The Center and the Right

EXAMINING ISRAEL'S REALIGNED POLITICS

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In the Israeli election set for April 9, 2019, the old fault lines between right and left will no longer prevail. They have given way to a center-right split, wherein the Israeli left has fallen away, diminished by a range of factors. The current battle covers not just the future of the West Bank but also the contours of Israel's democratic character. A look at the two main political camps and their guiding principles helps set forth the terms of the coming vote, as well as the broader trajectory of the country.

The contest between right and left in Israel has never mirrored that of the United States, where the difference of opinion centers on the role of the state in society. In this dynamic, the right backs small government and the left a larger, more activist government.

Since the 1967 war, Israelis have defined right and left by one's stance on yielding territory to Arabs. At first, this debate centered on whether to give the West Bank, or parts of it, to Jordan, and later the Palestinian Authority became the potential recipient. The failure to resolve this split has amounted to something of a cold war, forming the epicenter of Israeli political life for more than a generation. After Menachem Begin broke a decades-long hold on power by the Labor Party in 1977, his right-leaning Likud enjoyed parity with the left-leaning Labor. So close was the competition that on five consecutive occasions (1981, 1984, 1988, 1992, and 1996), the elections among these parties and their satellites were decided by a handful of seats or fewer. In 1996, the margin between the leading parties was less than a percentage point, and twice Labor and Likud were forced to join together in a unity government.

FADING LEFT-OF-CENTER

During the 1990s, the leaders of Israel's Labor Party were Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, and Ehud Barak. The party operated according to the view that the alternative to accommodation with the Palestinians was governing by force and living by the sword. Over the course of the decade, impelled by the 1993 Oslo Accords, Labor ideology evolved into an approach rooted in pursuing the two-state solution. During the 1996 election, in which Likud candidate Binyamin Netanyahu narrowly defeated his Labor opponent, Shimon Peres, Likud adopted the mantra of a "secure peace." While in power, even as it formally rejected the idea of territorial compromise, Likud did implement an interim military pullback from much of the biblically important city of Hebron amid on-and-off Oslo interim negotiations with Palestinian and other Arab interlocutors. It did not implement another key pullback stipulated by the Wye River agreement (1998). Yet a genuine hope had emerged that peace was attainable. Before the 1999 elections, in which Netanyahu fell to Labor candidate Barak, 69 percent of Israelis thought a peace agreement would be reached resulting in a Palestinian state in the West Bank, and 55 percent thought the Palestinian demand for a state was justified. Polls identified peace with the Palestinians as the Israeli public's top policy objective.[1]

However, September 2000 saw the start of the second Palestinian intifada, a period that would become the bloodiest intercommunal conflict in Israel's history. The violence began after failed negotiations led by U.S. president Bill Clinton, at the dusk of his tenure, with Prime Minister Barak and Palestine Liberation Organization chairman Yasser Arafat. And whether or not Arafat intentionally instigated the violence, the fact remained that he did not try to stop it. Approximately 3,000 Palestinians and 1,000 Israelis were killed in the subsequent four years, with some sources placing the casualty figures even higher.[2] The subsequent Israeli disillusionment unraveled the peace paradigm, realigning national politics. By the early years of the intifada, more than 60 percent of Israelis disbelieved that Palestinians wanted peace or could attain it.[3] Israelis were losing faith that the conflict could be resolved, and the political left, which identified closely with the idea of peace negotiations, paid the price. If accommodation was not possible, Labor would suffer most.

This sense of disillusionment was reinforced by Israel's two unilateral withdrawals: from Lebanon in 2000 and from Gaza in 2005. Both were depicted on the Palestinian side as signs of weakness, and domestic Israeli displeasure increased after Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah declared after the Lebanon pullout that Israel was no more menacing than a "spiderweb" that could be flicked away.[4] During the 2006 Palestinian election season, Hamas posted banners declaring that resistance in Gaza was preferable to futile, protracted peace negotiations. In 2006, Hezbollah fought Israel to a thirty-four-day standoff in Lebanon—six years after Israel's departure from the country. And Hamas engaged Israel in three wars—2008–2009, 2012, and 2014—all after the Israeli disengagement from Gaza.

