

Don't tempt us with peace, scare us with its absence

By Akiva Eldar

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It is both interesting and strange that the very same people who complain about what they believe to be U.S. President Barack Obama's excessive support for the Palestinian struggle for liberation from the yoke of Israeli rule also attack him for what they perceive as his soft stance on the internal Iranian struggle against the incumbent regime. What was Benjamin Netanyahu trying to gain in leaking to Maariv that Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi told him that even Hillary Clinton is opposed to the president's weak stance on the Iranian regime? Was he trying to make Obama understand, once and for all, that the only language understood in the Middle East is one of force and fear?

To be honest, when it comes to the Israeli government, Washington has received the message, loud and clear. The Americans understand that Israel did not voluntarily compromise on "natural growth" in the settlements. And what has changed in the West Bank, allowing for the sudden removal of dozens of roadblocks and the evacuation of more Palestinian cities?

White House officials know what became of the promises previous Israeli governments gave to former president George W. Bush and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on plans to alleviate the hardships of Palestinian civilians. They were able to locate the transcripts, while they were (desperately and unsuccessfully) looking for documents to prove earlier "understandings" on natural growth.

A new study by Prof. Daniel Bar-Tal of Tel Aviv University and Dr. Eran Halperin of the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya shows that fear is one of the obstacles preventing the spread of alternative beliefs on resolving conflicts by peaceful means. Such obstacles develop through a selective and distorted processing of information aimed at preserving conflict-beliefs. Take, for example, the belief that "time is on our side." By contrast, the two researchers found that only a small minority of Israelis evaluate the conflict through the ethical lenses of justice and morality.

The researchers therefore assumed that the only way to open Israelis to compromise was to present them with the heavy price they are now paying - and will pay in the future - as a result of their refusal to compromise. This conclusion parallels the findings of Nobel Prize laureate Prof. Daniel Kahneman and the late Prof. Amos Tversky, who assert that people are primarily influenced by fear of losing their assets, rather than the hope for a future profit.

In their research, Bar-Tal and Halperin found that people who were exposed to a scenario emphasizing the price Israel might have to pay for allowing the conflict to continue were more willing to accept new information and compromise, in comparison to those exposed to a scenario based on the fruits of peace. While positive prognoses on the future of Israel and the Middle East did not result in a change of attitude, information on the losses Israel can expect unless a peace agreement is signed soon intensified the wish of those surveyed to consider alternative solutions to the conflict.

Detailed explanations on the economic ramifications of a failure to resolve the conflict, or demonstrations on a possible Arab shift toward supporting a binational state led many people to realize that "time is not on our side" and that the cost of a future peace may exceed that of peace

today.

Since the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, the fear of "terror now" has silenced the public discourse on "peace now." In the absence of an effective left, there is no agent in Israel able to convince the public of the urgent need for change, and to outline the heavy cost of perpetuating the conflict. Israel's right has entered this enormous void and filled it with alternative fears: It points to Hamastan at Jerusalem's gates and expresses fear in the face of the right of return and horror at Barack Hussein Obama. (Incidentally, how many Israeli politicians knew the middle names of Bill Clinton or George H.W. Bush and his son?).

Leaders of the international community and the Arab world are the only ones capable of convincing the average Israeli that only a "sucker" would miss out on the great opportunity for a Jewish state within the improved 1967 borders, on resolving the bulk of the Palestinian refugee problem, ensuring normalization with the Arab world and receiving security guarantees from the West. Obama appealed directly to the Muslim umma, bypassing the radical Islamists; the time has come for him to directly address the Israelis, bypassing their leadership. In doing so, it would be best to first present them with the cost of refusal, before Netanyahu manages to convince them that Obama is not a partner.

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