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Israel Update

Give Peace A Chance

By Sarah Ann Haves

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu gave his long anticipated speech at Tel Aviv's Bar-Ilan University on Sunday night, June 14, to a local audience of mostly conservative Israelis, international diplomats, and journalists. In his nearly 30 minute speech, broadcast to a global audience, Netanyahu mentioned the word "peace" 43 times, hoping that the Palestinians and Arabs will eventually give peace a chance in the troubled Middle East.

Breaking ranks with some of the hardliners in his Likud Party, Netanyahu conceded to the establishment of a Palestinian state. Several ministers in his unity government coalition said it was pressure coming from U.S. President Barack Obama that caused Netanyahu to publicly define the new state parameters.

Netanyahu declared, "In my vision of peace, in this small land of ours, two peoples live freely, side-by-side, in amity and mutual respect. Each will have its own flag, its own national anthem, its own government. Neither will threaten the security or survival of the other."

Hearing that the Palestinians would have their own homeland within what is now the borders of Israel upset many pro-Israel supporters. But, Netanyahu also put conditions on the establishment of a state for the Palestinians. Those conditions include:

- (1) International guarantees that the state would be de-militarized.
- (2) Any Israeli withdrawal from land must be met with international guarantees that Israel will have secure and defensible borders.
- (3) The Palestinians must recognize Israel as the Jewish state of the Jewish people.
- (4) The Palestinian refugee problem must be solved outside the borders of Israel.
- (5) Jerusalem will remain the undivided capital of Israel.

Netanyahu also inferred that Israel will continue to build in the settlements to accommodate for the natural growth of families, in order for residents to be able to live normal lives. This runs contrary to U.S. President Barack Obama's demand that Israel halt all settlement construction.

Netanyahu's conditions have already been met with negative reactions from the Palestinian Authority (PA) leadership, with a declaration stating they are not interested in resuming negotiations under Israel's new terms. Some Arab leaders in the region have also issued harsh statements to Netanyahu's proposed peace plans.

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At a press conference on Monday, June 15, the Prime Minister's spokesman, Mark Regev, said that the Netanyahu government is not making these demands a pre-condition to resuming talks. "The Prime Minister said even before our trip to Washington, a month ago, that he is ready, the government is ready, for direct talks with the Palestinians. And, those talks can start immediately and Israel places no pre-conditions whatsoever on those talks."

Regev explained that the idea is that the Palestinians can bring their concerns to the table and Israel can bring its concerns. He alluded to the fact that there should have already been a resumption of dialogue, but it is the Palestinians that have been dragging their feet. He mentioned that the pre-conditions that the Palestinians have placed on the Netanyahu government were not even expected of previous governments like those of Ehud Olmert, Ariel Sharon, or Ehud Barak. "Instead of putting pre-conditions on the table, surely it would be better to come to the table and talk."

While the Netanyahu government believes the successful outcome of talks would require the Palestinians to recognize the legitimacy of Israel as the Jewish homeland, PA leaders have been unwilling to go that far. Chief PA negotiator Saeb Erekat stated earlier in June, "Until now, no one has said anything about the Jewish character of Israel. As far as we are concerned, there's only the state of Israel, and that's all." To the outside world, of those not living in the Middle East, this may sound like simple semantics. But, it is an important factor in furthering peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

In his speech, Netanyahu brought up a key point that "the root of the conflict was, and remains, the refusal to recognize the right of the Jewish people to a state of their own in their historic homeland." He reiterated this statement when he proclaimed that Israeli "territorial withdrawals have not lessened the hatred, and to our regret, Palestinian moderates are not yet ready to say the simple words: 'Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people and it will stay that way.'" Netanyahu, again repeated this issue when he proclaimed that "a fundamental prerequisite for ending the conflict is a public, binding and unequivocal Palestinian recognition of Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people."

Why is this pre-requisite so important to Israel?

Without Palestinian recognition of the Jewish homeland, Israel would be required to settle Palestinian refugees within its borders, threatening a sustainable Jewish majority, demographically, in the state of Israel. Also, the White House made comments after Netanyahu's speech that went further than previous U.S. administrations in defining who is entitled to the land. "The (U.S.) President is committed to two states, a Jewish State of Israel, and an independent Palestine, *in the historical homeland of both peoples.*"

For his part, Netanyahu spoke about the importance of *Jewish* historical rights to the land, stating that "the connection between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel has lasted for more than 3500 years. Judea and Samaria, the places where Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, David and Solomon, and Isaiah and Jeremiah lived, are not alien to us. This is the land of our forefathers. The right of the Jewish people to a state in the land of Israel does not derive from the catastrophes that have plagued our people. True, for 2000 years, the Jewish people suffered expulsions, pogroms, blood libels, and massacres which culminated in a Holocaust -- a suffering which has no parallel in human history."

Continuing to talk about the Holocaust, Netanyahu went on to proclaim that the "tragic history of powerlessness explains why the Jewish people need a sovereign power of self-defense. But, our right to build our sovereign state here, in the land of Israel, arises from one simple fact: This is the homeland of the Jewish people; this is where our identity was forged."

Netanyahu's speech should resonate with those in Washington who already understand and recognize Israel's biblical right to the land. But, some in the Obama Administration may not think Netanyahu has gone far enough to meet their demands.

During Obama's recent trip to Europe, he acknowledged the suffering of the Jewish people during the Holocaust, visiting the Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany.

This went a long way in gaining the admiration of North American Jewry. Still, Israelis are not convinced that Obama believes that the Jewish people have a historical and biblical right to settle in their own Promised Land.

For the time being, the Netanyahu government is more interested in talking about a circle of peace, which would include Arab states in the region, beyond the peace commitments of Jordan and Egypt. With an eye towards establishing peace treaties with Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and the Gulf States, Netanyahu is also willing to consider peace with the Syrians.

Yet, ultimately, Israel sees a historic reconciliation with the Palestinians as the main element that will lead to regional peace. According to Regev, "We want to see Arab states step up to the plate and be involved in the peace process."

Netanyahu also wants to contribute to the development of the Palestinian economy. He's looking to move ahead with a triple track approach which would include the political track, the economic track, and the security track.

A sticking point in previous negotiations with the Palestinians has been the troublesome take-over of Gaza by Hamas.... a radical Islamic terror group that has called for the destruction of Israel. In order for peace negotiations to be successful, Netanyahu hopes the PA will be able to take control of Gaza, and govern the Palestinian population there, as well as, in Judea and Samaria (the West Bank). However, for that to happen, the PA will have to replace Hamas, and most likely, that would only occur through reconciliation efforts or through civil war in the territories. Meanwhile, Israel only recognizes the government of PA leader Mahmoud Abbas. "There is only one recognized Palestinian government. Hamas is part of the problem, not the solution," said Regev.

For now, the Netanyahu government is waiting for a response from international leaders in Europe and Arab states on the core issues of his newly laid out diplomatic plan. If the initial response from Palestinian leaders is any indication, the prospects for furthering peace negotiations in the region are dim. But, then again, there may be one courageous person who is willing to step up to the plate and declare, as Netanyahu did in the final words of his speech: "Let us realize the vision of the prophet Isaiah, who in Jerusalem 2700 years ago said, 'nation will not lift up sword against nation, and they shall learn war no more.' With God's help, we will know no more war. We will know peace."

"Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled; neither let it be afraid." John 14:27

Ms. Haves is a news analyst, reporting from Israel on political, diplomatic, military and spiritual issues affecting the nation.

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