

# Israel's 'Bibi' can forge a secure, lasting peace

By GEOFF BERG

**T**HE election of the Likud's Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu as prime minister of Israel is not the blow to peace that many across the world seem to believe it to be. It was, after all, a Likud government under the leadership of Menachem Begin which agreed to return every bit of the Sinai peninsula to Egypt under the terms of the Camp David Accords reached by Israel and its western neighbor.

The current peace process — the one begun in Madrid in 1992 — has achieved much that couldn't have been imagined just three years ago. The Palestine Liberation Organization has renounced terrorism and recognized Israel's right to exist, and Israel has given Palestinians control over their own lives. No one has suggested that Bibi would do anything to change what has already been done.

The Likud leader was elected to continue and strengthen the peace process, not to end it. Netanyahu faces a difficult situation in which Israelis want very much to end the conflict with the Palestinians, but not pay for the privilege with their lives. Since the signing of the Oslo Accords (the exchange of letters between Israel and the PLO which led to the handshake on the White House lawn between Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin), more than 200 Israelis have been killed by Palestinian terrorists. In a country of about 5 million, 200 dead civilians is not an insignificant number.

Shimon Peres, despite being a former and present defense minister, has never had the military credentials needed to make peace. In a nation in which everyone, male and female, serves in the army, Peres never did. The late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was known as "Mr. Security" because he was the hero of the 1967 Six Day War, the outcome of which probably established Israel as a fact for all time. Rabin was trusted to look out for Israel's security. Peres never was.

By contrast, Benjamin Netanyahu was a member of an elite commando unit, the one which rescued Jewish hostages being held at Entebbe in Uganda. His brother Yonatan was the leader of that mission and the only Israeli killed there. Bibi can be expected to draw bright, clear lines over which he will not cross. Peres never did.

Netanyahu has the credibility with the Israeli people to make the kind of peace which will ensure their security. Even if his record on security turns out to be no better than



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that of his predecessor, he will still have more room in which to make peace than did Shimon Peres. Bibi is trusted to look out first for the security of the state of Israel and its citizens.

Netanyahu will continue the peace process, but under a different set of priorities. From now on, Yasser Arafat can expect to be held to his word; when he does not deliver on his promises, he should expect reciprocal treatment from Israel.

Syria can forget its silly demand that Israel simply retreat from the Golan Heights in exchange for vague promises of peace from a known murderer, supporter of terrorism and drug runner like Hafez Assad.

World politicians, pundits and observers are scrambling for ways to describe Netanyahu and his policies. Many have opined that Bibi does not like or trust Israel's Arab neighbors. I agree. He does not trust them, and he should not — they have attacked his country repeatedly over the past 50 years or so with the stated intention of killing or expelling all of its non-Arab inhabitants. Would you trust

someone with whom you had that kind of history?

Shimon Peres does trust them, which may be why Israelis have never really trusted him. Bibi shares Israelis' powerful desire to live in peace with the Arabs, but also their skepticism about whether the Arabs really want the same thing from Israelis. That is exactly why Netanyahu is the perfect candidate for peace-making.

Whether the Palestinians get their own state is irrelevant. Most Israelis don't care either way; what they want is security, whether it grows out of a pastel vision of this New Middle East, as Peres would have it, or a bitter reconciliation with ancient enemies, as will be the case with Netanyahu.

If, in this country in 1972, George McGovern had been president and traveled to Beijing, it would have been widely considered a cave-in by a dovish president who was soft on communism and weak on American defense. Such is the case with Peres in Israel and among the Arabs. Richard Nixon, the ridiculed, McCarthy-like anti-communist could be trusted not to make any agreement with the Chinese that would harm U.S. interests.

Such is the case with Netanyahu in Israel and among the Arabs. Only Nixon could go to China and only Bibi can go to Palestine.