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'ANY NEW GOVERNMENT MUST PURSUE THE STRATEGIC NEEDS OF ISRAEL'. EPHRAIM SNEH ON DOMESTIC ISRAELI POLITICS, PALESTINIAN ENGAGEMENT AND PRESSING STRATEGIC ISSUES

Efraim Sneh is a former Deputy Defence Minister of Israel. He was a member of the Knesset for the Labor Party between 1992 and 2008 and served in several ministerial posts. Out of office he has challenged the prevailing wisdom that Israel lacks a partner for peace. In a wide-ranging interview with Samuel Nurdling he discusses the political deadlock in Israel, the implications for Israel of the loss of the bi-partisan strategic alliance with the US in favour of a partisan political alliance, as well as reflecting on the turmoil in Lebanon and Syria, and security threats from Hamas and Iran.

Part 1: Political deadlock in Israel

Samuel Nurdling: What do you think of the current political deadlock in Israel? What would you advise Benny Gantz to do?

Efraim Sneh: Gantz needs the support of 61 MKs – he cannot change the parliamentary arithmetic – so he has two options: (1) the establishment of a minority government reliant on outside support, including from Yisrael Beiteinu and the Joint List or (2) the establishment of a national unity government. Both options are restrictive; a minority government would be limited in its actions and it would take a great deal of political courage to pursue the right steps, particularly in diplomacy and military affairs. A unity government is actually a government of paralysis, meaning one unable to undertake innovative government initiatives.

These two options are better than a government reliant on ultra-right parties that push Israel into sustained political and military crises. So, Blue and White could establish a minority government if they have the political courage or, if they do not, they must form a national unity government.

SN: You were part of the Labor/Rabin government that received the support of the Arab parties. Tell us more about how that came into being – were there voices in the centre/left advising you against it, how did it work in practice, and do you think it's a realistic option for Gantz today (given that a Blue and White minority government would need them even more than Rabin did after the 1992 election)?

ES: My deputy was a MK from Labor party, an Israeli Arab, Nawaf Massalha. I sent him to represent Israel in international and regional forums and he did it flawlessly, as a loyal Israeli patriot. Yitzhak Rabin (with 56 Knesset seats) was courageous enough to pursue peace with the Palestinians and with Jordan, allowing him to recruit the necessary five seats to form a 61-seat majority (from the ultra-orthodox parties) during the course of that Knesset. That government passed legislation that fundamentally challenged ideas regarding the responsibility of the state for the welfare of its citizens, something that no government had previously considered possible. It was a welfare state, but in a very serious and proportional way. Rabin always found the needed five votes in the Knesset, from Ultra orthodox religious or Arab parties, and he obtained his goals. With faith, courage and leadership you can govern with a slim majority.

Part 2: Trump and two-state paradigm

SN: Given the US intention to withdraw from Syria, you wrote that Israel must establish new regional alliances. Over the last few years, we've seen more openness from Gulf States to host Israeli ministers. Are we entering 'a new era' for Israeli-Arab relations, as Kushner said on Monday? How far do you think these relationships can go without progress on the Palestinian issue?

ES: What we are seeing are very minor steps, such as the singing of the Israeli national anthem at a Judo tournament in Abu Dhabi or the invitation of Israeli representatives to various conferences in the Gulf. There are changes, but they are minor. What is needed is very broad cooperation, particularly in security. But that will not happen as long as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is unresolved. There is a need to resolve the conflict because achieving strategic balance with Iran in the region can only come through the combination of the political and economic power of Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt and Jordan with the technological and military power of Israel.

Benjamin Netanyahu currently employs empty platitudes regarding achieving a 'regional peace' to avoid an explicit commitment to the two-state solution. Our

problem is with the Palestinians, not the Bahrainis or Omanis. The Palestinians are our neighbours and the mode of demarcation of boundaries and two-state solution is the most important thing for them and us. Netanyahu has been so reliant on the far-right parties for his political survival that he did not dare speak in a different way. Now there is a change in the political arena and another kind of government can be established.

This new government must pursue the strategic needs of Israel, especially when the political alliance with the Trump administration has been a colossal strategic failure. The American withdrawal from the region left Israel alone in front of Iran. Russia is the dominant power in the region. The strategic alliance is no more. What we do have is a political alliance between the evangelistic wing of the Republican party and the Israeli far right. The Government must understand that we need to compensate the disappearance of the strategic alliance with the US with a new regional alliance and, to achieve this, you cannot control the West Bank. Those who understand strategy get it, and those who are ideologically committed to the continuation of the settlement project get it. I believe Netanyahu himself understands it.

SN: Could Gantz halt the blurring of the line between Israel and the West Bank/ that has occurred under Netanyahu?

