

The Livni Plan, December 29 2006

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Does Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni have a clear diplomatic plan that she is trying to promote? Livni implies that she does, but refuses to explain. She speaks of the two-state vision. She talks about the need to divide the country politically. She speaks of the fact that she has a clear, high-resolution picture of what can be done vis-a-vis our Palestinian neighbors in the coming year. However, she does not explain what the plan really is, the nature of the operative Israeli idea now under discussion.

Apparently the idea is as follows: to promote a diplomatic process by means of a package of gestures that includes transferring money to the Palestinians, releasing prisoners and bringing in the Egyptians to help stop the arms smuggling on the Philadelphi route. Then, to conduct negotiations with Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas about the second stage of the road map and about the establishment of a Palestinian state within interim borders. Then, to convene the moderate Arab countries to give him backing. And then, to hold elections in the PA in which the moderates will have a reasonable chance because they will be able to offer the Palestinian public a clear and existing political horizon.

And only then, if the moderates do in fact win, to return to the first stage of the road map, to deal with the dismantling of the terror infrastructure and to begin to move forward toward the evacuation of the settlements, a reduction of the occupation and the establishment of a real Palestinian state, while ensuring Israel's security needs and receiving international guarantees that Israel will be recognized as a Jewish state and will not be asked to absorb Palestinian refugees.

Can this plan be implemented? Isn't it totally divorced from reality? The foreign minister is very careful not to mention any details, but she radiates optimism. She is full of self-confidence, is Livni. Energetic. Upon leaving a meeting with hostile European MPs, she is full of adrenaline. The challenges with which she presented them. The arguments with which she surprised them. The way in which she convinced them that they themselves don't want to return to the 1967 lines. And when she finally sits down in her armchair and treats herself to some chocolate, Livni tries to overcome the directness that is gushing from her and to become formal once again. To become a stateswoman. To be the real alternative to the prime minister.

Palestinians? Two states for two peoples

Tzipi Livni, it's been 10 months since you became foreign minister. Have you learned anything you didn't know before?

"As a person, I haven't changed. I think I've learned how significant diplomacy is. I've seen how much the right conversation between leaders can influence decision-making. That doesn't mean there are no vested interests. That doesn't mean there are no political constraints. But in the end it's people. And in most cases these are people who want to do the right thing. That's why if you identify the common interest but also show them our real argument, they'll listen to you. You can change things that are significant."

What do you see as the main challenge now facing Israel ?

"I'm disturbed by the process of turning national conflicts into religious ones. And the Iranian issue is, of course, a problem. But my main commitment is to the Israeli-Palestinian issue. I think that the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is a keg of gunpowder that we're sitting on and for which we have to find a solution. Time is not on the side of the moderates on both sides. Time is working against a solution of two nation-states."

And is the two-state solution still relevant? Is the present government committed to dividing the country?

"Of course."

The practical significance of dividing the country is the establishment of a Palestinian state as soon as possible.

"Yes. Yes. My vision says that the principle of two nation-states is not only an Israeli gift to the Palestinian but a promotion of Israel 's interests."

And do you believe that the establishment of a Palestinian state during the term of this government is a possible goal?

"I don't like to set timetables. I'm not talking only about a Palestinian state but about two nation-states living in peace side by side. And in my view there is a Palestinian public that considers this goal its own as well. Up until now, the Palestinians have missed every opportunity. They could have been celebrating the 60th anniversary of their state - had they accepted the Partition Plan - and alternatively they could have been celebrating the sixth anniversary of their state - had they accepted the Camp David ideas.

"But I believe that today there is another opportunity. The moderate Palestinians must understand that Islamization and religious extremism are working not only against Israel , but against every Palestinian who wants a nation-state of his own."

In effect, do you see the government bringing about a significant change in Judea and Samaria in the coming years?

"If that doesn't happen, it's because the Palestinians have become more extreme."

But do you, for your part, have the determination to bring about this dramatic change?

"Absolutely. And I'm not talking only about a vision. I'm talking about an operative diplomatic plan with quite a high resolution. I won't reveal all the details to you now, but I can tell you that I, for my part, know exactly what must be done."

Do you propose returning to the road map?

