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## *A Netanyahu Conversion? The Case for Skepticism*

**By Leonard Fein**

Too transparent to be a scam, more nearly a farce. I refer to Prime Minister Netanyahu's 10-month "freeze" in settlement construction on the West Bank, about as gummy a freeze as can be imagined, a freeze meant to change nothing, only to placate the Americans.

That is, admittedly, an increasingly contrarian view. Many people, including some very unlikely people, are these days suggesting that Netanyahu is staggering towards the ultimate revisionism — the revision of his lifelong commitment to a Greater Israel. These people argue that the harsh truth has finally taken root amongst Israel's traditional hawks: The world will not accept Israel's permanent colonization of the West Bank. (That line of reasoning appears lately to have overtaken the demographic argument as the cornerstone of creeping dovishness.) The world at large will not accept it, and even the United States will ultimately reject it.

I very much hope that Aluf Benn, the distinguished Haaretz correspondent who wrote last month that Netanyahu is prepared to make concessions to the Palestinians and to broker a two-state solution, is right, and that Shimon Peres, Israel's president, who shares Benn's view, is right, and that the review of these and similar views by Ethan Broner in The New York Times of December 16 is on target. But I see no good reason to accept that Netanyahu has seen the light, and at least three powerful reasons to suppose he has not.

Let's begin with the terms of the freeze itself, with the trumpeted announcement of what Netanyahu called "a policy of restraint": There will be no new housing construction and no new housing permits in the West Bank for 10 months. Sounds good, yes? But then come the exclusions: The policy does not apply to East Jerusalem, where construction continues apace, where housing meant for Jews now threatens more and more Arab neighborhoods and renders

the prospect of East Jerusalem as capital of a new Palestinian state more problematic each day, where just this last year Israel's Interior Ministry revoked the residency rights of 4,577 Palestinian residents — a number 21 times greater than the annual average revocations over the last 40 years. And construction will continue on the 3,000 housing units already begun in the West Bank. And there will be no limit on the construction of public buildings in the West Bank — schools, clinics, synagogues and so forth. The carpenters and the plumbers and the cement mixers will not be idled.

Note as well the somewhat curious time frame: Ten months. Ten? Why ten rather than nine or twelve, or six? What logic is there to a 10-month half-baked moratorium? Hint: The Netanyahu announcement was made on November 25. Ten months brings us to late September of 2010. Let's suppose that, true to his repeated word, Netanyahu decides to resume housing construction in the West Bank, and that he announces that decision on September 25 — six weeks before the off-term congressional elections in the United States. Will President Obama or the candidates for Congress choose a public brawl with Netanyahu on the eve of a fateful election?

A second reason to doubt Netanyahu's alleged conversion: In announcing the moratorium, Netanyahu said, "When the suspension ends, my government will revert to the policies of previous governments in relation to construction." And his statements since that time have been earthier, bolder, more clearly reflective of his determined intentions: "This is a one-time decision and it is temporary. We will go back to building at the end of the freeze," he said on December 1. And he went on to say of the settlers that they are "an integral part of our people. They donate, they serve, they volunteer, they are our brothers and sisters, so I would like to tell them as well as all citizens of Israel and our Palestinian neighbors that this decision is temporary."

Now, perhaps Netanyahu's hope was that the Americans would be mollified by his halting forward step and think it sufficient inducement to persuade the Palestinians to restore to life the currently comatose peace process. Or perhaps he realized that there was no way the Palestinians could accept his unilateral moratorium, in which case he gets credit for moderation and can once again blame the other side for the lack of a peace process. "We have no partner," remember? Or, as is quite common in Israel's leading political circles, perhaps he simply

calculates that 10 months is a very long time, that we cannot know now what will be going on with Iran, that if circumstances change sufficiently there will be time for him to move in a different direction from what he has promised. No one knows. Netanyahu himself may not know. All we have at the moment are his words — and they are unambiguous.

A third reason to be skeptical: Israel awards special grants to communities designated as “priority.” They are eligible for extra assistance in tax breaks, grants, employment and industrial support, technological funding, housing loans, development costs and financial assistance in the construction of public buildings. It goes without saying that a number of the larger settlements in the West Bank are on the list approved just last week. But in a last-minute expansion of the list, 91 of the 121 settlements beyond the Green Line now qualify as priorities. This is an insane attempt to buy off the vehement and sometimes violent opposition of the settlers to the housing moratorium. It encourages them to believe that their vehemence and their violence are worthwhile.

Oh yes: The state has informed the High Court that it cannot carry out the order to demolish illegal outposts so long as the moratorium is in force, since its personnel will be busy enforcing the moratorium.

I don’t envy Netanyahu: angry settlers, recalcitrant colleagues, an unloved prime minister. I envy Obama still less: Netanyahu.