

Netanyahu Is Endangering the Future of a Two-State Solution

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Advocacy groups, congressional delegations, and Trump administration officials should all be asking Israel the same tough question: how can we help you rethink settlement expansion and thereby preserve separation as an option?

Israelis are about to go to the polls. It is tempting to call the upcoming national election on September 17 a referendum on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, now Israel's longest-serving leader, who [faces](#) corruption charges (all of which he denies). Perhaps because of these legal troubles, alongside his fear that smaller right-wing parties will siphon off votes from his Likud Party, Netanyahu has now declared that if he remains prime minister after the elections, he will [annex](#) the Jordan Valley and all settlements, pending consultation with the United States.

This is not an act of leadership. Instead, it is a political act designed to appeal to the settler movement, which constitutes the backbone of Netanyahu's party. By boosting Likud's fortunes in this way, Netanyahu seeks to ensure that Israel's president, Reuven Rivlin, will come to him first to try to form the government. (While having largely ceremonial powers, Israel's president is nonetheless the one who determines after an election who should be asked to try to form the governing coalition. Traditionally, after canvassing all the parties, the Israeli president asks the leader whose party received the most votes or at least seems most able to form a government.) Should Netanyahu remain as prime minister and actually implement this policy, the possibility of allowing a separate sovereignty to Palestinians, thereby preserving the chance for a two-state solution in the future, would be lost.

In announcing his new plans for annexation, Netanyahu is putting politics before country. In our new book [Be Strong and of Good Courage](#), we profile four Israeli prime ministers—David Ben-Gurion, Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Rabin and Ariel Sharon. All of these men were, of course, capable of making shrewd political maneuvers. But their view of leadership meant that when they faced fateful decisions, they put their country first—even when they knew what the costs and political backlash might be.

Not surprisingly, while these four did not share an ideology—and Ben-Gurion and Begin were even bitter enemies—they had a common view of leadership and responsibility. Sharon [talked about](#) the “solitude of the leader,” and how leaders must bear the burden and the weight of their decision-making. He and these other three men understood this duty. They were mindful not just of the costs of acting, but also of the consequences of not acting.

They saw the stakes clearly and were prepared to take on their own constituencies—necessarily putting their country ahead of their political interests. (Take Sharon, who persisted in withdrawing from Gaza, even though his party [voted in a referendum](#) not to withdraw.) They all felt the need to lead their publics by clearly explaining their policy decisions. They understood when the moment required a difficult choice and were ready to step up.

While the election in Israel this week seems to revolve more around personalities, there is an issue that will confront Israel soon. If it stays on its current course, it will lose the ability to physically separate from the Palestinians—something that if lost will mean that two states will not even be possible in the future.

Since 2000, the concept of absorbing settlement blocs into Israel and compensating the Palestinians with territorial swaps has been a part of every peace effort. Building within the blocs—the areas close to the 1967 lines that are adjacent to Israel's urban areas, and where most settlers live—is consistent with a two-state outcome. Building outside of them is not.

Today, the number of settlers living outside the blocs has [grown to over 103,000](#). If Israel keeps building outside the blocs or to the east of the security barrier, it will become one state for two peoples. Once it does, the patched quilt of populations will make Israeli separation from the Palestinians no longer an option. Put simply, annexing all the settlements and continuing to build beyond the security barrier is not a tactical decision but a strategic choice—one that will ensure Israel becomes a binational state.

We say this even though we understand that two states as an outcome is not possible any time soon. Regardless of the Israeli government—right, center or left—the Palestinians are split between the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza. The two groups are divided on the issue of peace with Israel, making two states unlikely for the foreseeable future.

So, the question is not who can produce the best plan for two states right now; no one in Israel can do so for some time to come. The question is who can preserve separation as an option by making the difficult political decision to stop building and expanding settlements outside of the blocs.

The challenge for Israel's leaders is to show voters who among them can ensure that Israel does not become a binational state and who among them has a plan, and the political will to carry it out.

Why is this challenge so important? For starters, this is the way to preserve Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, one in which there is one law for all its citizens. But there's another powerful reason that requires immediate action: Once a two-state solution is no longer even part of the conversation, the only political discussion left will be about one state. If that is going to dominate the political landscape internationally and regionally, then Palestinians will create a new mantra: "one person, one vote."

One state with equal rights means that Israel will remain a democratic state, but given the demographic Jewish-Arab trends, the Jewish majority is [likely being reduced](#) over time. Alternatively, if it is one state without equal rights, it may be Jewish but no longer a democracy.

Israelis facing Iran and Shia militias in Syria, Iranian efforts to put precision guidance capabilities on [130,000 Hezbollah rockets](#) in Lebanon, [ISIS in the Sinai](#), and [Hamas missiles and tunnels in Gaza](#), may understandably be more focused on the threats around them than on the more abstract issue of the future identity of their state. But that doesn't take away from the severity of the issue—and the need to address it head on.

As for the candidates in the election this week, the focus on the small percentage of swing voters is leading most to ignore the prospect of Israel becoming one state for two peoples.

But genuine friends of Israel in the United States should also be asking that question. Every congressional delegation that goes to Israel should be asking it. And an administration that truly cared about Israel's future would be raising it and asking what the United States can do to make it easier for an Israeli leader to act like Ben-Gurion, Begin, Rabin and Sharon.

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