"The road map contains stages, not content. It lacks content to a certain extent. It affirms that in the second stage, a state with temporary borders and symbols of sovereignty will be established. But what does that mean? I think that in talks with the Palestinians, I can get into details on this issue.

"I think that I can conduct talks with Abbas that will clarify what they want to achieve in the two-state vision. On the one hand, I want to anchor my interests on the security issue, demilitarization and the refugee problem, and on the other I want to create a genuine alternative for the Palestinians that includes a solution to their national problem. If we achieve such an alternative, the moderate Palestinians will have to receive a mandate to implement it. At a certain point, it will also be necessary to bring in moderate Arab countries to support the plan. It may also be possible to formulate some of the basic principles of the final status agreement, even if it's impossible to reach such an agreement now."

You're optimistic.

"Anyone who lives in the Middle East and has his feet on the ground cannot permit himself to be optimistic. But I see a type of opportunity. On the one hand, we're surrounded by a growing threat and extremism and zealotry. But on the other hand, precisely because of this threat,

moderate countries and moderate factors in the region understand today that their problem is not Israel .

"I think that this opportunity must not be missed. At least we must examine it. We must clarify for ourselves whether it has a chance."

But meanwhile Qassam rockets are falling on Sderot. What you are proposing is negotiations under fire.

"Even during Sharon 's term of office, I claimed that we shouldn't say that we won't talk under fire, but that we won't make concessions under fire. We have an obligation to work to stop the Qassams. As of today, as we speak, I don't think that it's right to carry out a dramatic military operation for that purpose. But even if the situation changes and there is no escaping some kind of incursion, at the end of the operation the diplomatic question will remain the same. The plan that I am proposing can also be a consequence of such an operation."

And aren't you afraid that if we leave the territories in Judea and Samaria in the near future, the Qassams and Katyushas will pursue us?

"The plan that I'm talking about must provide an answer to the problem of steep-trajectory firing. That is one of the reasons why I prefer a consensual diplomatic process to a unilateral one. I think that after the disengagement, it's absolutely clear that we cannot simply throw down the keys and leave. The separation fence provided a solution for the suicide bombers and it began the process of partition, but it is not providing a solution to the present security problems. We have to find an answer for them in a diplomatic context."

Is the separation fence a reference point for you for dividing the country?

"Yes."

And do you believe that the present government will be capable of evacuating the tens of thousands of settlers living to the east of the fence?

"The behavior of the Palestinians in Gaza after the disengagement creates a major problem. But I believe that in the final analysis, if a reasonable solution is found for the security issues, most of the Israeli public will support this process."

What you are in effect proposing is a return to the convergence plan. But your convergence is a convergence in agreement with the Palestinians.

"I didn't use the term convergence a year ago, and I certainly won't use it now."

But in effect that is your vision. That's what you're aiming for.

"The vision is the State of Israel as a national home for the Jewish people, which provides a solution for the problem of the Jewish people and for Jewish refugees, and provides a national expression for each and every Jew, and alongside it a Palestinian state that is the national home of the Palestinian nation, which provides a total solution for the problem of the Palestinian nation and the Palestinian refugees, and provides a national expression for each and every Palestinian. I feel that I have the obligation to make that happen."

Syria ? I'd remain silent

And Syria ? What will happen with Syria meanwhile?

"I'm not ruling out anything. The question is mainly one of timing and wise tactics. Here, too, it's clear that we want to achieve peace. But when you enter negotiations, you have to know what you'll do if they fall apart."

Have you undergone the same ideological process in relation to the Golan Heights that you underwent in relation to Judea and Samaria ? As far as you're concerned, is there no basic deterrent to leaving the Golan Heights ?

"Anyone who talks about a future discussion with Syria understands that we are talking about the Golan Heights ."

In other words, there is no basic problem here. You're simply afraid that a possible failure of negotiations with Assad will increase the chances of war.

"In the Syrian context, it's not clear what outcome we will have at the end of the process. There is a package that we call peace. At this point, entering negotiations will not lead to this outcome, but will enable Syria to enter Lebanon through the door rather than through the window. At the moment, I must take that into consideration. Syria knows exactly what it must do in order to be part of the international community, but it is doing the opposite. The meddling in Lebanon , the embargo on the Syria-Lebanon border, Gilad Shalit. There is a gap between Syrian statements and Syrian actions."

