

# Trump and Netanyahu Won't Bury the Two-State Solution

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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**By forcing the settlements issue prematurely, Israel's right-wing parties may have misjudged the new administration's interest in preserving its peacemaking options.**

**W**hen Donald Trump meets Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu this week, it will, no doubt, be a love fest. Both men want to show that it is a new day in the U.S.-Israel relationship. If there were problems before, they'll say, they were due to President Barack Obama and have now vanished.

The truth is more complex. While President Obama was genuinely committed to Israeli security, he had no problem airing America's differences with the Israelis in public. In the early days of the administration, he felt distancing himself from Israel would show how different he was from George W. Bush -- an objective necessary, in his eyes, to restore America's battered image in Muslim-majority countries.

President Trump's desire to demonstrate he is different from his predecessor on Israel is not unique. Since Israel's emergence as a state, nearly every president has done likewise. Dwight Eisenhower wanted to show he was different from Harry Truman, who he felt should not have recognized the Jewish state over the opposition of his entire national security team. John F. Kennedy thought Eisenhower made a mess of the region and tilted too far away from Israel. Richard Nixon thought Lyndon Johnson was too close to Israel and that the 1967 war had cost the United States with the Arabs. Ronald Reagan felt Jimmy Carter failed to see Israel as a strategic asset. George H.W. Bush believed Reagan was too pro-Israeli and he needed to rebalance the relationship. Bill Clinton, meanwhile, was convinced Bush had been too tough on Israel and deliberately softened our opposition to Israeli settlements. George W. Bush felt Clinton was too preoccupied with the Arab-Israeli conflict and even dropped the phrase "peace process."

Thus it continued under Obama, who, unlike Bush, deliberately showed "daylight" between the United States and Israel by being openly critical of Israeli policy on settlements and not stopping in Israel when he went to Saudi Arabia and Egypt in June 2009. He also took the unprecedented step of walking away from a presidential

commitment by refusing to recognize the letter between Bush and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, which effectively recognized Israeli settlement blocs in the West Bank -- referred to euphemistically by Bush as "major population centers"-- as part of Israel's decision to withdraw from Gaza in 2005.

That letter may figure prominently in this week's meeting between Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu. Even though Iran, the Islamic State, Syria, the Sunni states, and Russia will surely be discussed, both the White House and Netanyahu have now publicly said the two leaders will talk about settlements.

While neither leader may have originally had settlements on his mind, the Israeli right wing has put the issue on the agenda. In response to the forced evacuation of 40 families from Amona, a small settlement established on private Palestinian property, Naftali Bennett's Jewish Home party pressed in recent weeks for legislation that would legalize all existing settler outposts -- even giving Netanyahu an ultimatum not to block it lest he bring the government down. The Knesset **[adopted \(http://edition.cnn.com/2017/02/06/middleeast/israel-knesset-west-bank-outposts-bill/\)](http://edition.cnn.com/2017/02/06/middleeast/israel-knesset-west-bank-outposts-bill/)** the "legalization law" after a heated debate while the prime minister was out of the country. Even if the new law is struck down by the Israeli Supreme Court, as is likely, the legislation is an unmistakable effort by Israeli right-wingers to extend Israeli civil law to the West Bank and effectively begin the process of annexing it.

Many like Bennett feel it is time to end any ambiguity about the future of the territory. They reject Netanyahu's position of two states for two peoples and are convinced that a Palestinian state would pose a mortal threat to Israel. And they think that with Trump, who has designated an ambassador to Israel who **[opposes \(https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/16/world/middleeast/david-friedman-us-ambassador-israel.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/16/world/middleeast/david-friedman-us-ambassador-israel.html)** Palestinian statehood, they have a historic opportunity.

But their exuberance may cost them. They appear to misjudge the Trump administration's interest in **[preserving the option of pursuing peace \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/amonas-last-gasps\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/amonas-last-gasps)** between the Israelis and Palestinians.

Even before the legislation was adopted, the Israeli government's announcement of 5,500 new housing units in the West Bank led the White House to issue a **[statement \(https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/02/02/statement-press-secretary\)](https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/02/02/statement-press-secretary)**: "While we don't believe the existence of settlements is an impediment to peace, the construction of new settlements or the expansion of existing settlements beyond their current borders may not be helpful in achieving that goal."

Having been President Bill Clinton's peace negotiator, I can say this statement could have been issued by his White House. The point it makes is that while settlements don't intrinsically make peace impossible, their expansion does make its pursuit more difficult.

That the administration felt the need to signal Israel that there was no blank check on settlements suggests that the president's interest in peace, or desire to lower the profile of the issue, favors a deal limiting Israeli settlement activity. During George W. Bush's administration, there were understandings on building "up" and not "out" -- in other words, building within existing settlement blocs was less objectionable than construction that stretched into new areas. The aim was to have Israel absorb no additional territory for settlement construction, thereby allowing construction to be consistent with a two-state outcome.

President Trump seems to accept that logic, having **[told \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/trump-warns-israel-that-expanding-west-bank-settlements-not-good-for-peace/2017/02/10/51a39ce4-ef89-11e6-b7e8-df81bd6c4c30\\_story.html\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/trump-warns-israel-that-expanding-west-bank-settlements-not-good-for-peace/2017/02/10/51a39ce4-ef89-11e6-b7e8-df81bd6c4c30_story.html)** the Israeli newspaper *Israel Hayom*: "There is limited remaining territory...Every time you take land for a settlement, less territory remains. I'm not someone who believes that advancing settlements is good for peace."

Here again, one can see the logic of the Bush-Sharon letter, which offers a basis for limits on settlements but also

formally acknowledges that the final border between the two states is not going to be the 1949 armistice lines or the lines before the 1967 war. There is a wide consensus within the Israeli body politic that the June 4, 1967, lines are not defensible and cannot become the border in any peace agreement. Moreover, going back to 2000, we developed with Israeli and Palestinian negotiators the concept of settlement blocs and territorial swaps to accommodate a significant number of Israeli settlers and compensate the Palestinians for modifying the border. With 75 percent of the Israeli settlers living on about 5 percent of the West Bank territory, this concept was designed to appeal to the mainstream of the settlement movement.

For Prime Minister Netanyahu, the Bush-Sharon letter could be used to hold back the right wing of his coalition and show the Israeli public he produced a number of strategic gains with the new president. Those gains include Trump's adoption of positions that contractually contradict key provisions in UN Security Council Resolution 2234 on settlements, his acceptance that parts of the West Bank in any peace agreement would be absorbed into Israel, and an end to official U.S.-Israeli disagreements on settlements, removing one of the historic irritants in the relationship.

There is one last irony to the focus on settlements in the meeting between Netanyahu and Trump. By forcing the issue prematurely, Israel's rightist parties may produce the opposite of what they intended -- a deal between the Israeli and American leaders that limits construction to the settlement blocs, permitting the Trump administration to claim it changed policy from Obama but also preserved the possibility of two states.

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