

Losing by Winning: The Rupture of the Israeli Center

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Brief Analysis

The new Israeli government reflects the country's increasing polarization and leaves Netanyahu with limited room for maneuver, making it difficult for him to preempt the growing momentum behind efforts to internationalize the Palestinian issue.

As the June 3 Paris peace conference approaches, the recent effort to broaden Israel's government may emerge as one of the more consequential moves of Binyamin Netanyahu's premiership -- not for what it produced, but rather for what may have been foreclosed. Much of the public commentary on the latest developments has focused on his decision to replace the experienced, steady, and trusted defense minister Moshe Yaalon with Moldovan-born arch-nationalist Avigdor Liberman, who has not hid his disdain for Netanyahu or his desire to become prime minister in the future. Indeed, the stakes are significant given Liberman's controversial statements on Israeli Arabs, Egypt, and the need to reoccupy Gaza; in the immediate sense, Netanyahu brought in his former aide turned rival in order to widen his very narrow coalition majority from 61 to 66 seats in the 120-member Knesset.

However, no less consequential was the collapsed effort to promote a centrist strategy by bringing together center-right Likud Party members and center-left Labor Party members in a joint effort to address the Palestinian issue. Netanyahu's failure to close a coalition deal with Labor leader Isaac (Bogie) Herzog after months of quiet,

painstaking talks may be something more profound than a failed political gambit -- it could represent how deeply polarized Israel has become.

After all, half of the twenty-four Knesset members in the Labor/Zionist Union alliance did not even wait to see what Herzog had achieved during the talks, rejecting the coalition idea outright. Saying no to Netanyahu appears to be more important to them than breaking the stalemate with the Palestinians and defusing the international delegitimization movement against Israel. By the same token, Likud's Yariv Levin mobilized his party's hardline young guard against the deal, saying he told Netanyahu that the gap with Labor was "too wide" to bridge.

Where was this gap most pronounced? In public comments, Herzog hinted that Netanyahu was willing to stop settlement construction on the Palestinian side of the security barrier -- that is, in 92 percent of the West Bank -- but ultimately refused to put it in writing. Given the lack of trust between Israel's rival factions, it is fair to say that whatever was not in writing was not going to happen. One edge of the country's political spectrum does not want to stop settlement activity anywhere, and the other edge does not believe Netanyahu will ever declare an end to construction in what would be a Palestinian state. Neither was willing to give the experiment a chance.

In short, Israel's center is not holding, and its more assertive edges clearly disagree on how the Palestinian issue may affect the country's future. If nothing else, this suggests that unity between center-right and center-left is unlikely to happen on Netanyahu's watch, and that will surely tie his hands. His room to maneuver on the international stage has already shrunk dramatically since the Herzog talks collapsed two weeks ago.

Between 2009 and 2015, when Netanyahu led a broader coalition with parties on his left and right, he had political space to maneuver and took advantage of it at times (e.g., by issuing a moratorium on some settlement construction in 2009-2010 and releasing pre-Oslo prisoners). Now he has no such space. Without a broadened government, he will likely be unable to demonstrate publicly that Israel's settlement policy is being brought into line with his professed desire for a two-state outcome. And without such an initiative, the government will be hard pressed to prevent international efforts to address the Israeli-Palestinian issue. France's effort to hold an multilateral meeting this week -- to which Israel and the Palestinians are not invited for now, partly because Paris correctly reasoned that Israel would not attend -- is just one indicator of what may be coming.

Ironically, some in the region are ready to give the Israelis a chance to launch an initiative and perhaps avert the type of imposed international outcome that Jerusalem fears. Egyptian president Abdul Fattah al-Sisi's remarkable statement before the Netanyahu-Herzog talks collapsed -- in which he made clear that Cairo and other Arab governments would support peace moves if Israelis came together -- was not accidental. Sisi was aware of the seemingly emerging coalition agreement and the likelihood of an Israeli peace initiative, and it led him to the extraordinary step of publicly appealing for unity within Israel. Would he be willing to maintain such a supportive posture now that the Herzog deal is off? On May 30, both Netanyahu and Liberman praised Sisi's remarks and noted the "positive elements" in the longstanding Arab Peace Initiative, but what concrete steps will their new coalition actually be willing to take on the peace front?

It is also noteworthy that Secretary of State John Kerry did not announce his participation in the June 3 Paris parley until after the Netanyahu-Herzog effort collapsed. With the widespread perception that the new Israeli government is incapable of launching a credible initiative, the Obama administration is unlikely to block new efforts to reach an international solution. Whether Washington will allow the issue to make it to the UN remains unclear.

Whatever the case, the pressures within the international system seem poised to intensify at precisely the same time that the new Israeli right-wing coalition -- in which Netanyahu is the most moderate member -- is most isolated. He understandably fears that Friday's meeting will set the predicate for a grand peace conference in Paris in the fall and possibly a UN Security Council resolution at year's end that imposes the parameters of a solution. There are several

good reasons why such an approach is ill-advised:

- If the past is any indicator, the international effort will lack balance. Principles that Palestinians seek will be concrete, while those addressing Israeli concerns will be left vague -- borders and Jerusalem will be spelled out for the Palestinians, while the details behind security and refugees will be left for future negotiations.
- If the issue comes before the Security Council, the United States will not be able to dissuade Russia and others from backing the Palestinian demands, and Vladimir Putin will insist on putting his own imprint on any resolution.
- Such an outcome would cement the Palestinian conviction that resisting negotiations, internationalizing the conflict, and backing delegitimization efforts are paying off, so why switch course?
- The right-wing Israeli government would probably become more defiant in response to an imbalanced resolution and international pressure, likely spurring additional settlement activity in the West Bank and greatly increasing the challenge of preserving a two-state outcome.

All of this may have implications for the next U.S. administration, which could be stuck with a policy that cannot be implemented. Calls for getting Netanyahu and Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas in a room and waiting for white smoke sound good in theory, but the gaps between them are too wide and their mutual distrust is too deep, making any such talks a certain failure.

At present, the only other real option is to restore a sense of possibility and preserve hope for a two-state outcome -- but that requires Israel and the Palestinians to take substantive unilateral steps toward accepting each other's core requirements. For Israel, this means limiting its settlement activity along the lines of the putative agreement between Netanyahu and Herzog, making clear that there will be no Israeli sovereignty on the Palestinian side of the security barrier, and signaling its willingness to negotiate a different final border if Palestinians come to the table. For the Palestinians, this means stopping the antinormalization campaign against contacts with Israelis, ending payments to families of people who are killed in the act of stabbing Israelis, and ending the practice of calling such people "martyrs."

Skeptics will cast doubt on whether Netanyahu and Abbas can actually implement such options -- indeed, Abbas is unlikely to change his strategy at first because he favors internationalization. Therefore, the initial pressure to act will fall on Netanyahu. To avoid internationalization, he will need to go over the heads of politicians at home and publicly explain the stakes to the Israeli people. He was very low key about his efforts with Herzog in order to avoid stirring up the right against his unity gambit, but that quiet approach failed and has narrowed his options. If he does not act now, and more visibly, the internationalization effort that was previously avoidable will only intensify, regardless of its wisdom.

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