All these wars took a heavy toll on Israel's peace camp and Labor, which had pushed territorial accommodation over the past four decades. (Prominent Israeli academic Benny Morris is an example of someone who became disillusioned over whether the Palestinians wanted peace.) Polling demonstrated that half the public still supported the idea of two states for two peoples, but these same polls showed that the public did not think this outcome would happen any time soon, largely due to the perception of Palestinian intransigence.[5] This percep-

tion has carried forward to the present day, high-lighted by the unceremonious parting by Labor with former foreign minister Tzipi Livni, the woman leader perhaps most associated with peace negotiations, in January 2019.

Indeed, representation for Labor and the left-wing Meretz plummeted from a total of 56 seats in the 1992 Knesset to 13–14 seats in current polls for the 2019 Knesset.[6] The left once boasted leaders from Israel's national security establishment, like former Israel Defense Forces (IDF) chiefs of staff Rabin and Barak, but now it has morphed into more of a niche party focused on domestic social activism.

The aura of major decline has been understandably hard to shake for Labor, the "Mayflower party" in Israel, dominating all governments from 1948 to 1977. A long-leveled charge against the party has focused on its paternalistic Ashkenazi viewpoint or Eurocentrism, even as Labor opened Israel's doors to hundreds of thousands of Mizrahi Jews emigrating from Middle East countries from 1948 to 1951. But the Mizrahi descendants would recall Labor's effort to secularize their grandparents and parents, who were proud Jewish traditionalists. Reflecting on the elitism with which Labor is inevitably tagged, Israeli pollster Tamar Hermann explained, "One should not forget the left's inability to renovate its message since the early 1990s, to put forward a united front, and to show strong enough leadership. Its internal rifts, exclusive socio-demographic composition, and inability to relate in a positive manner to the average Israeli longing for a sense of 'togetherness' played a critical role in the move to the right."[7]

PREMISES OF THE ISRAELI RIGHT

For almost the last two decades, Likud has replaced Labor as the dominant party in Israel, with only a brief interlude when the centrist Kadima Party led under Ehud Olmert from 2006 to 2009.

As of March 2019, Netanyahu has held the prime ministry for an uninterrupted decade. If he wins his fifth term in April and still holds power in July, he will surpass David Ben-Gurion as Israel's longest-serving leader. And Netanyahu has not just filled the vacuum, he has acted to shape the rightward reorientation of Israeli politics.

Expanding on the Coalition of Outsiders

Israel's political changes have been fueled by more than disappointed hopes for peace with the Palestinians. Demographic shifts have also played a part. The country is no longer the Israel of the kibbutz, run by the secular Ashkenazi pioneer generation and its successors. Although Likud came to power as an outsider coalition in 1977, its electorate has grown rapidly in the years since, driven in part by alienation with the old guard. Alongside the arrival of Mizrahim, or Jews from Muslim-majority countries, has been the rapid rise of orthodox and ultraorthodox citizens. The birthrate for the ultraorthodox stood at 6.9 children per family in 2012–14.[8] Whereas 52 percent of Israeli Jews identified as secular in 1998, only 47 percent did so in 2018.[9] Three years earlier, Israeli president Reuven Rivlin cited the even starker figure that only 38 percent of all Israeli Jewish first graders were secular.[10] This shift is astonishing given that over a million immigrants from the former Soviet Union entered Israel in the early 1990s, virtually all of them secular.

This coalition of outsiders cultivated by the Israeli right includes the immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Like many of the ultraorthodox, they were not reared within a democracy and felt separate from the existing elite. Furthermore, having been part of a superpower covering eleven time zones, they did not like the idea of ceding territory from their new tiny country in a prospective deal with Arabs. Another member of the outsider coalition has been the national religious, or modern orthodox, community. Members of this community began to feel they could vie with the secular elite because they held leadership combat roles in the army and some had a strong professional education. They did not suffer from a sense of inferiority to the old elite, and some wanted to replace it. For the most part, these national religious Israelis were vocal in their opposition to Israel yielding large parts of the West Bank. Some made this argument based on security, but many contended that it was illegitimate—and not merely misguided—for any Jewish government to give up biblical patrimony.

