

Stop the bungling

Israel's prime minister has enraged his main ally and hurt the peace process: it is not too late to change course.

BINYAMIN NETANYAHU is one of the great survivors of Israeli politics. Whether he is the man to secure his country's long-term survival is more questionable. In 1997 *The Economist* acknowledged his "easy eloquence and optimistic approach", yet called for him to resign as Israel's prime minister after dubbing him a serial bungler with an "extraordinary talent for coming up with ill-conceived, provocative decisions at the wrong moment", such as his insistence on building "a new Jewish suburb" on the east side of Jerusalem which Palestinians saw—and still see—as their part of their future state's shared capital. We condemned Mr Netanyahu for the "arrogance of his assumption that the Palestinians will in the end accept whatever he offers them". More than a dozen years on, has Mr Netanyahu changed?

His recent behaviour eerily suggests not. It is hardly wise to enrage your most vital ally on the eve of negotiations, as he did by seeming to flaunt Israel's decision to build new settlements in East Jerusalem, just when America's vice-president, Joe Biden, arrived to hail the talks' resumption. Piqued by this apparent insult, Barack Obama let it be known that his patience with the Israeli leader was running out. The Palestinian leader, Mahmoud Abbas, is refusing to resume talks unless the building decision is revoked. Clashes erupted between Israeli security forces and stone-throwing Palestinians. A Gaza rocket killed a Thai worker in Israel. Fears of another intifada grew.

The hope is that this noxious row will spur a new sense of urgency (see article). Even in the influential American lobbies which usually back the Israeli government anxiety is rising lest Mr Netanyahu's obduracy prods America's president into making support for the Jewish state more conditional. Relations have not been this bad, on some counts, since the 1970s.

And yet, bloody-minded as the mood is, there is a hopeful paradox in Israeli politics. Though the centre of gravity has shifted over the years towards the right-wing-cum-religious end of the spectrum epitomised by Mr Netanyahu's coalition, the acceptance of the idea of two states, Palestinian and Israeli, existing peacefully side by side, has gained ground. Mr Netanyahu openly kiboshed that idea when he was previously prime minister; he now officially, albeit grudgingly, accepts it.

Another reason for cautious hope is that mainstream Israelis and Palestinians agree that an adjustment of the 1967 border, including equitable land swaps to compensate the Palestinians, is inevitable in any durable peace deal. If the border issue were resolved early in negotiations, much of the poison over the continuing building of Jewish settlements would be drawn, because the biggest of them would fall on the Israeli side of the new line, even along parts of East Jerusalem's rim.

Progress will come about only if Mr Obama gets involved himself. Entangled as he is with health care and Afghanistan, that may not happen until after the November elections. Opponents at home are criticising him for beating up his friends, such as the Israelis, while buckling or proving impotent in the face of his enemies, such as Iran and China. Moreover, he has been widely accused of making the Israeli-Palestinian imbroglio worse, by unwisely raising expectations of a settlement freeze and then failing to have a plan to nudge Israel into compliance when it gave him only part of what he sought.

Bibi, look to the centre

For sure, Mr Obama's stirring early oratory has been unmatched by his subsequent diplomacy. But the source of the latest impasse was Mr Netanyahu, who either knew about the announcement or failed to countermand the new settlements when he heard about them. If he is paralysed by his reliance on parties on his right, he should bite his lip and consider dropping them and dragging Tzipi Livni's centrist Kadima party into his government. If he refuses to do that, progress towards peace may have to wait for Mr Netanyahu's own eventual downfall. The danger is that a new round of peace-destroying strife may erupt long before that happens.

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