Some people in the Israel Defense Forces top brass and the intelligence community are warning that in the wake of the Lebanon war, the status quo with the Syrians is over. Now it's either-or. If there is no progress within a few months, there will be deterioration. Maybe even war.

"Like everything in life, the Syrian issue is also a matter of timing. I think the statements on the subject do not contribute a thing. Neither the refusal to negotiate nor the peace festivities contributes a thing."

In that case, you wouldn't openly refuse the Syrians?

"I would remain silent. I don't think I have to reply every time someone offers me a microphone. There is significance to what a foreign minister says. There is significance to what a prime minister says."

But meanwhile the impression is being created that we are refusing. The Syrians are knocking at our gate, begging for peace, and we're slamming the door in their face.

"I'm not sure that the Syrians are begging for peace. We want peace. They want negotiations."

In that case, the right thing to do is to expose the bluff. But we aren't doing that because we are obeying the orders of the Americans.

"It's not only the Americans. Many people all over the world understand the problematic nature of Syria . Many understand that the Syrians must be pressured."

What you are saying is that certain Europeans are also cool to the idea of Israeli talks with Assad at the present time?

"Cool? That's an understatement. Go to France ."

But neither France nor the United States will bear the results of this policy. As before the Yom Kippur War, the government of which you are a member is waiting for a phone call. Aren't you afraid that in the future we'll see this winter as the winter in which we didn't prevent war?

"I ask myself that question every day. That's why I think it's proper to conduct a situation assessment every day. To examine at every moment whether conditions have changed. As of today, Syria is totally involved in terror. It is doing as it pleases in Lebanon and is trying to bring down the Siniora government."

Really? And I thought that the situation on the northern border is excellent. The declarations of the prime minister convinced me that our historic victory in the second Lebanon war led to a situation where Hezbollah was smashed, Nasrallah is in a bunker and the situation of the moderates in Lebanon has never been better.

"I still think that the situation in Lebanon is better than it was. But the pressure on Siniora and his government is disturbing."

The war? And I say, boys, stop it

Do you view the war as a success?

"The diplomatic result of the war - UN General Assembly Resolution 1701 - is a success. It reflects the Israeli interest. But there were failures in the war. There were failures. Something very negative happened to the public as a result of the war."

What happened?

"There was a huge gap between the expectations and the reality. And it's not that the public got up in the morning and said 'I expect.' This gap was fed. There was a problematic dynamic of talk and of declarations and of raising expectations."

Were there moments when you looked around you and saw belligerence?

"Yes, yes."

Was there an excess of enthusiasm at the beginning of the war?

"Yes. About everything. It was a real heartache. The period that was hardest for me was the period of euphoria. I wasn't there."

Did you return from meetings with a heavy heart?

"Forget it. I don't want to talk about personal feelings. But did I have a heavy heart during that period? Yes."

What was the root of the problem?

"I think that from the second day of the war, it was clear that the exit would have to be political. The military campaign was important to make it clear that Israel will not conduct business as usual when soldiers are kidnapped, but the campaign couldn't stand on its own. That's why I thought that the exit must be diplomatic and immediate."

Did you support a diplomatic exit from the war right from the start?

"From the second day. I wanted us to begin to create it then. That was the great difficulty. Part of the leadership and certainly the army had a feeling that the issue was the military campaign itself. Whereas I thought that the military campaign had to be only an entry point to a diplomatic process. People expected the military campaign to produce something that it couldn't provide."

Did you think that it was possible to arrive at a good diplomatic exit point at a much earlier stage?

"And that it should be done immediately. After the blow of the first night, we should have been concerned about how the future would look. And how the future will look is more than a military campaign."

Did you see male hormones raging around you?

"Sometimes there are guy issues."

Was there a guy problem in the conduct of the war?

"Not only in the war. In all kinds of discussions, I hear arguments between generals and admirals and such and I say guys, stop it. There's something of that here."

Did the Israel Defense Forces worry you during the course of the war?