Feeding Antagonism Toward the Old Elite

Netanyahu has played antagonism to the old elite to his advantage. Specifically, he identified Israel's

Supreme Court as a bastion of secular liberalism that was unpopular with members of his base. For the national religious community, the courts served as a brake on Israel's legal control over the West Bank. For example, Palestinians appeal to the court to question the validity of settler land acquisitions—even if they do not usually prevail. And for both the national religious and the ultraorthodox communities, the courts were viewed as seeking to dilute Jewish identity in favor of universalistic liberal principles considered too secular.

All this came to a head in summer 2018, when Netanyahu led the push for a Basic Law, Israel's equivalent to a constitutional law, known as the Nation-State Law. The new legislation identified Jews as the only collective that could shape the character of Israel, even as the prime minister said Israeli Arabs were entitled to full individual rights. But this explicit mention of individual rights did not make it into the law. The traditional equilibrium upholding Israel as both a democratic and a Jewish state appeared to be undone, bringing into question the hallmark principle of equality under the law. Those contending that the status quo would hold referred to the multiple mentions of equality in other Basic Laws, saying these empowered the courts to block any discrimination resulting from the latest legislation. But this reassurance was insufficient for others concerned about the future of the state.

Breaking Begin's European-Style Liberalism

The net impact of Netanyahu's strategy is a tacit repudiation of classic Zionist Revisionism, the nineteenth-century European-style liberalism of Vladimir Jabotinsky, which was refined further by his disciple Menachem Begin. Jabotinsky believed in Zionist military deterrence to prevent neighboring Arabs from believing they could destroy a Jewish state. Once this deterrence was achieved, accommodation with the Arabs would be permissible, in his view. While fundamentally sharing this position, Begin perceived Israel's biblical patrimony as more sacrosanct than his predecessor. Yet both believed that Arab citizens should enjoy full civil liberties. In the early 1960s, Begin was one of the first Israeli politicians to call for the lifting of martial law on Arab communities inside Israel.

Likud has lost many of its Begin-esque liberals, with exceptions being the former prime minister's son, Benny, and President Rivlin. Notably, both of these figures have avoided anti-Arab insinuations seen on the harder edges of the party. And Rivlin specifically has staked out a position calling for equality between the Arab and Israeli Jewish right to vote, while also emphasizing civic equality among all citizens. Netanyahu's declarations of belief in Arab civil liberties, for their part, clash with other public statements he has made during the last two election cycles, which marginalized Arab voters, casting them as threats to the Jewish character of the state.[11] The persistence of this tone will encourage right-wing divisiveness toward Israeli Arab participation in the system.

And signs indicate it will persist. In early 2019, Netanyahu forged a merger of a hard-right party that includes a contingent of avowedly racist members who advocate violence against Arabs. He promised the party a seat in his future government. The lure for Netanyahu was that he would lose votes if the party failed to cross a 3.25 percent electoral threshold. This expediency demonstrated by the prime minister contrasts with the outlook of Begin, who refused to even meet the progenitor of that party, Meir Kahane.

Casting Aspersions on Those Insufficiently Skeptical of Arab Intent

During the campaign, Netanyahu has tarred anyone who shows flexibility on Palestinian or related issues as a "leftist." While saying it is legitimate to be left-wing, he has at the same time implicitly equated "leftism" with a lack of patriotism, not to mention naiveté. Keep in mind here that he is facing three former chiefs of staff, running on the Blue and White Party slate: Benny Gantz, Moshe Yaalon, and Gabi Ashkenazi. They are not traditionally viewed as doves (one of them is a former Likud defense minister whom Netanyahu appointed), and like the prime minister, they do not question the imperative of Israeli military strength for deterrence in a dangerous region. Yet Netanyahu insists these former military brass are concealing a left-wing agenda. While a decade ago Netanyahu himself declared in a speech at Bar-Ilan University that he favors a two-state solution, he now refers derisively to his opponents' support for this outcome,

while embracing the concept of a "state-minus" for the Palestinians—although he has yet to clear up what exactly this means.