ES: The expectation is that a government led by Gantz will not follow the rule of Netanyahu, Bennett and Shaked and other representatives of the ultra-right and political lobby of the settlers. A majority of Israelis understand that now is the time to take another route. While this may not necessarily lead to a solution to the conflict tomorrow morning, it does mean that we stop the reckless talk about annexation and we start talking to the PA leadership. These measures can start positive dynamics.

SN: You came out in support of the Zionist Union plan in 2016 that called for Israel to begin separating East Jerusalem's neighbourhoods as a precursor to negotiating a two-state solution. However, Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital has pretty much rendered that idea moot. What impact has Trump's policy had, in your view, on the two-state solution?

ES: I wrote an article in Haaretz in which I praised the plan, not because Herzog is my friend but because it was a very brave move – in fact, I called him before sitting down to write the article and asked 'do you mean [areas] A, B and C?' There are many variations of how to approach the conflict, but in the end Israel and the Palestinians should be two separated entities. Look, UN Resolution 181

gave the Jewish people 56 per cent and the Palestinians 44 per cent of the land in historic Palestine. The Palestinians defied this solution but now they are ready to sign on for a 78 per cent and 22 per cent split, i.e. they are ready to sign on to half of what the UN gave them in 1947. This is the victory for Zionism. If we insist on 100 per cent of the land, we will end up like Lebanon – it will be an end to the Zionist dream.

If we wish to maintain control of the Palestinian territories without given them full rights as citizens, it will be very difficult for Israel to maintain its key relationships with actors in the international community. Instead, the Right in Israel present the public an optical illusion – they argue that the world admires Israel's technology, science, culture and democracy, but whenever there is voting in the UN about issues related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for example, a large majority of countries vote with the Palestinians and not with Israel.

Why is this important? Very soon, we may be obliged to engage in (at least) two military campaigns. Who will provide the necessary pressures to stop the fighting? It will be neither Israel nor the enemy, but the UN, who may decide to call a ceasefire before the IDF accomplishes its mission and restores deterrence. So we will pay the most precious price of our soldiers' lives, but we will still not obtain the indispensable military achievements that we deserve. This is not simply because former US ambassador to the UN Nicki Haley is no longer there, but because the UN will not allow us to deal a major blow to our enemies given the fact that the international community is not with us on the Palestinian issue

Part 3: Turmoil in Lebanon

SN: Lebanon is going through a period of political turmoil at the moment. Is there a real risk of things degenerating into civil war (again)? If so, would Israel have a role to play if that did happen – similar to how it protected the Maronites beginning in the late 1970s?

ES: The danger is not civil war because a civil war happens between the various communities. What we may see materialise eventually is the collapse of the Lebanese state, which will result in chaos. Some may say that chaos is good for Israel, but I am not so sure because we do not have a way to translate this chaos into something that is positive for us, unless the majority of the Lebanese blame Hezbollah for its current predicament.

There is another danger. In order to divert the attention of the Lebanese people, and to assert their hold over the Lebanese people, Hezbollah could attempt to provoke hostilities along the Israel-Lebanon border, which they can do with ease. Hezbollah could seek to utilise the present crisis to reignite hostilities with Israel, which would have a negative impact on the mutual deterrence between Israel and Hezbollah.

SN: You've had a long and industrious military career, starting off as a trained medical officer and ending as the head of the IDF Civil Administration in the West Bank in 1987. How have Israel's security threats changed since then?

ES: I initially raised the alarm about the security threat posed by Iran in 1992 as a young member of the Knesset, and others subsequently followed. The strategic danger to Israel is as follows: Iran continues to grow and expand its military, and deploys its missiles in various locations that both surround Israel and are directed toward Israel. As Netanyahu has recently stated, Iran is seeking the means to launch precision-guided missiles at Israel from Yemen. Whatever the Iranians have, the Houthis will have, and the Iranians have missiles with a range of at least 2,000km. So the immediate danger is the Iranian military entrenchment in Syria and Iraq.

The US withdrawal from north-east Syria was the reward for the Iranian bombing of the Saudi Aramco-owned Khurais oilfield and Abqaiq oil processing facility in September 2019. Iran was not punished for this attack on Saudi Arabia: they were rewarded. If the US is out of north-east Syria, Iran can expand its presence and they have a wider road from Iran across the region. Here lies our problem. This does not diminish the importance and dangers posed by the situation in Gaza. In Gaza, there are at least 10,000 missiles and rockets which Hamas and other militant groups use frequently, and every Friday there are attempts to penetrate Israel. But the Iranian threat represents the single greatest strategic threat facing Israel.

Part 4: Iran in Syria

SN: Netanyahu says that Iran is Israel's greatest threat. He has met with Putin 11 times since 2015 in the aim of convincing the Russian leader to kick Iran out of Syria. Yet, Putin has shown little appetite for doing so. How do you see Iran's anti-Israel strategy evolving over the coming months and years?

