

# A Shameful Chapter

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**H**OW WOULD THE US react to a declaration that the Palestinians would not conduct negotiations with an Israeli government that includes semi-fascist parties?

With outrage, of course.

How does the US react to an Israeli statement that Israel will not negotiate with a Palestinian government that includes Hamas?

With full approval, of course.

FOR ANYONE interested in Israeli-Palestinian peace, the prospect of domestic Palestinian reconciliation is good news.

For years now we have heard Israeli spokespersons announcing that it's no use making peace with half the Palestinian people and continuing the war with the other half. Mahmoud Abbas is a plucked chicken, as Ariel Sharon tactfully put it. It's Hamas which counts. And Hamas is planning a Second Holocaust.

Under the recent Palestinian reconciliation agreement, Hamas is now committed to supporting an all-Palestinian government of experts agreed on by both parties. The Israeli extreme right-wing government is burning with rage. It will never, never, never negotiate with a Palestinian government that is supported by Hamas.

Hamas must first recognize Israel, stop all terrorist activities and undertake to respect all previous agreements signed by the PLO.

That's OK, Abbas declares. The next government will be appointed by me, and it will fulfill all three conditions.

That's not enough, Netanyahu's spokespersons declare. Hamas itself must accept the three conditions, before we deal with a government supported by Hamas.

Abbas could respond in kind. Before dealing with the Netanyahu government, he could say, all factions in the Israeli government must declare their support for the Two-State Solution, as Netanyahu has done (once, in his so-called Bar-Ilan speech.) At least two parties, Naftali Bennett's "Jewish Home" and Avigdor Lieberman's "Israel our Home", as well as a great part of the Likud, would refuse to do so.

One can envision a ceremony in the Knesset, in which every cabinet minister would stand up and declare: "*I hereby solemnly swear that I fully and sincerely support*

*the creation of the State of Palestine next to the State of Israel!*" The Messiah will arrive first.

Of course, that is immaterial. The stand of individual parties or ministers is unimportant. It is the policy of the government which counts. If the next Palestinian government recognizes Israel, renounces violence and respects all previous agreements that should be enough.

WHY IS the Palestinian reconciliation agreement good news for peace?

First of all, because one makes peace with a whole nation, not with half of it. A peace with the PLO, without Hamas, would be ineffective from the beginning. Hamas could sabotage it at any moment by acts of violence (a.k.a. terrorism).

Second, because by joining the PLO and eventually the Palestinian government, Hamas accepts in practice the policy of the PLO, which has long ago recognized the State of Israel and the partition of historic Palestine.

One should remember that prior to the Oslo agreement, the PLO itself was officially described by Israel (and the USA) as a terrorist organization. At the time of the signing on the White House lawn, the PLO charter was still in force. It called for the destruction of the illegal State of Israel and the return of practically all its citizens to their counties of origin.

For many years, this charter was denounced by Israeli politicians and academics as an insurmountable obstacle to peace.

Only after the Oslo agreement came into force, did the PLO National Council abolish these clauses of their charter in a festive ceremony, attended by President Bill Clinton.

Hamas has a similar charter. It, too, will be modified once Hamas joins the government.

It is one of the ironies of history that in the past, Israel covertly supported Hamas against the PLO. While all Palestinian political activity in the occupied territories was suppressed, Hamas activities in the mosques were allowed.

I once asked a former Shin Bet chief if he had created Hamas. His answer was: "*We did not create them, we tolerated them.*"

The reason was that at the time Arafat's PLO was considered the enemy. Arafat himself was relentlessly

demonized as the “Second Hitler”. Everybody fighting against Arafat was considered an ally. This attitude continued to prevail for a year after the outbreak of the first intifada, when the Shin Bet realized that Hamas was much more dangerous than the PLO, and started imprisoning (and later assassinating) its leaders.

At present, an undeclared state of ceasefire (tahdiya or “stillness”) prevails between Israel and Hamas. Clearly, Hamas has decided that its ambitions as one of the two major Palestinian political parties are more important than the “violent struggle” against Israel. Its main aim is to attain power in the future Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Like so many former liberation organizations around the world, including Begin’s Likud, it is transforming itself from a terrorist organization into a political party.

AS COULD have been foreseen, the US has followed suit and fully accepted the Israeli line. It has threatened the Palestinian Authority with what amounts to a declaration of war if the reconciliation agreement is carried out.

The American peace initiative has ground to a halt. The full truth about it can and must now be told.

It was doomed to failure before it even started. There was not the slightest chance of its bearing fruit.

Before the facts become buried under an avalanche of propaganda, let’s state clearly how it ended: not by Abbas joining international bodies, not by Palestinian reconciliation, but by the refusal of Netanyahu to fulfill a solemn and unequivocal undertaking: to release certain Palestinian prisoners on a certain date.

The release of prisoners is an extremely sensitive point for the Palestinians. It concerns human beings and their families. These particular prisoners, some of whom are Israeli citizens, have been in prison for at least 21 years. Netanyahu just did not have the strength of character to fulfill his promise and confront a wild campaign of incitement unleashed by the extreme Right.

He preferred to end the “negotiations”.

THE PERFORMANCE of John Kerry can only be described as pitiful.

It started with the appointment of Martin Indyk as the manager of the negotiations. Indyk had worked as an employee of AIPAC, the main lobby of the Israeli Right.

AIPAC’S main task is to terrorize the American Congress, whose members—senators and representatives—quake at the very sight of its agents.

To install such a person as an impartial mediator between Israel and the Palestinians was just plain chutzpah. It told the Palestinians right from the beginning what was in store.

The second act of chutzpah was to start the talks without first obtaining from Netanyahu a list of the concessions he was ready to make. Throughout, the Israeli side refused to present a map of its proposed borders, even after the Palestinian side produced their own map.

This charade went on for nine months, in which not an inch of progress was made. The parties met and talked, talked and met. Apart from Netanyahu’s ridiculous demand that the Palestinians recognize Israel as “*the nation-state of the Jewish people*”, there was nothing on the table.

Tzipi Livni, a very minor politician, basked in the limelight on the glamorous international stage, and would have loved to go on forever without achieving anything at all.

The Palestinian representatives were also interested in continuing, even without purpose, in order to pass the time without an internal explosion.

The whole exercise revolved around one simple question: was President Obama ready to confront the onslaught of the united forces of AIPAC, the Senate, the House of Representatives, the Republicans, the Evangelicals, the right-wing Jewish establishment and the Israeli propaganda machine?

If not, Kerry should not have even started.

THIS WEEK, in a private meeting, Kerry stated the obvious: that if Israel continues with its present policy, it will become an apartheid state.

There is nothing revolutionary in this. Former president Jimmy Carter used the term in the title of his book. In Israel, independent and left-wing commentators do so every day. But in Washington DC all hell broke loose.

The hapless Kerry rushed to apologize. He did not mean it, God forbid! The Secretary of State of the mighty USA asked for little Israel’s forgiveness.

And so the piece reached its shameful finale on a dismal fading chord.