

The Push for Mideast Peace Hinges on Benjamin Netanyahu 2.0

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As Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu recently passed his first 100 days in office, there are early signs that the Israeli leader has evolved since he held the post a decade ago.

This could mean -- on the Israeli side at least -- a real commitment to a durable peace.

During Netanyahu's premiership of Israel in the 1990s, he was viewed inside and outside Israel as playing to his conservative base at the expense of the rest of the country. While he did reach some interim agreements with the Palestinians, they were undone -- at least in part -- because he sought to placate his base. He lost re-election and for the most part proceeded to wander in the political wilderness.

In his return to the political forefront, Netanyahu, like the rest of the country, is unfailingly consistent in his demands that Iran not gain a nuclear weapon.

But on the Palestinian issue, he has changed - in both substance and tone. Unlike in the 1990s, Netanyahu has added the Labor party, which is not part of the conservative bloc and has been more open to discussing a two-state solution, to his coalition. In a speech in mid-June, Netanyahu explicitly endorsed a two-state solution, something he had opposed all his life.

Netanyahu's poll numbers shot up -- and have stayed high ever since.

Some may say Netanyahu is governed by calculation more than conviction. Yet a little-noticed speech by Netanyahu in late July suggests a genuine shift in his thinking.

The annual speech given by a premier to Israel's National Defense College graduates is traditionally devoted to policy, not sound-bites. It was at this venue in 1993 that Yitzhak Rabin -- a Netanyahu rival -- explained how the Middle East changed dramatically after the end of the Cold War and first Gulf War, requiring Israel to "change [its] thinking patterns" about the prospects of peace.

That speech, more than any other of the time, presaged Rabin's secret road to the Oslo accord.

In Netanyahu's speech, the premier referred directly to the Palestinians, saying, "there is a struggle here, as in other parts of the world, with dark, radical forces . . . I say that our real test, here, with the Palestinian Authority, is whether

they can move closer in Dubai's direction, or whether they will retreat in Gaza's direction." He added, "If there is one mission that we are partner to, it is to ensure that the forces of moderation, of progress, prosperity and peace will win this struggle."

It is significant that Netanyahu now equates moderates with the Palestinian Authority and realizes Israeli responsibility for broadening the moderate base at the expense of Hamas extremists.

He did not speak this way in the past. Then, the onus was entirely on the Palestinians. Then, he would have relentlessly seized on militant statements by non-Hamas factions. Not now.

Meeting with him during my recent trip to the Mideast, one senses that the man sees more shades of gray today than he did in the past.

Netanyahu's evolution goes hand-in-hand with economic gains in the West Bank, which are further setting back Hamas and bolstering the Palestinian Authority. At this time of global economic recession, the International Monetary Fund says that the West Bank is growing at 7%. In my travels, the difference is clear: West Bank cities are no longer chaotic.

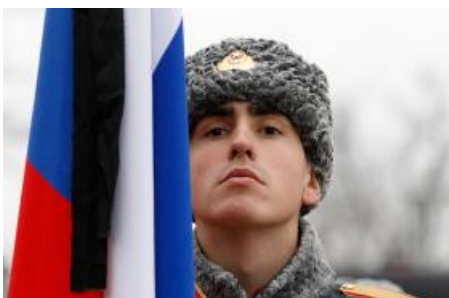
At the same time, Israeli security forces have been re-engaging with their Palestinian counterparts. As a top Israeli security official said recently about the Palestinian security officials, "They have stopped lying to us."

If there is Palestinian leadership on the other side willing to reject Hamas and walk a responsible path, the new Netanyahu finally looks poised to start walking down the road toward peace. Though the path would be rocky, it would be both momentous and profoundly ironic if a second Netanyahu tenure brings to fruition the Rabin peace legacy.

David Makovsky, the Ziegler distinguished fellow and director of The Washington Institute's [Project on the Middle East Peace Process \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC11.php?CID=65\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC11.php?CID=65), is the co-author with Dennis Ross of a new book, [Myths, Illusions and Peace: Finding a New Direction for America in the Middle East \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=310\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=310). ❖

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