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## THE HUFFINGTON POST

# It's Just Not Good Enough to Be Prime Minister of AIPAC

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Noted *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman once remarked that it is far more important what Arab leaders say to their people in Arabic than what they tell Americans in English. That adage also applies to Israeli leaders, including Benjamin Netanyahu, whose speech yesterday before the National Policy Conference of the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee wowed the fretful faithful, but represented no Sister Soldjah moment break with his darker anti-peace agenda.

Netanyahu in English is not the same Netanyahu in Hebrew.

In his AIPAC speech, the prime minister went to great lengths extolling the virtues of peace with the Palestinians and Arab nations "...peace is Israel's highest aspiration...and I'm prepared to make a historic peace with our Palestinian neighbors."

Halleluiah!

Netanyahu enchantingly exalted his audience to share his vision of a durable peace that would open up ties with Arab states and turn them into "...thriving relationships." He extolled how a great new union between Israel and Gulf states, what with Israeli innovation and Gulf entrepreneurship would "...catapult the entire region forward!"

Bibi's rhetorical wings soared ever higher across the cavernous Washington Convention Center as he embraced a Middle East that would solve its water and energy problems if a lasting peace emerged. "We could better the lives of hundreds of millions... So we all have so much to gain from peace."

Was that Peter Pan taking us on a voyage to Neverland, or a courageous, empowered leader finally embracing compromise to deliver a comprehensive two state solution -- willing to fight tooth and nail for it back in Israel to become his nation's transformative leader?

Well, first of all, those words have never been delivered in Hebrew by Mr. Netanyahu. And preparing Israelis for the sacrifices necessary to reach the Middle East promised land Bibi artfully portrayed before AIPAC has not been part of Mr. Netanyahu's Hebrew lexicon, so what is one to believe -- empty rhetoric or setting the peace table?

It's a constant guessing game. But it wasn't too long before Mr. Netanyahu quickly transformed his Middle East oasis into a mirage.

Having lifted kindred spirits about the comforting possibilities of peace, Netanyahu pivoted 180 degrees, defiantly asserting that what is standing between this new Middle East is the Palestinian leadership -- a Palestinian leadership he accused of refusing to recognize Israel as a Jewish state; a Palestinian leadership which, he warned, will flood Israel with Palestinian refugees, and a Palestinian leadership which wants to "amputate" (his word) parts of the Negev and Galilee from Israel.

That was the recalcitrant Bibi we have come to know all too well -- the brooding self-declared preserver of Israel's security at any cost -- even at the cost of delivering to Israelis that city on the hill whose vision he had just laid out for Israel in English at AIPAC.

I challenge Mr. Netanyahu to deliver the same AIPAC speech in Hebrew before Israel's Knesset - word for word.

Would it really matter to Mr. Kerry's chances of success if Prime Minister Netanyahu delivered that speech to Israelis? Certainly! It would inaugurate the long overdue debate that Netanyahu has steadfastly avoided taking to Israel's electorate ever since Mr. Kerry began his quest. And time is running out on Bibi to control the theatrics... the show is going to go on whether he likes it or not.

At what point in time is Mr. Netanyahu going to end his rhetorical *ropa dopa* -- on the one hand claiming to want a diplomatic solution, yet kow-towing to the equivalent of his own tea party equivalent, rewarding it with hush money to fund new West Bank settlements and promising never to give up one inch of Jerusalem?

Netanyahu knows (and we have already heard it stated publicly from Palestinian President Abbas) that the Palestinians have no intention of flooding Israel with Palestinian refugees; that the Palestinian leader has proposed thoughtful solutions to Israel's security concerns in the Jordan River valley, and only those imputing the worst motives against the Palestinian leadership would use this red herring of a demand to recognize Israel as a Jewish state as the reason to walk away from a peace treaty that would require the Palestinians to execute an end of conflict treaty fully recognizing Israel as the Jewish state of Israel on the dotted line.

Mr. Kerry's framework proposals are supposed to be unveiled no later than April 29, then the ultimate test of intentions will commence and let's be clear, neither the Palestinians or the Israelis are arriving at this decisive point with clean hands, enthusiasm, or magnanimity.

Reports out of Ramallah indicate that Mr. Abbas told Mr. Kerry that he will not agree to continue negotiations until the end of 2014 once the framework proposals are unveiled unless there is a settlement freeze and more prisoner releases. The Palestinian leader also asserted to visiting Israeli political leaders that the framework must offer a solution, be based on 1967 borders, and permit a quota of Palestinian refugees to be resettled in Israel. And too many Palestinian officials continue to turn a blind eye to corroborated Israeli accusations that anti-Israeli incitement continues unabated and callously blow off Bibi's demand that Palestinians recognize Israel as a Jewish state -- a demand that resonates, however unfairly motivated by Netanyahu, with vast swaths of the Israeli public. President Abbas stated he will wait till his March 17 Washington meeting with President Obama before making a final judgment whether to continue or walk away.

Secretary of State Kerry has unsparingly and at great personal sacrifice, invested considerable American prestige getting to this latest Middle East diplomatic fork in the road. Ironically, the all-too-familiar "final status" issues (refugees, borders, Jerusalem, right of return, mutual recognition, end of conflict) appear closer to compromise than the historically charged demand by Mr. Netanyahu that Mr. Abbas immediately recognize Israel as a Jewish state. The more Bibi demands this of Mr. Abbas, the more Abbas resists doing so, asserting that to make such a public declaration would jeopardize the rights of Israel's Palestinian minority.

Just to be clear, the demand is a relatively new one for an Israeli leader to assert, but it is also odd for Palestinians to resist what seems obviously and eminently reasonable reality on the unusual pretext that they suddenly sees

themselves as protectors of Israel's Arab minority -- a minority they have ignored for decades.

As my good friend, Aaron David Miller, one of the most respected Middle East experts around asserted in *Foreign Policy* today, Israeli-Palestinian peace has been a trap for Bibi to avoid at all costs and never an opportunity to embrace. But Netanyahu has signaled that he will not reject Kerry's framework -- whatever that portends for Mr. Kerry's efforts during the coming months.

In the final analysis what *both* Abbas and Netanyahu say to their respective populations in their own languages will ultimately determine the fate of Mr. Kerry's investment and the future vision of the two state solution enterprise. If this promising effort falters, neither Mr. Netanyahu nor Mr. Abbas will be able to avoid the blame -- whether in English, Hebrew, or Arabic.

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