"Yes. During those days, the thinking was too militaristic. But I think that today, in the wake of the war, there's a better understanding that the strategy cannot be only military. They understand that in the army too. At the beginning of the war, some people thought that the diplomatic role was to provide the army with time. That's understandable: In the past we always achieved, we conquered, we released, we won, and then the world came and took away from us. The victory was military and the failure political. But this time it was the opposite."

So what should be changed now? What cannot be repeated in the next war?

"We have to tell the army officers that they're wonderful and they know how to do wonderful things, but we also have to ask them how. We have to ask them more questions. To ask the right questions."

And the right questions weren't asked?

"The main question that must be asked is, Then what? Okay, do such and such a thing, but then what."

Iran ? People know what they know

In light of the way in which Olmert, Peretz and you conducted the small war in Lebanon , do you have confidence in your ability to conduct the major battle against Iran ?

"Yes."

Don't you feel a need to expand the government?

"It's not as though there is someone outside the government who has a magic solution in his hat."

Can Israeli citizens sleep peacefully when Olmert, Peretz and Livni are repelling the Iranian threat?

"Yes. There's always room for improvement. But that's not something that is a function of a different coalition or a different composition of the cabinet. I feel very confident about what I want to do and what I'm capable of doing. Nor do I feel any lack of group confidence on this issue."

And the Iranian threat itself - how serious is it?

"The danger of Iranian nukes is more than just the Iranian nuke. The fear is of a domino effect. Many countries in the region understand that the combination of Iranian ideology and a nuclear bomb is not something that they can tolerate. Therefore, if Iran goes nuclear, they will do one of two things: Either they will compete with Iran or they will join it. Countries that can develop nuclear weapons on their own will do so in order to compete with Iran , and countries that cannot develop nuclear weapons will join the neighborhood bully, Iran .

"For many of the moderate countries in the Middle East , the choice will be between creating their own bomb or asking for sponsorship. That will have two consequences: widespread nuclear proliferation not only to countries but to terror organizations as well, a fact that will change all the international rules of the game on the nuclear issue, and moderate countries being dragged toward the extremist ones. The world cannot permit itself a nuclear Iran ."

1938?

"My texts are different."

Is the threat dramatic?

" Israel has been a threatened country during all the years of its existence. We are a country that lived under threats for many years and knew how to deal with them. There's a problem here. On the one hand, you can hear even me saying terrible things about the Iranian threat, all over the world. And it's true. But I wouldn't want the citizens of the country to reach an almost physical sense of dread. The public today is filled with anxiety and that bothers me. We are here and we will be here for many years to come. We and our children and our children's children after us."

The things you are saying are heartwarming. But the feeling is that Ahmadinejad is continually marching forward and there is nobody stopping him.

"It's true that Ahmadinejad is moving forward. And it's true that he must be stopped. But nobody has given up. Neither the Israeli government nor the world."

Do you see enough determination and ability in the West to stop the Iranian nuclear bomb? Don't you think that both the West and Israel have failed so far in a big way in their attempts at stopping it?

"Everyone agrees about the need to prevent Iran from having nuclear weapons. The problem is that the attempt to arrive at consensus decisions at the UN leads to delays in the timetables and to compromises. That's why even the decision taken this week in the UN Security Council was taken very late, and deals only with soft sanctions. There is a need to impose harsh sanctions on Iraq , immediate and unequivocal ones. Most members of the Security Council understand that."

It's not too late?

"The important point is the acquisition of know-how. The crossing of the technological threshold."

Crossing the threshold is liable to take place in 2007. Maybe even in the coming months. "Israeli policy is to lower our profile on the Iranian issue. And if I continue to answer your questions that won't be lowering our profile. We have to be aware of the fact that time is working against us. But we are working. We're in a process. We're maintaining international awareness of the Iranian threat."

And not only that. We're doing even better, and coming out with a series of unprecedented declarations that create a feeling that the policy of ambiguity has changed. Did you like the declarations?

"To be fair, it must be said that a problem has been created. Even in places where they understand the Iranian threat, they were forced to respond aggressively on this matter because of inner discomfort stemming from the fact that Israel is seen as a threat. But a large part of the impression was created due to media coverage."

