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What Are the Motives and Meanings of a Jewish State?

Rami G. Khouri

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Netanyahu offers a combination of outright lies and views that widely reflect Israeli and, to a lesser extent, worldwide Jewish sentiments on such core issues.

NEW YORK - In my discussions on Palestinian-Israeli negotiations with various informed audiences around the United States during the past month, the question that comes up most often is about how the Palestinians can, should or will respond to the Israeli government demand that they must recognize Israel as a “Jewish state.” The prevalent Arab and Palestinian demand is to rule out any such recognition, on several valid grounds, such as: The Jewish state concept is not defined, it does not take account of the Palestinian Arab and other non-Jewish Israelis, it does not address the implications of such recognition for the UN-acknowledged rights of the Palestinian refugees, and it does not have any basis in prevailing international law or diplomatic norms related to how states recognize each other.

These valid points do not seem to impress the Israelis, who have made this more central to their demands for any permanent peace agreement. Israel also seems to have convinced the United States to come down on its side on this issue, as the American president, secretary of state and other senior officials routinely

confirm when they refer to Israel as “the Jewish state of Israel” or some other such formulation.

It is not clear if Palestinians will cave in and accept the Israeli-American demand as they usually do, for three main reasons. First, the demand comes in the context of final status negotiations that aim to resolve all outstanding disputes, so there is likely to be some room for give-and-take in any final agreement. Second, the “Jewish state” concept remains undefined, and its clear definition, coupled with agreement on the rights of the Palestinians and non-Jewish Israelis, could pave the way for some mutual acknowledgments that satisfy both sides. Third, a central negotiating demand such as this, which springs up suddenly after over six decades of warfare, seems to be a proxy concept that reflects some deeper issues that must be resolved.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has only broadly commented on why the Palestinians must recognize Israel as the Jewish state or as “the nation-state of the Jewish people.” He recently claimed at a conference by the Institute for National Security Studies that the Palestinians have long had a “basic objection to any Jewish presence,” which he traces back to the Arab-Zionist clashes of the early decades of the 20th Century, before the state of Israel came into being. He sees the Palestinian Arab conflict with Israel as reflecting a “struggle against the very existence of the Jewish state, against Zionism or any geographic expression of it, any State of Israel in any border. The conflict is not over these territories; it is not about settlements, and it is not about a Palestinian state [T]his conflict has gone on because of one reason, the stubborn opposition to recognize the Jewish state, the nation-state of the Jewish people.”

As usual, Netanyahu offers a combination of outright lies and views that widely reflect Israeli and, to a lesser extent, worldwide Jewish sentiments on such core issues. He lies because the Palestinians and other Arabs who rejected the formation of a Jewish state in 1948 have since come to terms with it, assuming that Palestinian national and individual rights are also implemented in a negotiated accord that both sides accept. The Palestinians have also twice in recent decades recognized Israel and accepted its existence, on the same reciprocal basis that recognizes and implements Palestinian rights.

The current Palestinian and Arab rejection of the Israeli demand should include asking for an authoritative Israeli explanation of the meaning and implications of a Jewish state, and the deeper reasons for why Israelis make this demand now. I suspect that the need for such recognition mirrors profound insecurities and concerns in Israel about three issues: the state’s ultimate Jewish character, the sincerity of Arab recognition of Israel in a peace treaty, and the consequences of a peace accord that is likely to include agreement on options for the Palestinian refugees, including a limited number returning to what is now Israel.

If this is the case, Israel should articulate honestly and clearly the issues that it

needs resolved, so that sincere negotiators can get on with the business of crafting an agreement that meets the critical needs of both sides. The current Israeli strategy of trying to shape an agreement unilaterally while lying to the world about Palestinian sentiments is an embarrassment to Jewish traditions of justice, but seems to be a routine operating system for the extremists and deceit merchants who shape Zionism today. The Palestinians should respond by demanding to know the meaning and motives of this idea, so they can formulate a nuanced response that promotes an ultimate peace that responds to the legitimate rights of both sides, rather than making this impossible, as the Israeli approach does.