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The disaster known as Netanyahu

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MJ Rosenberg

Well-handled, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. Rather than apologise to the Turkish government for the deaths of nine of its nationals on the *Mavi Marmara*, you dug in and now your ambassador to Ankara has been expelled. At this rate, the once critical Israeli-Turkish relationship will soon be finished, leaving Israel with no friends in the region except shaky Jordan.

The peace treaty with Egypt is holding, but just barely and Egypt can hardly be considered a friend anymore. Its people despise Israel and identify it with former President Mubarak, the one Egyptian relationship Israel bothered cultivating. Israel's de facto friendship with Syria will end when President Bashar al-Assad goes. He is no Zionist, but he has been a force for stability on Syria's border with Israel, and Lebanon's, too.

Once he's gone, the north will almost surely heat up, especially now that Hezbollah plays a dominant role in the Lebanese government. As for the Palestinians, Netanyahu says that if they dare to take their case to the United Nations later this month, he may declare the Oslo agreement null and void. In other words, the Palestinians will be deemed enemies of Israel. Again.

In short, Binyamin Netanyahu is very close to bringing Israel back to where it was before the Oslo agreement of 1993. There is even the strong possibility that he will take it back to where it was before the Camp David peace treaty with Egypt — with the added disaster that the relationship with Turkey (established in 1948) will also be gone.

In a normal country, a record of disastrous failures like those would lead to Netanyahu's departure from office. But not in Israel. Despite all the damage he has done to the country's security and to its economy (note the massive protests against Netanyahu's Tea Party economics), he remains in office because the right supports him and Israel is governed by an entirely right-wing coalition.

The worst part is that nearly all of Israel's problems with its neighbors could be resolved by ending the occupation. Even the economy would benefit if the Israeli government was not wasting so much money on the settlers and their exorbitant demands.

New realities

Israel's propaganda machine would have it otherwise. It insists that the Palestinians, and the Arabs and Muslims throughout the world who support them, don't really care about the occupation. Their goal, we are constantly told, is to destroy Israel itself. As proof, they insist that "the Palestinians have never recognised Israel's right to statehood."

This is the kind of thing that used to be called the "big lie." The Palestinians have repeatedly recognised Israel's right to statehood and security within the 1967 borders.

For those who have forgotten, that is what President Clinton, Prime Minister Rabin and PLO Chairman Yasir Arafat agreed to on the White House lawn that day in 1993. Israel recognised Palestinian rights and the Palestinians recognised Israel. In the years since, neither side has threatened to revoke that recognition until last month when Netanyahu began saying that Oslo could be revoked if the Palestinians go to the United Nations.

But why?

The Palestinian turn to the United Nations offers the solution to virtually all of Israel's problems. President Mahmoud Abbas says that once Palestine is recognised by the international body, he will resume negotiations with Israel over all the issues that divide the two sides. The only difference will be that negotiations will be between two states, not one powerful state and one supplicant hoping a few crumbs fall off the table.

Netanyahu is terrified of a UN vote. He and his emissaries are going around the world demanding that the statehood resolution be voted down. And the combined forces of Netanyahu and the lobby here have cajoled the Obama administration to join Netanyahu in demanding a "no" vote.

It is clear that Netanyahu wants to preserve the status quo, even if it means that Israel reverts to a position where every one of its neighbors is an actual or potential enemy, even if it means that its strategic relationship with Turkey is over, even if it means that it has no one in the region to help prevent war with Iran.

Wrong priorities

It sounds crazy, but only because it is. Netanyahu's highest priority is to maintain the occupation. The settlers and the religious fanatics are his people; the Israelis of Tel Aviv and Haifa are not.

It's not that Israel's security does not matter to Netanyahu. It does. But for him, Ariel and the crazed settlers of Hebron matter every bit as much as the state itself. To him, there is no difference. (On that score, Netanyahu is much like Palestinian extremists who view all of Israel as occupied territory. Netanyahu makes no distinctions either.)

Netanyahu is bringing Israel to the brink and no one is doing anything about it. Both the president and Congress go along with Netanyahu because the lobby tells them that the only way to support Israel (and, in turn, be supported by its "friends") is to approve of everything done by the Israeli prime minister. That is why the Palestinians have to go to the UN. They cannot expect anything from the United States or even the Europeans (who are being pressured heavily on Netanyahu's behalf by the US).

The UN vote is expected to occur on September 20. It is too much to hope that America will do what it knows is the right thing and vote "yes" or be an honest broker and abstain. The best we can hope for is that the United States and Israel are part of a very small minority voting "no." That kind of vote will strengthen the Palestinians and perhaps frighten Netanyahu into negotiating in good faith.

But even if not, the UN will have stated that the Palestinians are people, too; people with rights, including the right to full sovereignty in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem. At that point, the writing will be on the wall. The occupation is ending, hopefully before Netanyahu does too much more damage ... to Israel.