Middle East Peace Negotiations at a Standstill

World events are speeding up their run, replacing, pushing and crowding each other. This is typical for the Middle East region, where after the “Arab Spring Revolutions” a barrage of shocks, major changes continues to occupy new areas. Today, hardly anyone will say that time has stopped there and in the commentary it is often written that even the quickest reporters cannot keep up with the change of events.

The powerful turmoil in the region has started to affect the Arab-Israeli conflict that has been stuck in an impasse for many years. The general opinion is that the preservation of the created stalemate and the lack of even a small shift in the negotiating process under the current circumstances of rampant terrorist activities on the part of ISIS and other extremist Islamic organisations, is fraught with serious consequences, especially since the humanitarian situation in Gaza after the Israeli invasion last year remains despite the promise of international aid very tense: destroyed homes have not been rebuilt, hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees are still homeless, the acute shortage of basic supplies remains.

Alas, these issues are of no concern to the Israeli Prime Minister, B. Netanyahu. For a considerable time he has been more concerned about the continued degradation of the state of relations with Washington, especially in connection with the US approach to Iran's nuclear program, as well as disputes with the European Union, especially after the recognition by some European capitals of the Palestinian state.

Netanyahu believes that the imminent implementation of the final agreement on the Iranian nuclear program (which, in his estimation, now definitely enters into the B. Obama’s agenda), changes the strategic balance of the region, strengthening Iran’s position and its room for manoeuvring to impact the development of the situation in Syria, Iraq and around the Persian Gulf.

Finding himself in a difficult situation, Netanyahu gives signals aimed at intensifying dialogue with the US administration, but warning at the same time that he will not renounce his criticism of the agreement with Iran and will closely monitor the progress of the negotiation process.

As for the other “uncomfortable” topic - the discussion in the UN Security Council of the resolution on a Palestinian state, he has no doubt that the Israeli lobbyists in Congress will find a way to put pressure on President Barack Obama on this issue and “he practically has” the US veto.

Overall, B. Netanyahu, taking into account the experience of an “awkward” relationship with President Barack Obama, whom he has called in informal remarks “a left sided liberal, naive and weak,” hopes that he will be able to establish a close and confidential contacts with the new US President (whether he is from the Bush or Clinton clan).

Netanyahu believes that the Arab world is currently experiencing one of the most difficult periods of its modern history and that it is difficult to forecast what will happen: whole countries are involved in bloody civil war, one of the biggest and once wealthiest - Libya is torn apart and plunged into chaos, with what seems to be no end in sight; strife between the ruling monarchies is becoming more explicit in nature with each of them seething with dangerous political passions. And all over the region fanatic terrorists of ISIS, Al-Qaeda and other Islamic extremist
 organisations wander, doling out brutal punishments and directing horror at the common man.

The Israeli prime minister said that the Palestinian problem to a large extent reflects the Inter-Arab struggle for power, and therefore evidently he will try to squash the ring around Hamas and at the same time endeavour to make the position of M. Abbas more vulnerable and more dependent on Israel.

The current Israeli government does not want to miss the opportunity to use the chaos and division prevailing in the Arab world and surreptitiously continue the former line on creeping occupation and manipulation with the Arab leaders: one day making threats, including the use of force, the other – appealing to establish useful contacts.

Netanyahu does not share the Messianic ideas of the settlers, considering settlements instrumental in preventing the creation of a Palestinian state. Therefore he will stick to the course towards their systematic expansion, convinced that as this line worked earlier, it will continue to work.

Netanyahu will lean on two major Jewish organizations in the US to carry out this policy: the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). He hopes that together with their heads he can put pressure on the administration by blocking with members of Congress, particularly from the Republican Party.

According to many observers, this "butting of US and Israeli heads" will apparently continue for some time. For example, the news agency Bloomberg, in late April reported that the US administration has made it clear to the Israelis that it may even give up the long-standing US policy of protecting Israel at the UN and support the draft resolution establishing the conditions for the creation of two states.

In this connection one should remember that in November 2014, France put forward a UN Security Council draft resolution that defined the process of a "negotiated solution" (the French draft spoke of the gradual complete withdrawal of Israeli security forces in line with UN Security Council Resolution 242 of 1967). Furthermore, the draft resolution clearly wasn't consistent with the principles set on February 18, 2011 by the US Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice (she is now the presidential aide for national security). Back then she said the following: "We think it unwise for the Security Council to attempt to resolve the core issues that divide Israelis and Palestinians... The only way to achieve a common goal is direct negotiations between the parties ... That is, dissent between Israelis and Palestinians, and even the best constructed external forces can not resolve the conflict for them." Later, under pressure from the United States, the French backed down from promoting their project, but yet under the new conditions in the UN it is possible that they could return to it again.

However, in the political circles of Western countries there is an awareness of the need to find a way out of the current impasse and to closely monitor and evaluate considerations expressed by political scientists and experts. In this respect, the proposal of former Israeli Justice Minister Yossi Beilin, published on May 15 this year in the newspaper "New York Times" has attracted attention. He believes that as long as the position of the current right-wing government of Israel remains fragile, in order to endure, it must demonstrate its loyalty to the world; and this will require the creation of a national unity cabinet. To achieve this, it is necessary to freeze new settlement construction and engage in serious negotiations with the Palestinians. The usual scheme for solving the Arab-Israeli conflict involves the creation of two states - Israel and Palestine. Beilin, in his turn, suggests straight away instead of a "divorce" to create an Israeli-Palestinian confederation, where both sides will have to make significant concessions. If you follow the logic of co-existence, not disengagement, it can be concluded that with both nations living so closely to each other the whole division of the territory will be counter-productive.

The well-known Lebanese journalist, Rami Khouri has some ideas in this regard. In his material published on April 25, he did not mince words by saying that reasonable acceptable ideas from the "wild people in Washington," should not be expected to come, and suggested paying attention to the book of the Swedish diplomat Mathias Mossberg and American Mark Levin called "One Land, Two States: Israel and Palestine as Parallel States". One of the options in the book suggests a model in which Palestinians and Israelis could choose their place of residence and their national sovereign rights would be protected by the relevant Israeli and Palestinian governmental structures. Of course, this is just a small step towards a comprehensive settlement but it could at least partly help alleviate everyday problems of the population.

In the capitals of the Middle East rampant pessimism reigns. The reason for this is the fact that, according to the prevailing opinion of the Arab press (in particular, "Arab News" of 09.05.2015), the current government of Netanyahu is the most right-wing in recent history (Israeli left-wing circles do not try to conceal the annoyance that the portfolio of Minister of Justice has been given to a woman known for extremist views), and the chances of
Achieving at least a little progress in the negotiation process are void. The Israeli researcher J. Mekelberg of the London Royal Institute of International Affairs sharply expressed himself on this point, as according to him the results of the elections on March 17 and the formation of a new Israeli government was in fact, "the last nail in the coffin of the peace process." One minister of the Palestinian cabinet bluntly stated that given the newly sworn-in government, it is essentially a "government of war".

Currently, there is a growing concern not only in left leaning Israel, but in Arab and even in Western countries about the stalling of the Middle East peace process, because in the end it only strengthens the position of extremist forces on both sides. It has long been obvious to everyone, that without a just settlement with the Palestinians, Israel will remain permanently under threat and security can be achieved only through an agreement with the Arabs and real international guarantees.

*Vladimir Mashin, Ph.D. in History, a political commentator, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.*