ES: When I say that there is an imminent conflict in Syria and Iraq, it is because we cannot tolerate a long-term, or permanent Iranian presence near our border. Israel will simply have to take the necessary measures to protect its strategic interests. Unfortunately, this is becoming the reality and a proscription for war. If one wants to prevent this, one has to stop the Iranians before their entrenchment in Syria is irreversible. Only Russia can do this, because the US has no more leverage in Syria. What the US can do, however, is continuing the sanctions on Iran to create the dynamics for a revolutionary uprising to happen. But make no mistake, no government in Israel can tolerate this military entrenchment in Syria: no way.

Part 5: Hamas in Gaza

SN: Is there a strategy for Gaza?

ES: A few months ago Hamas fired more than 700 rockets into Israel in one day that resulted in the death of four Israeli citizens. Can you think of any other country where this kind of thing happens? The problem of Gaza cannot be separated from the Palestinian issue. There are two million Gazans who live in poverty, under terrible humanitarian conditions and under the brutal oppressive rule of designated terrorist organisations. This is part of the Palestinian problem. There is no true and permanent solution to Gaza's troubles except for a combined comprehensive military, diplomatic and economic arrangement. It must involve: the demilitarisation of the military wing of Hamas, provision of jobs and greater income, providing future of dignity to the Palestinians,. You cannot do this separately to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Netanyahu is not willing to countenance this because he is not willing to pay the price of removing 120,000 settlers who live beyond the security barrier in the West Bank. But, there is also a huge reward for the leader brave enough to do so: economic ties with the Arab world. We should utilise this huge opportunity

Part 6: The PA in the West Bank

SN: When announcing his new 10-year plan in October, IDF Chief of Staff Kochavi said the 'central strategic challenge of the State of Israel lies in the northern arena'. What is the current situation in the West Bank? Is it stable?

ES: I said almost a year ago at the annual conference commemorating General Dagan in Netanya academic college, that an explosion in the West Bank is possible at any moment because all of the ingredients of the powder keg are

present. There are armed Jewish settlers, there are armed Palestinian security forces, there is a growing Hamas presence trying to influence the local population to carry out terrorist attacks., and there is a stalemate in the politics and peace process. These factors can lead to an ethnic war in the West Bank; it is just missing a spark.

SN: How much control does Abbas have in the West Bank? Has his power waned over the years? How do you rate his leadership?

ES: We have to praise Abbas for maintaining security cooperation with Israel in the face of strong pressure to stop it. But Abbas is a responsible leader who understands that the PA and Israel face a common enemy and those that face common enemies must act together. This is why the cooperation between both side's security forces has not stopped but has continued and will continue as long as we Israelis do not take stupid moves.

SN: Has Israel missed an opportunity to make peace with the Palestinians under Abbas? What happens after Abbas?

ES: Since the death of Yassar Arafat, we have had an opportunity to make peace. Prime Minister Olmert decided in the summer of 2008 (quite late, but better late than never) to negotiate with Abbas and achieved understanding about all the issues on the table. Some gaps remain but they are small and bridgeable. This is exactly where a serious (not amateurish) mediator could help bring us to an agreement. It is important to remember that Olmert did not come from the political Left: he was born on the Jabotinsky estate in Binyamina in northern Israel where loyal and veterans of the Jabotinsky movement settled at the beginning of the 20th century.

Since 2009, when the new government was established, there have been no serious negotiations with Abbas and this has been a missed opportunity. All prime ministers and cabinet ministers that read the intelligence know that Abbas is against violence, terrorism and is committed to negotiations with Israel, but Netanyahu has refused to negotiate. This is a terrible failure.

I know all Abbas's potential successors and I know that they are committed to the legacy of Abbas, meaning negotiation not violence. The GDP per capita in the Palestinian territories is around \$3000 per person and in Israel, it is around \$40,000. All those that want a thriving Palestinian state know that it can only be done through cooperation with Israel, and this cannot be achieved through launching rockets at its cities but by working together economically.

If someone really wants a Palestinian state, they should look to build up the economic institutions first, As former Palestinian PM Fayyad did. In order to lift themselves upward, the Palestinians must work with us and not against us. Look at Gaza. Hamas believes in the resistance covenant, but look at what that has brought. Salam Fayyad was the ultimate example of a pragmatic responsible Palestinian leader. He was not a Zionist, to be very clear, but he learned from us how to build a state: by hard work. He understood that Israel was a state before the Jews declared it in 1948. We already had healthcare, education facilities, and sport and culture clubs. He understood that the declaration of a state is the end point. You have to build its foundations first.