Delinking the Palestinian Issue from Broader Israel–Arab Ties

Despite a lack of progress on a comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian settlement, Netanyahu has succeeded in another area: finding common ground and having tacit relations with several Arab states based on a shared antipathy for jihadism and Iran. Tentative security and even quiet economic ties have emerged with Gulf states based on these shared interests. In the past, even incremental steps with Arab countries would have been viewed as signaling concomitant advances on the Palestinian issue. But today these steps are occurring while the Palestinian track remains completely dormant.

Opening New Relationships and Markets

While making inroads with Gulf Arab states, Netanyahu has also sought to diversify Israeli trade relationships to avoid overdependence on its main current partner, the European Union. Privately, the prime minister's advisors say this inclination arises from a fear that Europe will impose sanctions, given its general sympathy for the Palestinian cause. To this end, Netanyahu has cultivated ties both with Eastern European countries and countries in the eastern Mediterranean, including Greece and Cyprus, where Israel recently discovered natural gas off the coast. These ties ensure that a consensus-driven EU will lack the requisite support to act against Netanyahu. Among the Eastern European leaders with whom the prime minister has assiduously curried support as a counterweight to Western European states, some are in the nationalist camp. To be sure, the domestic anti-Semitism stoked by some of these leaders adds a dissonant component to this Israeli outreach. Netanyahu has also engaged in vigorous outreach to major Asian countries, including China and India, as well as African and Latin American states.

Keeping Trump Happy

After a turbulent relationship with the Obama administration, Netanyahu has been careful not to antagonize President Trump. Of course, this has been made easier by the current administration's general sympathy for the prime minister's policies, such as annexation of the Golan Heights, moving of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv, prominent pushback against anti-Israel intent at the United Nations, and scuttling the Iran nuclear deal. Still, while Netanyahu was clearly disappointed by the U.S. administration's late 2018 decision to abandon its military efforts in Syria, thereby empowering Iran to entrench its own military capabilities, the prime minister was still careful not to be outwardly critical.

Refusing to Commit to Separation from the Palestinians

While Maj. Gen. (Res.) Amos Yadlin, coauthor of a new proposal released by Israel's Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), cites that as many as 80 percent of Israelis favor splitting from the Palestinians, Netanyahu does not rhetorically back this idea.[12] Why not? To support separation is to support the Palestinians having their own independent entity. Moreover, since he formed a coalition with right-wing parties in 2015, Netanyahu has been more open to the idea of settlers living outside the security barrier. This constitutes a critical shift. Of the Israelis who live in the West Bank (not including East Jerusalem), approximately 345,000 live inside the security barrier within an estimated 8 percent of the West Bank and approximately 105,000 live outside the barrier within 92 percent of the West Bank.[13] Almost all the approximately 2.5 million West Bank Palestinians live outside the barrier, where additional Israeli building could hurt the future viability of a Palestinian state. When one includes East Jerusalem, up to 85 percent of Israelis beyond the pre-1967 lines live within the barrier, with the numerical figure reaching 767,000.

The Israeli right is not monolithic. Toward the extreme end, Education Minister Naftali Bennett has asserted that the Palestinians do not deserve more than 40 percent of the West Bank. This small area would encompass Palestinian cities (the Oslo land classification called Area A) and environs of urban areas (Area B). He repeatedly has argued for Israel annexing the remaining 60 percent. In Bennett's view, the Palestinians and international community would adjust over time to this split.[14]

Although Netanyahu has not associated himself with the Bennett approach, he has studiously avoided

saying how Israel and the Palestinians should share the West Bank. But the Likud is now calling for the annexation of all West Bank settlements. This policy may amount to an empty declaration given the clash with the international community that would ensue if he fully sought to implement it. But two developments could make Israeli annexation a possibility. If Likud wins the April 2019 elections and then Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas rejects a subsequent peace plan from the Trump administration, considerable pressure will mount from the right for the new Netanyahu government to start annexing settlements. How Netanyahu will respond to such pressure cannot be known. But he may feel more indebted to those far-right parties than usual in light of his legal woes, with a pending indictment levied against him in late February in a fifty-five-page report by Israel's attorney general, Avichai Mandelblit.

