

An Israeli Labor Party Perspective on Peace

by [Isaac Herzog \(/experts/isaac-herzog\)](/experts/isaac-herzog)

Jun 20, 2011

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Isaac Herzog \(/experts/isaac-herzog\)](/experts/isaac-herzog)

Isaac Herzog is chairman of the executive at the Jewish Agency for Israel.



Brief Analysis

On June 16, 2011, Isaac Herzog addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute to discuss Israel's next steps in the wake of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's recent visit to Washington. A member of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, Mr. Herzog has served in a number of senior positions in the Israeli government, most recently as minister of welfare and social services. He is currently a candidate for the Labor Party chairmanship. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

Given the huge uncertainties created by the Arab Spring, many Israelis believe that the best response is a "wait and see" approach. That is a narrow, short-term view, however. A better response is to shape the region's changes in Israel's interest, based on the view that it is better to influence history than be swept along as a passive participant.

From that perspective, President Obama's recent speech hit on the crux of the difference between the Israeli right and left. The current government chose to focus on a few controversial words in the speech and, in the process, deepened the tension between Israel and the United States. On the other hand, the Israeli opposition -- especially the Labor Party -- welcomed the address as another evolutionary step from the 2000 Clinton Parameters toward the goal of ending the conflict with the Palestinians. Although Prime Minister Netanyahu delivered a brilliant speech to Congress that touched on Israel's centrist consensus, he did not take advantage of the occasion to advance the diplomatic process and offer real statesmanship toward a two-state solution.

The reality of a potential UN General Assembly vote on Palestinian statehood this September carries substantial risk for Israel. Many young Palestinians see the energy and activism of their counterparts in Egypt and long for the same liberating experience. Given these strong undercurrents, the adoption of a UN statehood resolution would likely unleash violence, whether in the form of civil disturbances, a third intifada, or terrorist attacks.

Recognizing the anti-Israel majority at the UN, the Israeli government has thus far decided to fight the statehood initiative by seeking support from certain pro-Western democracies. At best, however, this approach will result in a Pyrrhic victory. A more effective way to meet the challenge is to embrace the process and try to shape it in Israel's interests. Specifically, that means supporting a UN statehood resolution conditioned on direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

By returning the process to the well-established path of bilateralism, Palestinians would be able to retain their dignity, and Israel would have a chance to negotiate directly to resolve core differences. The alternative -- a deadlock and no bridging proposal -- would leave the international community perplexed, Washington with no tools to move

forward, Israel trapped and isolated, and Palestinians heading down a dangerous path of confrontation.

On the Israeli domestic front, the Labor Party -- which is known to be centrist on issues of war and peace and has a social-democratic approach toward socioeconomic issues -- could play an important role in the next election. In its view, many middle- and working-class Israelis are disaffected with the political and socioeconomic status quo and are poised to show their support for Labor. Despite the difficulties that arose when Defense Minister Ehud Barak and Shimon Peres left the party, the new members and interim chairman have worked together to form a successful group, and the number of candidates who have registered to participate in the decisive September 12 leadership primary has tripled. Although it is unrealistic to expect Labor to win the next national election, the party can gradually gain influence.

For now, the new Labor has offered a bold, proactive plan for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The party welcomes Obama's vision of advancing human rights and democracy in the Middle East and supports the formula of two states for two peoples based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed land swaps. Labor is also the only Israeli centrist party that accepts the Arab Peace Initiative as a framework for negotiations. Furthermore, it maintains that a future Palestinian state will be demilitarized, that Palestinian refugees will return to the Palestinian state alone, that Jewish neighborhoods in east Jerusalem will exist under Israeli sovereignty while Palestinian neighborhoods will belong to the Palestinian state, and that a special joint administration will oversee the holy sites. As for negotiations, the party supports a two-tiered approach, beginning with borders and security and continuing with the more emotive issues of Jerusalem and refugees.

Finally, regarding Hamas, Labor opposes negotiating with elements that call for Israel's destruction. Yet Israel should be willing to negotiate with a government formed of technocrats regardless of their original party backgrounds, so long as that government accepts the criteria set forth by the Quartet (i.e., the United States, EU, Russia, and UN): acceptance of Israel, disavowal of violence, and acceptance of past agreements. The eventual goal of the peace process is not a three-state solution with two Palestinian states, but rather a two-state solution that will necessarily involve elements from all reaches of Palestinian society.

Although Israeli politics have shifted to the right in recent years, the pendulum is now swinging in favor of the centrist views expressed in Prime Minister Netanyahu's speech to Congress. Accordingly, the Israeli public is ready to be swayed toward the left if they come to believe there is a serious partner on the Palestinian side. The Labor Party believes that this partner exists.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Sheli Chabon. ❖

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchetskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab-Israeli Relations \(/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations\)](#)

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](#)

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](#)