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**What is really happening with the American proposal?**

**[with Nimrod Novik, Haaretz in Hebrew, 22/11/17]**

It is difficult to gauge President Donald Trump's determination in realizing his intention to launch a political initiative to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian-Arab conflict. It is even more difficult to assess whether the American administration - characterized by a "revolving door" policy at senior levels; having not yet made vital appointments in the areas of foreign affairs and security; and to put it mildly, lacks a coherent foreign policy – would be able to conduct complex negotiations, and then implement an agreement if it is reached.

However, the president's adviser on international negotiations, Jason Greenblatt, who is assisted by a small but well-versed team, is doing his best to formulate a peace plan based on lessons from the past. He has conducted dozens of meetings with the parties as well as with experts from the region and beyond. The president and his son-in-law and top adviser, Jared Kushner, who is in charge of the issue, have contributed to the effort by emphasizing its importance, demonstrating to the parties that Greenblatt is indeed speaking on behalf of the president.

All this comes despite the president's statement that from his point of view, he would accept "one state [or] two states", provided that the parties agree, and moreover, despite his ambassador to Israel, David Friedman, not exactly being an avid supporter of the two-state vision.

One of the challenges that Greenblatt is trying to overcome is the level of skepticism between the two peoples - the Israelis and the Palestinians - as well as the Arab environment relevant to the success of his mission. In an attempt to prepare the ground, he is making an effort to persuade all those involved to take early steps that will bring about a change of atmosphere, enabling the process to be launched under somewhat improved conditions.

To his surprise, he found considerable willingness to do so in the most unlikely places, chiefly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. But their willingness to change the atmosphere by taking steps demonstrating to the Israeli public the value of the regional process is being halted by their deep distrust of Benjamin Netanyahu. They fear that he will not live up to his promises to respond to their gestures by taking steps that will demonstrate his commitment to the twostate solution. Therefore, the American request for "advances" from the Arab side encountered a willingness to "synchronize reciprocity." Or in the words of Netanyahu: "if they give, they'll get; if they don't give, they won't get." It seems that the fear of being portrayed as suckers is not a uniquely Israeli phenomenon: past experience teaches them that Netanyahu leaves them to pay the bill in the face of Arab public opinion and the more extreme countries and organizations.

The administration believes that this effort will not only solve the local problem, but also enable the creation of a regional framework that will better synchronize Israel's interests with those of the Arab Quartet (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and the UAE) in face of the Iranian and jihadist threat. For Kushner, Greenblatt and Friedman all realize that progress on the Palestinian front is essential to the integration of Israel into the regional community.

At this point, it seems that the American team still needs more time to complete two main pillars of its program: first, to ensure that when the Trump program is launched, they will have a clear commitment on the part of the three main players - Israel, the PLO and the Arab Quartet – to promote trustbuilding measures demonstrating their commitment to the process and reduce the lack of confidence to a degree that makes negotiations viable.

Second, to expand the framework of negotiations so that it will be held in three parallel channels:

Israel - PLO: Negotiations on all core issues for a permanent settlement of two states for two peoples; Israel - The Arab Quartet: Dialogue on Israel's reservations about the wording of the Arab peace initiative as well as on common regional issues; The donor countries - the PLO: discussions in the context of "economic peace" and the construction of the organizational and economic infrastructure for a Palestinian state.

In the first context, it appears that the Americans want to reach the launch of the program with three deposits that will be carried out gradually but simultaneously (using a "three-sided zipper") the day after the start of the process. The components of the various "packages" are still being discussed, but there are reasons to assume that the Israeli contribution should include renewed commitment to the twostate solution; acceptance - albeit conditional - of the Arab peace initiative as a basis for reference to the process; avoidance of undermining the internal Palestinian reconciliation process; restricting construction in the settlements to the built-up area (in American English: up but not out, ie, high-rise construction); and the transfer of a symbolic piece of territory from Area C to Area B (as an illustration of the fact that the annexation talks do not reflect a policy that Area C is not subject to negotiations).

In the Palestinian package, the PLO is required to refrain from international moves against Israel, to maintain and deepen security coordination, deal with incitement, promote internal Palestinian reconciliation, and work with donor countries to improve governance and transparency of the PA budget. The "package" of contributions from the Arab Quartet (which, of course, mainly refers to Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, though other countries seem to be considering), includes initial normalization measures, including flight permits for Israeli aircraft in the airspace of the countries in question; interoperability of communication lines; promotion of business meetings and visas for business people for reciprocal visits; encouraging mutual media coverage, including the opening of Arab media to Israeli interviewees and the possibility for Israeli media to operate in the relevant countries. It is expected that these countries will also undertake commitments to grant the PLO financial and political support.

As for the nature of the negotiations itself, it appears that the Greenblatt team is still working on preparing the parameters for conducting the negotiations and that the team's work is based on generations of past litigants, but their deliberations regarding the core issues are not simple at all. The team is supposed to present the president with parameters while his attention is to considerations other than the success of the process: the need to balance his domestic needs (including the fear of angering the evangelical base) and the expectations of his friends in Riyadh, the difficulty of pressuring Netanyahu in the light of the Republican political flak jacket, the fear that pressuring the Palestinians will bring about the collapse of the PLO, etc.

Thus, the strenuous work of an impressive Washington team, an exception in the current administration, is only a few months from the moment it is presented to their unpredictable president. Then it would be clear whether he's determined to follow through or that his enthusiasm has waned. If he decides to leave the matter, he will leave us with the same familiar dilemmas: in the absence of an external savior, how to protect the Zionist project from annexation trends which marks its end.

If he chooses to take on this mission, while being aware of the scope of the effort required to jumpstart a process and further promote it over time, then the leaders of the three main players in the drama will be tested - the Arab Quartet, the Palestinian people, and Israel. But in reality, whatever the contribution of the others to success – or failure - we Israelis will not be satisfied with praying for the success of the move. We will have to insist that our leader is worthy of the task and if not - to ensure that Israeli democracy replaces him by another.