The issue goes beyond geographic partition. Netanyahu has made clear that he does not think Abbas is a partner for peace, owing to statements the Palestinian leader has made on martyrdom, or maintaining government payments to relatives of those who perpetrate violence against Israel. (One crucial exception to the impasse between the two leaders is shared support for day-to-day security cooperation to keep Hamas and other rejectionist actors from bringing terrorism back to the West Bank.) Yet in the absence of negotiations, Netanyahu does not discuss a Plan B—meaning he has pointedly refused to say how Israel can maintain its dual Jewish and democratic character. He does not press the idea of unilateral separation or, as implied, even avoiding further construction outside the security barrier.

Premises of the Israeli Center

Even amid political dominance by the Israeli right, the country's political center has remained a significant force. Excepting the government formed after the 2015 vote, the centrist party has remained the second largest in Israel over the past decade.

A key moment in the drift of right-leaning politicians toward the center occurred in late 2005, when Prime Minister Ariel Sharon led an exodus of moderate Likud members as he unilaterally withdrew Israeli settlers from Gaza. Sharon went on to establish Kadima, which became the first of three permutations of a centrist political current. But within just a few short weeks of the move, Sharon suffered the massive stroke that effectively ended his life. Still, Kadima went on to win the 2006 election, and again garnered the most votes in 2009—though this time it lacked the requisite support of smaller parties to assemble a sixty-one-member Knesset majority. Yesh Atid, led by Yair Lapid, carried forward the centrist mantle until merging in early 2019 with Gantz's Blue and White Party.

These centrist parties have all held comparable views on key principles. Like Likud, they do not believe a comprehensive peace agreement with the Palestinians is attainable owing to the gaps between the parties. Unlike Likud, however, they may believe such an agreement is desirable. A key premise of the centrist parties is a belief that the status quo with the Palestinians will test Israel's character as a Jewish and democratic state, and therefore that Israel must move toward separation. Absent progress in establishing a separate Palestinian entity, they believe, Israel will continue sliding toward a binational reality that is antithetical to Israel's endurance as a Jewish and democratic state. Likewise, the center fears the Palestinians will give up on forming their own entity, and will start an international campaign for one person, one vote. This would effectively mean the end of Israel as a Jewish state: in this scenario, Arabs would constitute 40 percent of the population, with their numbers growing. Likud would also oppose a one-state pitch by the Palestinians but believes that Israel, supported by the United States, can successfully continue resisting international pressure toward this outcome. By contrast, the center contends that Israel simply cannot afford to wait things out, but instead must separate from the Palestinians, even if the outcome is something other than an overarching peace agreement. This position aligns with the historic Zionist ethos wherein national leaders must take responsibility for the country's future, rather than waiting for external actors to do so in potentially damaging ways.

In short, separation would maintain the future viability of a Palestinian state—even if not implemented now—and also ensure that Israel does not slip toward binationalism. But how would it work? At a minimum, a plan would require that Israel not increase settlement activity outside the security barrier, thus averting a Bosnia-like situation wherein the

communities are so intertwined that they cannot be disentangled in the future. Other questions would include what role, if any, the IDF would play in the territory, and what would happen to the approximately 105,000 settlers outside the barrier, including whether some could stay or, alternatively, receive compensation for leaving their homes. The new INSS proposal does not recommend removing settlers living outside the barrier at the moment.[15] This move would ratchet up friction with political leaders, explaining why politicians seldom bring it up. Specifically, the Blue and White Party has for now ruled out such a move. Nor does the Blue and White platform include language on expanding Area C for the Palestinians, as the INSS report suggests. This, one would assume, would carry too much political risk, allowing Netanyahu to brand his opponents as being soft on security. This, indeed, is why Blue and White has left out much fine detail from its separation proposal.

Another core premise of the center is that separation will enable Israel to decouple IDF border security, a policy with consensus support, from settlements in outlying areas, for which no consensus exists. It charges that Likud has blurred two issues—security and settler ideology. In this, the center sees itself as the bloc truly committed to Israel's security, whereas Likud endangers it by ignoring the perils of bilateralism. To drive home this point, the Blue and White Party has taken a step unprecedented in Israel's history by assembling three former IDF chiefs of staff, in turn seeking to neutralize Netanyahu's perceived advantage on security. Back in 2015, the absence of a security figure on the ticket hurt parties in the center and left, with these parties hitting an all-time low of fifty-three seats.

