

Netanyahu's peace strategy as a rational choice

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Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu at the weekly cabinet meeting, July 28, 2013. Photo: Koby Gideon/GPO

The readiness of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu to free scores of terrorists in order to meet Palestinian demands for the reopening of peace negotiations has fueled broad speculations on his motives. Some instant analysts have pushed simplistic psychological theories, and others see dark conspiracies, but given Netanyahu's history in both his first and second terms, a carefully formed, rational and strategic political explanation is more likely.

In the past four years, the widely repeated image of a narrow ideological warrior has been exposed as highly inaccurate.

In his July 27 letter to the Israeli public asking for support and understanding, the prime minister wrote that this difficult decision was necessary for "the good of the country" – a term he left undefined. But it is not hard to guess his calculus.

This "good" certainly includes maintaining the close cooperation of the United States, whose president and secretary of state clearly give high priority to a negotiation process – which they see as a key American interest. As Egypt, Syria and the rest of the region become even less stable, close Israeli- American cooperation is vital.

In addition to this already complex menu, Netanyahu must add the threat posed by Iran's ongoing nuclear weapons program, which the US is best placed to halt, particularly if military action is necessary in the next few months. On the list of Israel's strategic priorities, dealing with Iran is clearly at the top, and if the price is the release of terrorists in order to start negotiations with the Palestinians, this is clearly a rational choice.

The prime minister is gambling that Obama and Kerry will understand the pain and appreciate Israel's willingness to release terrorists in order to help Washington in the region.

In addition, there are important Israeli interests stemming from the talks themselves, beginning with assessments by military commanders on the ground that without this "political horizon," the level of Palestinian violence and attacks against Israelis will escalate rapidly. They argue that the relative quiet that has prevailed in the Judea and Samaria regions of the West Bank in recent years is not sustainable, and point to the steady increase in attacks in recent months.

The evidence suggests that cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian security forces has played a significant role in this calm, and in order to maintain these links, talks and agreements that move toward a two-state framework are necessary. In contrast, another round of sustained violence will be costly for Israelis and will add to the regional chaos.

With the agreement on negotiations, the Palestinian Authority pledged to suspend its intense campaigns of demonization and political warfare against Israel in the United Nations, the International Criminal Court and other venues for a period of nine months. Netanyahu can be criticized for over-emphasizing this issue and attributing too much influence to the PA's role, particularly as these campaigns will continue through the network of European-funded non-government organizations (NGOs) that act as proxies. But this factor is part of the overall assessment of costs and benefits.

Based on these dimensions, Netanyahu's decision to release terrorists in order to open talks can be readily explained on the basis of rational cost-benefit calculations and Israel's core interests. But the game is far from over with the opening round in Washington, and decision makers must also consider the scenarios and stages that are likely to follow. There are good reasons to conclude that the talks will break down as expectations on borders, Jerusalem and Palestinian refugee claims again prove irreconcilable.

Perhaps Netanyahu has some concrete assurances that if the Palestinian leadership again follows Arafat's playbook by rejecting all reasonable proposals and compromises, the US will push through international acceptance of borders and other terms that provide long-term security for Israel. Or perhaps the nine months allocated for the first stage are enough to gain the strategic objectives in Iran and Syria, and to limit factors promoting Palestinian violence.

None of these explanations mitigates the pain and moral objections to yet another release of inhuman terrorists who will be greeted as heroes by the Palestinian population. And Netanyahu's calculus on these complex issues may prove to be wrong – a rational approach is no guarantee of success and the record shows that betting on the US to follow through is risky. On the other hand, if this and subsequent moves helps to achieve vital Israeli strategic objectives, the prime minister will have done his job.

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