

# The Four Nos of Bibi

By Stephen Scheinberg

Many Israeli and other commentators have hailed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's May trip to Washington as a major victory. Certainly he accomplished his own short-term goals: He successfully unified his right wing coalition by yielding nothing to the Palestinians. He rallied the enormously influential Israel Lobby behind him. He confronted U.S. President Barack Obama and won the support of the American congress.

He began by taking issue with President Obama's endorsement of the 1967 lines, with agreed-upon swaps, as if the President had enunciated something radical and new. This gambit encouraged Bibi's Republican allies such as Eric Cantor and Mitt Romney, the latter charging that the President had cast Israel under a bus. Then the Prime Minister went on to plaudits from AIPAC and surpassed that appearance with an address to Congress that was greeted with more than thirty standing ovations. Whether this was due to his oratorical skills or the power of the Israel Lobby, I leave the reader to ponder.

The content of his speech reminds one of nothing so much as the infamous rejection of Israel in 1967, known to the Israeli mainstream as "the three nos of Khartoum." Though Bibi mentioned briefly the "painful sacrifices" that Israel was prepared to make for peace, he did not elaborate. But he did set out a strong set of preconditions that the Palestinians had to meet; in an earlier day they would have been termed "non-negotiable demands." One of these was the demand that they recognize Israel as a "Jewish state." In fact Palestine Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas has no objection to Israel calling itself anything it wants, and the PA has long since recognized Israel.

So, what does the Jewish state demand imply? It is a means of requiring two surrenders from the Palestinians: first, that even before negotiations commence the Palestinians must give up the so-



called right of return, and second, that Israeli Arabs be excluded from the definition. The right of return is an emotional and strongly held belief, especially in the Palestinian diaspora. On the other side, only a handful of Israelis would welcome a returning flood of Palestinian refugees, which could change the very nature of Israeli society, to say nothing about security issues. Even moderate Israelis have resisted more than a symbolic

right of return. In any case, asking the Palestinians to give up a significant bargaining chip before negotiations commence is absurd (*chutzpadik*), or intentionally a non-starter. As for the Israeli Arabs, there are alternative formulations that could include and satisfy them, such as "recognition of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state with equal rights for its minorities." The "Jewish state" demand privileges a new immigrant from Brooklyn over an Arab native of Haifa. Unfortunately, minority rights do not appeal to Netanyahu and his right-wing coalition, which includes those, like his own Foreign Minister, who would "transfer" Arab Israelis, given the opportunity.

The second precondition that Bibi insisted on is no return to the "insecure" borders of 1967. (He did not refer to them as "Auschwitz borders," but some of his right-wing supporters did, including Canada's *Jewish Tribune*.) Of course, the border security conditions of 1967 are no longer very relevant in the age of missiles and rockets. Nor is terrorist infiltration a major danger since the building of the security fence. In 1967 a heavily armed Iraq was viewed as a security threat, but much has changed. What has not changed is the desire of Netanyahu and his allies to hold on to their far-flung settlements and outposts throughout the West Bank. Maintaining troops in the Jordan Valley is likewise only a façade for settlement retention and expansion. It is not about security.

A third, and to my mind, more serious issue was Bibi's demand that the PA sever its relations with Hamas. He has told the PA that it must choose either peace with Israel or partnership with Hamas. However, there is no evidence that he gave the PA any reason to hope for a negotiated peace before the unity pact was negotiated. There are, of course some commentators who make much of divisions within the Islamist move-

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ment or seize on a few less inflammatory words from individual Hamas leaders, to argue for a moderating trend within the group. Pundits are entitled to their views but no leader of Israel can depend on them. On a more solid basis, former Mossad chief Efraim Halevy states that “whatever happens, there will be no serious progress in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict without some way of including Hamas in the process.” That is probably true, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton rightly urges not immediate condemnation or approval of the unity pact, but rather watchful waiting. In the same vein, a confidential report from Israel’s own foreign ministry sees the pact as “not only a security threat but also a strategic opportunity to create genuine change in the Palestinian context.” It remains to be seen not only whether the deal will break down (an earlier deal collapsed in 2007) but also which party, Fatah or Hamas, will dominate.

Netanyahu, like the PA, has some unpleasant characters in his coalition, including at least two parties that publicly advocate what is politely termed “transfer” of Israeli Arabs, a euphemism, I maintain, for “ethnic cleansing.” Are the Palestinians likewise entitled to a veto on the most extreme members of Israel’s ruling coalition?

A fourth Bibi demand is that the status of Jerusalem is not a matter for negotiation. Here we must understand that his reference to Jerusalem is not to the historic old city of 2.2 sq. kilometers, but to the artificial creation of the city boundaries, after the 1967 war, with its now 270,000 Palestinian residents. At our Passover Seders we offer a toast to “next year in Jerusalem,” but that never included the many Arab villages amalgamated into the modern urban construct. Thus, when he conjures up Jerusalem, Bibi plays on the emotions of diaspora Jews who see only the Western Wall. Ehud Olmert, former Israeli Prime Minister and a former mayor of Jerusalem, put it this way – “Whoever wants to hold on to all of the city’s territory will have to bring 270,000 Arabs inside the fences of sovereign Israel. It won’t work.”