The center's bet is that the separation argument will be popular, made all the more so by its backing from military leaders. The argument could have resonance if seen as part of a wider strategy to ensure Israel's character as a Jewish and democratic state, without the need for untenable concessions to the Palestinians. Some on the right will charge that this separation approach betrays biblical patrimony, and others will ask about a Palestinian quid pro quo for Israeli cessation of settlement beyond the barrier. To this, the center will counter that Likud—with the exception of Bennett—offers no endgame. Ben-nett's 40 percent plan, the center will say, is unrealistic and will never earn the support of the international community.

Blue and White and the 2019 Elections

In emphasizing a goal that is both modest and consistent with Israeli security safeguards, Blue and White is trying to distinguish itself from previous centrist efforts. This is true even if the party's plan is light on details, a shortcoming for which it has drawn criticism. Moreover, the public has lately been focused on Netanyahu's corruption case. Here, the nature of Israeli campaigns—focused on a relatively small slice of undecided voters—comes into play. Such campaigns do not tend to focus on first principles, such as larger attitudes toward the Palestinians. This explains why the term "separation," whether for or against, has been largely omitted from campaign ads, which instead focus on domestic issues and the avowed unfitness of the other side to lead. Moreover, no policy decision is forcing the issue at the moment, despite the near-term prospect of a Trump peace plan. And even for this plan, the lack of announced details has kept it rather abstract in the public perception.

Taken together, these factors suggest a recognition that separation is a process, not a sudden operational-action plan that will play out the moment elections are over. The prominence of top security officials on the ballot is aimed at winning the voters' trust on this issue. Moreover, Blue and White has incorporated in its list three people identified with Israel's right: the earlier-noted Moshe Yaalon, who served as Netanyahu's minister of defense, along with the prime minister's former advisors Zvi Hauser, who was cabinet secretary, and Yoaz Hendel, a communications aide. These additions are meant to cast as wide a Blue and White net as possible. But assuming Blue and White manages to win, the question will remain of whether the big-tent approach only works for a successful election, giving way to intraparty squabbling over actual implementation. Alternatively, one could argue that if the separation plan is devised meticulously, allowing the IDF to continue to act, the big tent may hold.

Recent statistics suggest that as many as 63 percent of Israeli Jews identify with the right, making the path for Blue and White a potentially difficult one.[16] (The figure drops to the mid-50s when the 20 percent Israeli Arab population is included.) The best chance for the party could lie in mobilizing a broad anti-Netanyahu base, from left-leaning voters to those on the right who formerly supported him but have lost faith over the corruption allegations or other policy choices.

But an array of other issues affect Israelis' lives, from housing costs to healthcare, and these are not subject to an ideological divide. The populace seeks only competence on them. This presents an opportunity for Blue and White. Also striking is the lack of an overarching debate on key foreign policy questions like how to deal with Iran or Gaza. This shows how the Palestinian issue rises to the surface every time, even if no peace is in sight and even amid the corruption cloud hanging over the prime minister. Some on the right have played down the preliminary indictment, claim-

ing that Netanyahu's strong hand on the Palestinians should remain paramount. The coming vote, in this sense, has the feel of a referendum on Netanyahu's leadership in the wake of the Mandelblit report.

CONCLUSION

In the 1990s, the central debate in Israeli politics was over peace with the Palestinians and the associated left-right divide. But subsequent developments decimated the Israeli left, and the idea of an incipient peace has evaporated. The new debate is not about peace, but rather about whether Israel needs to take unilateral steps to preserve its character as a Jewish and democratic state. The stakes are therefore high for the forthcoming elections. The springtime vote will show whether Israelis decide to continue on the current course, which has allowed them a measure of stability but holds future uncertainties, or opt for a reimagined, security-based center.

NOTES

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Middle East (Viking/Penguin). His 2017 interactive mapping project, "Settlements and Solutions," is designed to help users discover for themselves whether a two-state solution is still viable. Six years earlier, in 2011, his maps on alternative territorial solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were reprinted by the *New York Times* in the paper's first interactive treatment of an op-ed. And his widely acclaimed September 2012 *New Yorker* essay, "The Silent Strike," focused on the U.S.-Israel dynamics leading up to the 2007 Israeli attack on Syrian nuclear facilities.