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ANOTHER VIEWPOINT

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Natanyahu, Arab Summitry, and Peace

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The election of Bibi Natanyahu as Israel's prime minister has sent shivers in the Arab world, and has caused concern in countries that had played a role in promoting peace in the Middle East. The Arabs fear that Mr. Natanyahu will be more hawkish, more Zionist, and less cooperative than his predecessors. These fears might seem justified by Natanyahu's pre-election statements, his preliminary guidelines for the new government, and the composition of his cabinet. The guidelines restated previous Likud positions against a Palestinian state, a divided Jerusalem, and withdrawal from the Golan Heights, but in favor of more Jewish settlements in the West Bank. The Arab countries lost no time in overreacting. They held mini summits as well as a summit of all Arab countries except Iraq. They issued one statement after another urging Israel to abide by the previous agreements, respect the land for peace principle, and continue the peace process.

Political rhetoric is to be expected in the Middle East, but that rarely reflects policy substance or expected action. My hunch is that there will be little policy change by Natanyahu. Both Labor and Likud have publicly opposed a Palestinian state, a divided Jerusalem, and withdrawal from the Golan Heights (except in return for full peace). Both also have favored more Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Natanyahu has simply restated those positions. To illustrate:

1. The principle of exchange land for peace was initiated at Camp David by Sadat, Begin(Likud), and Carter. Then, Syria was offered similar terms as those offered to Egypt: full Israeli withdrawal from the Golans in return for full peace, which became the standard motto of Israeli governments since then. There is little reason to expect Natanyahu to deviate from that policy, although he may replace the "full peace" term with "full security" to please his supporters.

2. All Israeli governments have declared their opposition to a divided Jerusalem. Natanyahu has just reaffirmed that position.

3. Since the Palestinians rejected the two-state solution of the 1947 United Nations Partition Plan no Israeli government or major political party has agreed to a Palestinian state. The closest to a concession was made last April by the Labor party, probably to influence the election results, when the party stated

that it may not be opposed to a Palestinian state. However, neither Peres nor the party did anything to institute a basic change in the party platform. Netanyahu's statements on the issue are neither new nor different, nor are they binding, given his willingness to negotiate all issues with no pre-conditions.

4. Labor and Likud have regularly promoted and subsidized Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories. When the United States stipulated a halt to settlement building in return for a \$10 billion loan guarantee, Israeli governments resorted to expanding existing settlements to circumvent US conditions.

5. There has been little difference in treatment of the Arabs by Israeli governments. Both Labor and Likud detained people and held prisoners for long periods without trial in the name of security. Both demolished homes, uprooted trees, bombed villages, and attacked civilians as collective punishment. Both also have continued to hold territory in Lebanon illegally. Given his background, it is unlikely that Netanyahu will be more harsh or cruel than his predecessors.

6. Both Labor and Likud have consistently objected to a Palestinian right of return and to repatriation of Palestinian refugees. They also have raised obstacles against payment of compensation. Netanyahu's position can hardly be more negative.

7. Concern about withdrawal from Hebron may be legitimate. Peres had the authority and the responsibility to deploy troops out of Hebron but he did not. Netanyahu has inherited the problem and it is not evident that he would not deal with the problem carefully and wisely.

Why then are the Arabs so worried about Netanyahu's future policies? First, Netanyahu may have overplayed the role of a tough leader before and during the elections. Second, the Arabs have few cards left to play to offset any tough policy he may initiate. They are disunited, relatively weak, and the Palestine National Authority and the PLO leaders are virtual hostages under Israeli domination. Hence, taking the initiative may have been a way to cover their weakness, and to secure reassurance from the United States and other countries on the peace process.

While these reasons might be sufficient to raise concern, political rhetoric and summitry can hardly change the results. The Arabs would probably have done better by considering the change of government in Israel as a matter of fact and declaring their willingness to negotiate with any government in office. They could have pursued silent diplomacy to clear the air and proceed with the peace process. They could have declared readiness to negotiate all issues at any time or place without any pre- or new conditions. And they could have challenged Mr. Netanyahu to meet with them face to face in Cairo, Damascus, Beirut, or Jerusalem to discuss the

outstanding issues and expedite the peace process. Mr. Natanyahu would have found it difficult to say no to such an invitation. He wants to guarantee security and he knows that without peace with Arab neighbors there can be no peace. The Arabs may still take such steps and Mr. Natanyahu may still prove himself a statesman and peacemaker.

AVP is a non-profit, non-partisan monthly published and edited by Elias H. Tuma (professor emeritus of economics, University of California, Davis, CA). Lori Aoun is Associate Editor. The views expressed above are those of the author and do not implicate the University in any way. On internet:  
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