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The Struggle over Iran

by RAMZY BAROUD

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Israel is currently experiencing the kind of turmoil that may or may not affect its political hierarchy following the next general election. However, there is little reason to believe that any major transformations in the Israeli political landscape could be of benefit to Palestinians.

Former politicians and intelligence bosses have been challenging the conventional wisdom of right-wing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu through a series of charged statements and political rhetoric.

A few weeks ago it sounded rather like a political fluke when former chief of the Israeli Mossad, Meir Dagan called an attack on Iran “the stupidest thing I have ever heard.” His comment was then widely dismissed, but other voices have since joined the discussion. Yuval Diskin, former head of the Israeli internal intelligence, the Shin Bet, went even further, as he questioned the abilities of both Netanyahu and Barak, accusing them of promoting ‘messianic sentiments’ regarding Iran.

“I saw them up close, they are not Messiahs...These are not people whose hands I would like to have on the steering- wheel,” he said. Dagan, who remains insistent on the ‘stupidity’ of the Israeli government, came to Diskin’s support. He told the New York Times on April 29 that “Diskin is a very serious man, a very talented man, he has a lot of experience in countering terrorism.”

Netanyahu's exaggeration of the supposed 'existential danger' posed by Iran's nuclear program is clearly political – ultimately aimed at weakening another regional foe and appeasing his hard-line coalition. The invoking of holocaust analogies over a 'threat' that various international agencies have disputed, is a clear sign of the government's political and moral bankruptcy.

Awareness of Netanyahu's ineptness is not confined to former heads of Israel's intelligence, but the military itself. In a highly publicized interview in Haaretz in April, Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Benny Gantz disputed the government's conventional wisdom – both by attesting to the rationality of Iranian leaders and discounting the very claim that Iran is on the road to manufacturing nuclear weapons. "Iran is going step by step to the place where it will be able to decide whether to manufacture a nuclear bomb. It hasn't yet decided whether to go the extra mile," he said.

The timing of this stream of focused criticism, emanating from some of Israel's most decorated intelligence and army men, is not coincidental. Yes, there may be a major political upheaval underway regarding Iran, but considering the fact that Netanyahu still possesses the upper hand in Israeli politics, one must neither delve too far into optimism nor subsist in perpetual cynicism.

In 'Changing Course in Israel' (Gulf News, May 4), Patrick Seale wrote, "The challenge to Netanyahu could have far-reaching consequences. For one thing, it appears to have removed any likelihood of an early Israeli attack on Iran, such as Netanyahu has threatened and trumpeted for a year and more; for another, it has revived the possibility of a two-state solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a solution many had thought moribund, if not actually dead."

It is difficult to ascertain whether the threat of war against Iran has been 'removed' based on statements made during an election season in Israel. Israeli politics is particularly known for its underhandedness, and parties vying for power understand that focusing their attack on Netanyahu is the only way to reinforce their candidate's chances in the upcoming elections. This is not the first time that former heads of Israel's intelligence and military have adopted such a charged position against a standing prime minister.

Yet, regardless of the motive, the move against Netanyahu may be backfiring. According to a recent Haaretz poll, Netanyahu is 'the clear favorite heading into Israel's upcoming elections.' Yossi Verter wrote on May 5, "Netanyahu can rest easy after reading the results of the latest Haaretz-Dialog poll: Not only does he trounce all his rivals on the question of who is most fit to lead the country, but an absolute majority of Israelis reject the aspersions cast on him last week by former Shin Bet security service chief Yuval Diskin."

The poll indicates that the clearly coordinated statements regarding Iran are yet to shake Netanyahu's throne. That said, such criticism could represent the start of political friction around Iran's war. The friction could either move the next government further to the right or to the center. Until the nature of the next Israeli political formation becomes clearer, German commentator Ludwig Watzal is maybe closest to the right assessment. "The power struggle between Israel's security establishments should tell the international public that an attack on Iran's civilian nuclear program would be highly dangerous and politically irresponsible," he wrote.

Iran aside, what about other major maneuvers in Israeli politics preceding the probable elections few months from now? Tzipi Livni, former head of Israel's biggest opposition party, Kadima, has left the Knesset with a bang, although her resignation had been anticipated following her major defeat by challenger Shaul Mofaz in primary party elections last March. Once more, Livni assigned herself the role of the visionary, warning that Israel was sitting 'on a volcano'. "The international clock is ticking and the existence of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state is in danger," she suggested.

Livni may have left the Knesset, but she has not left 'political life.' That declaration was enticing to the media which began speculating on what role Livni now sees for herself. According to the Haaretz poll, Mofaz, who defeated Livni, enjoys a minuscule approval rating of 6 percent.

The frenzy of statements and political realignments preceding Israel's elections are typical, and should not indicate major shifts in policies. Mistaking all of this to signal the return of the two state options is too hopeful, to say at least.

The fact remains that Israel is unlikely to shift its aggressive policies from within. What is being promoted as the moral awakening, or political sensibility of some influential Israelis might merely be political maneuvers aimed at helping Israel find an exit strategy from delving further into war rhetoric. It could also be an attempt to challenge Netanyahu's stronghold on Israeli politics. Quarreling within the ruling class in Israel during an election is almost a requirement. It neither ushers a new era of peace, nor does it signal a serious change from the constant saber-rattling against Iran.