Bibi’s speech to Congress was, in effect, a rejection of all those analysts who had looked for the emergence of a new pragmatic Netanyahu. They had hoped that under all sorts of pressures—change in the Arab world, growing EU hostility to Israel, increasing Israeli isolation in the United Nations and dissatisfaction within the Obama Administration—a pragmatic, more conciliatory Bibi would emerge, one who might reform

his coalition, reaching out to Tzipi Livni and Kadi-  
ma, and offering the world, if not the Palestinians,  
a plausible peace initiative. That was not to be.  
Bibi and his camp preferred to go it alone and, for  
the moment, they feel justified by his success in  
Washington. However, Nahum Barnea, the dean of  
Israel’s diplomatic correspondents, cast a wet  
blanket on such a victory. Barnea recalled a simi-  
larly triumphant Golda Meir who was celebrated  
in Israel and America for giving no ground to  
Arabs or Palestinians—and then came the shock  
of the 1973 war. “The Americans loved her. They  
loved the American chapter in her youth, her Eng-  
lish, her rhetoric, the Jew-  
ish pride.” But, adds  
Barnea, “Golda missed the  
chance to prevent war  
because of inflated arro-  
gance; the arrogance of a  
victor.” His point is, of  
course, that these kinds of  
“triumphs” breed hubris,  
an arrogance that may soon be dashed.

The drama of the Middle East has many acts,  
and Washington was merely one scene. Obama  
has gone on to try to rescue Israel from itself and  
from Bibi’s leadership. A major defeat for Israel  
was looming, as the Palestinians planned to go to  
the United Nations in September, but the Presi-  
dent, facing re-election, prefers to press for another  
round of talks, which will promote the illusion  
that he is still promoting peace, while forestalling  
a collision with American Jewish voters and sup-  
porters. To that end, Obama brought the G-8 on  
board, but they omitted his reference to the 1967  
lines as a starting point.

Canada’s Prime Minister Stephen Harper  
agreed to support the declaration favouring talks.  
but only if any reference to the 1967 lines was  
struck out. This was no surprise to those who  
knew of the PM’s close links to the Christian right,  
to the pro-settler B’nai Brith Canada, and to the  
right wing of the Canadian Jewish establishment.  
It was, after all, their payday following Harper’s  
May 2 electoral victory. The Canadian Prime Min-  
ister even earned praise from Israel’s settler For-  
eign Minister Avigdor Lieberman. The deletion of  
the 1967 lines did not really undercut Obama’s  
strategy and so the G-8 is on board for another,  
most likely useless, round of talks.

Those talks can only delay the crunch for the  
Israeli right. The UK, France and others are only  
reluctantly on board with the Americans for this  
round. A re-elected Obama, after 2012, will  
remember Bibi’s insulting behaviour, and he will  
be free to take stronger action. It is a cliché of  
American politics that the controversial decisions

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### **The “Jewish state” demand privileges a new immigrant from Brooklyn over an Arab native of Haifa.**

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## WATER COOLER...

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Canucks jerseys.

Further, why it is that such violence, whether or not it's directly inspired by sport, seems to accompany it rather than other activities, such as the arts or even politics, with all the acrimony the latter arouses? I don't recall—at least in Canada—post-election riots by partisans of defeated parties, and find it hard to imagine book or movie lovers rioting after their favourite writer or actor has been passed over for a Booker Prize or Oscar.

With respect to the many peaceful Canadians—including friends and coworkers of mine—who enjoy hockey and other sports, I think there is, alas, a lot of truth in Orwell's characterization of professional sports (in his 1945 essay "The Sporting Spirit"): "Serious sport ... is war minus the shooting." ♦

## HUMANISTS...

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birthday celebration on April 25, 2004. There was a crowd of over 200 people. More well-wishers were turned away at the door. Among the speakers honouring Goldberg were scholars and friends of Yiddish culture, including former students and others from varied political backgrounds. Ester Reiter from Toronto was on hand to deliver greetings on behalf of the UJPO.

Itche's own remarks were poignant. "Our *Yiddishkayt* has deep national roots—because secular *Yiddishkayt* must choose for itself the values from *tradition* and *enduring* culture. Our humanism led us to the Jew and *mentsh*. [This is a reference to Chaim Zhitlovsky's adage: "*Vos mer mentsh, alts mer yid*"—"The more decent a human being the Jew becomes, the more of a Jew he becomes."] The principle was always love for the Jewish people and for the Yiddish language." ♦

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are reserved for the second term. A group of prominent Americans, including former Congressional leader Lee Hamilton and Zbigniew Brzezinski, several of them close to Obama, have outlined the strategy he may pursue after 2012. It would include the presentation of a modest American peace plan, as a framework for an agreement. However, if not accepted by either of the parties it "should be submitted for adoption by the UN Security Council." In other words, for the first time there would be

consequences attached to the failure to reach a negotiated settlement. Of course, we will have to see how that scenario unfolds.

Bibi's apparent victory in Washington may be much less substantial than his supporters believe. The Arab world is changing, more and more UN members favour Palestinian statehood, at the moment a second term for Obama seems probable, and the nature of Palestinian resistance is shifting towards an attractive non-violence. Bibi may now relish his day of victory, but there is reason to believe that it could be short-lived. ♦

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