Are the media to blame?

"The media are always to blame. By definition."

Is there a change in the policy of ambiguity?

"There's no change. I'm a partner in this context and there is no decision about a change in policy."

And shouldn't there be a change?

"No. What people know they know."

Shouldn't the change in the situation lead to an increase in the level of Israeli deterrence vis-a-vis Iran?

"Israel has deterrent power in this area. People know what they have to know."

Are you aware of the fact that since the Lebanon war there has been a sense of profound crisis in Israel?

"I see it. People have a feeling of an existential threat. If there is anything that disturbs me, it's the sense that people feel a need for physical survival. I think that's extreme. There's no justification for that. But this process disturbs me because it has internal consequences. Anyone who can is beginning to think in family terms of bank accounts abroad, to send the child to study abroad, a foreign language, a foreign passport. I feel that's wrong both from a Zionist and a social point of view. Because this is being done by those who are able, and that increases the distress of those who are unable."

The distress does not stem only from the external threat. It also stems from the sense that there is a leadership crisis in Israel.

"That's the situation. I can't argue with feelings. Yes. It exists."

Olmert? I'll run if I have to

You were close to Sharon. What did Sharon give the Israeli public and what was lost with his leaving?

"Sharon provided a sense of security. The public does not expect the leadership never to make mistakes. The public expects the person who is sitting there on top to have the right considerations. To consider the good of the nation and the country over the long term rather than in the here and now."

"That's why the question is not whether the leadership makes mistakes. It's natural to make mistakes. The question is whether there is someone sitting and weighing things in such a way that even if he makes a mistake, it will not be a dramatic one. And if he makes a mistake, he'll know how to fix it. That's how it was with Sharon. Slower movement is good."

Do you remember the moment of Sharon's collapse?

"Yes. There was that terrible night. When most of the night you crossed your fingers. A silent prayer. And then I went to Jerusalem and I had a buzzing in my head that the public is looking toward Jerusalem and it needs a government in Jerusalem. Otherwise everything will fall apart. I remember the feeling that they were looking at us, and now we would either take responsibility or everything would fall apart. And we had to convey the message that there was a responsible adult. There are responsible adults. And that we were together.

"Therefore, when I heard people in the media already talking about the fact that there were two heads - Olmert and me - I knew we had to cut off a head immediately, and that was my head. I approached the television cameras and said that there was a deputy prime minister and that we were standing behind him and with him."

And when you look back after a year - did you fulfill the assignment? Is there a responsible adult in Jerusalem? "I know that the public feels otherwise."

Are you satisfied with the government in which you are serving?

"The fact is that the public feels a lack of confidence."

And what is the source of that feeling?

"The leadership in Israel is a very lonely place, unfortunately. I believe in teamwork. But in teamwork, you also expose weaknesses. That's why many politicians in Israel refrain from that. I feel that the problem is one of an absence of teamwork as it should be."

We all hope that the term of Prime Minister Olmert will continue for as long as possible. But after the Olmert era, do you see yourself qualified for the premiership?

"In terms of qualifications, yes. I did not set my sights on being prime minister. I really didn't. It's something that was created. A while ago, I would have answered you differently. But there was a process here that has prepared me."

So that as far as you're concerned, you've grown and matured and today you're qualified to be prime minister?

"I'm qualified to be prime minister."

So when the Olmert era is over, you're next in line?

"If I see that at the point when the contest takes place, there are missions that I haven't completed and that I must complete and I'll be able to complete by being prime minister - I'll run for the premiership."

Is there a possibility that you would run against Olmert?

"I've told you what my test is. It's not personal. It's not connected to some identity or other. If I can do what I believe in and receive that same cooperation that we discussed - I'm happy where I am. If I can't do that, I'll compete for the place where I can do it, which is the place of prime minister."

I don't hear any outright rejection of running against Olmert.

"I'm interested not in the job but in the issue. I entered politics first and foremost to further the diplomatic issue. At the point where I am, that can be done if there is support from the

prime minister. Therefore, if I have such support and I can do what I believe I must, I won't look for the next slot. If not, I'll run for prime minister."