

A PALESTINIAN VIEW

Israel's 'bunker government' 2012

Mahdi Abdul Hadi

Most recently, we have witnessed Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu in four different spheres. Simultaneously, he was architect of the coalition deal with Israeli opposition party Kadima; negotiations (with Egypt) and the subsequent compromise ending the Palestinian prisoners' hunger strike; the response of "words and not deeds" to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' letter; and the continuation of military operations against Palestinians in Gaza and settlement expansion in the West Bank, including Jerusalem. Some of these acts sent out a lifeline, not only to the ailing Kadima party but also to Abbas' faction Fateh, both of which thoroughly dread the prospect of elections in their respective parliaments.

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The Israeli premier orchestrated the above as he faces far greater

threats to his power than the recent emphasis on Iran would suggest. While Israel's unemployment figures are running significantly below those in Europe and the US (5.4 percent at the beginning of this year), 2011 saw hundreds of thousands of Israelis taking to the streets of Israeli cities as part of

an emerging social justice movement, demanding lower housing and food prices for the squeezed middle classes. Although the irony of an "Occupy Jerusalem" movement is not wasted on many, this is in fact a real possibility given the level of public disapproval for the backroom agreement between Netanyahu and Kadima leader Shaul Mofaz, which effectively robbed Israelis of a chance to participate in the democratic process.

The benefits to Netanyahu of forming a new coalition are stark: the coalition reflex has become prominent among almost all European governments in the face of the ongoing financial crisis, and clearly Netanyahu believes that the coalition may act as a buffer for his own party against criticism on economic issues. Netanyahu is also far more competent in the field of neutering his political opponents than his predecessors and is happy for now to reap the benefits of a short-term commitment from which he can easily walk away.

However, to focus on the domestic in this fashion is to display a great naivety towards the Israeli context: here the formation of a coalition carries far more sinister implications than it would in Europe. That is to say that this could well be a "war government", i.e., a government that brings together cross-party support to ensure unity during a military campaign against an external threat. The government now contains a number of military generals and faces possible targets beyond Iran, including the Gaza Strip, South Lebanon

and Syria.

For now, however, perhaps the description of a "bunker government" would suffice. Israel is currently peering out to its southwest, eagerly awaiting the outcomes of two major elections in the region: those in Egypt (to be held in a few weeks), and those for Hamas's highly-secretive shura council. Israel is notoriously far-sighted in all its foreign policy decisions and is waiting for the smoke to clear following the "Arab spring"--and with it, the emergence of a new chapter in political Islam--before it can reassess its predicament and decide where to point the guns.

It must be said however that this coalition was not formed with an exclusively "war agenda", but also to maintain the status quo. Following the forging of the coalition, Israel has followed its longer-term strategic agenda of keeping an open door for dialogue with Egypt in order to maintain security along shared borders, contain Hamas in Gaza, and prepare for relations with the future Egyptian president.

Moreover, Israel has acted to ensure the survival of President Abbas' authority in the West Bank by agreeing to the demands of hunger-striking prisoners. Had a prisoner perished during the hunger strike, Abbas' legitimacy in the eyes of Palestinians would have been dealt a killer blow, while Hamas would have benefitted from the public outrage against Israel. Therefore, in the name of continuity, the Israelis want to sail clear of

open warfare with the Palestinians, while maintaining the peace process in its current state of deadlock. -Published 21/5/2012 © *bitterlemons.org*

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