

# The Israeli Prime Minister's New Path

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## Netanyahu is emphasizing a rationale for peace negotiations rooted in Israeli self-interest rather than Palestinian goodwill, and Abbas should do the same.

In 1956, Israel's famed general Moshe Dayan gave a eulogy about a young kibbutznik who was killed in a border attack by Arabs, saying that Israelis needed to get used to the idea that life in the Mideast meant remaining forever on guard. He termed this the "fate of our generation." "This is our life choice," he said, "to be prepared and armed, strong and determined, lest the sword be stricken from our fist and our lives cut down." Expressing sympathy for the Palestinians, while at the same time saying their hatred for Israel is growing, Dayan added, "without the steel helmet and the cannon's fire, we will be not be able to plant a tree and build a home."

Nearly 50 years later, in 2003, future Prime Minister Ehud Olmert used a memorial service on the 30th anniversary of the death of Israel's founder, David Ben-Gurion, to veer from the conservative stance of the Likud. Citing a 1949 address to Israel's parliament, in which Ben-Gurion explained Israel's decision not to gain the West Bank in the armistice ending its war of independence, Olmert said that "faced with the choice of all the land without a Jewish state or a Jewish state without all the land, we chose a Jewish state without all the land." If Israel had taken the land, an Arab majority would have outnumbered Jewish Israelis. Olmert said that Israel now had to make a comparable decision.

Secretary of State John Kerry, who recently announced a "basis" for resuming Israeli-Palestinian peace talks after a three-year hiatus, may be pleased to know that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is showing signs of continuing this graveside tradition.

At Theodor Herzl's gravesite on June 27, in an admittedly less sweeping fashion, Netanyahu spoke of the Zionist ethos of self-reliance. Anti-Semitism will not be eradicated anytime soon, he said, and a peace agreement will not extinguish extremism. Yet, he declared, "we do not want a binational country." People who meet Netanyahu privately in recent weeks say he now often talks about the threat of binationalism as a rationale for supporting a Palestinian state even if he has opposed it for decades as a security threat. Netanyahu elaborated on this at the start of a cabinet

meeting this Sunday. In remarks released by his office, he stated that holding talks is a "vital strategic interest" because Israel is keen on "preventing the creation of a binational state between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea."

In short, Netanyahu is saying the status quo is unsustainable. Netanyahu argues here that Zionism is based on Israel remaining both Jewish and democratic, and that the character of the state will not persist indefinitely if Israel fails to reach an agreement with the Palestinians. I have carefully followed Netanyahu's public statements over decades, and this theme of preventing Israel from sliding into binationalism is one that he has largely avoided. (There was a singular reference to it when he spoke at a Tel Aviv think tank last year, but this was during the short period of time that he had a very wide government coalition of 94 of 120 Knesset members. As the liberal elements left his government over a separate issue, he did not mention it again.)

This is important, as it enables a right-of-center government to frame a peace agreement in terms of Israeli self-interest. In the 1990s, when the idea of Mideast peace was in its heyday, Shimon Peres -- who fashioned himself the Jean Monnet of the region, bringing old enemies together on the basis of economic cooperation -- spoke of a "new Middle East." However, the Middle East today is in chaos and therefore, the economic self-interest argument carries little weight. It is important for Israelis to frame peace in terms of self-interest, especially since there is so little trust among Israelis of Palestinian and Arab intentions.

Moreover, Netanyahu is an Israeli leader who greatly identifies with the idea that Palestinians should recognize the Jewish character of Israel. Some Palestinian officials quietly insist that Israel is overplaying its hand. Since Israel wants this so badly, they argue, Palestinians should hold out until it is the last card to play. Others oppose such explicit recognition altogether. In any event, this demand of Israel to be recognized as a nation-state of the Jewish people derives from the same fear of Israel becoming binational -- that in the absence of the partition of the vast majority of the West Bank, Israel would continue the slide toward becoming de facto binational (approximately half Jewish and half Arab, although exact calculations are extremely contentious). This would undercut the very Jewish character that Israel seeks to preserve in order to remain a democracy.

It is interesting that an idea that originated with Israeli liberals is beginning to migrate to the right side of the spectrum as both sides declare fealty to the idea that Israel, as a Zionist state, is democratic and Jewish. Retaining its democratic character -- equal voting rights for all its Jewish and non-Jewish citizens -- and its Jewish character therefore requires an arrangement to preserve its Jewish majority: a two-state solution.

Just as Netanyahu is finding a rationale for peace negotiations rooted in self-interest rather than in Palestinian goodwill, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas must do the same. Of course, the lack of trust is just as strong on the other side. Abbas has to make it clear to his people that the road to ending occupation and to attaining statehood runs through peace with Israel.

Their political messaging is critical. Polling among both Israelis and Palestinians demonstrates that both groups still want a two-state solution. However, they are convinced the other side is not interested and that therefore, peace is very unlikely. Moreover, Netanyahu and Abbas do not like to get out ahead of their publics. Both are risk-averse. They are not figures like Ben-Gurion and Anwar Sadat, who made gigantic decisions and brought their people behind them. Rather, these two men look over their right shoulders. That's why their messaging is important, enabling both leaders to tilt the cost-benefit analysis in the direction of peace -- so that they no longer have to go only to gravesites to deliver tough truths.

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