

Israel's New Politics and the Fate of Palestine

Akiva Eldar | *The National Interest* | July-August 2012

In my vision of peace, there are two free peoples living side by side in this small land, with good neighborly relations and mutual respect, each with its flag, anthem and government. . . . If we get a guarantee of demilitarization, and if the Palestinians recognize Israel as the Jewish state, we are ready to agree to a real peace agreement, a demilitarized Palestinian state side by side with the Jewish state.

—Benjamin Netanyahu, June 14, 2009



SEEMINGLY, IT was a historic moment. The prime minister of Israel and leader of the Likud Party publicly embraced the two-state solution. A short while into his second term in office, ten days after the newly inaugurated president of the United States promised in Cairo to “personally pursue this outcome,” Netanyahu declared an about-face, shifting from the traditional course he and his political camp had once pursued.

Thus, more than ninety years after the Balfour Declaration of November 1917, it appeared the successors of the founders of Zionism were moving toward a historic compromise to resolve the conflict embedded in that intentionally vague statement. It is the conflict between “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people” and “nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine.”

Now it appeared that this dispute, which for decades had split Israeli society into rival political camps, could be resolved. Forty-two years after the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, formerly held by Jordan and Egypt, a right-wing prime minister declared his

willingness to return these territories to the people living in them, as well as his consent for the establishment of a new, independent state of Palestine.

But almost immediately, other voices emerged questioning whether this solution—dividing the land into two independent, coexisting states—was still feasible; whether the “window of opportunity” that might have been available in the past had already closed for good; whether the Israeli settlement enterprise in the West Bank had reached a point of no return, creating a new situation that did not allow for any partition; and whether the division of political powers within Israeli society had changed, making the dramatic move impossible. As Robert Serry, UN special coordinator for the Middle East peace process, put it:

If the parties do not grasp the current opportunity, they should realize the implication is not merely slowing progress toward a two-state solution. Instead, we could be moving down the path toward a one-state reality, which would also move us further away from regional peace.

This article focuses on the Israeli side of this equation in part because the Palestinian leadership, as far back as 1988, made a strategic decision favoring the two-state solution, presented in the Algiers declaration of the Palestinian National Council. The Arab League, for its part, voted in favor of a peace initiative that would recognize the state of Israel and set the terms for a comprehensive Middle East settlement. Meanwhile, various bodies of the international community reasserted partition of the land as their formal policy. But Israel, which signed the Oslo accords nearly two decades ago, has been moving in a different direction. And Netanyahu’s stirring words of June 2009 now ring hollow.

Israel never overtly spurned a two-state solution involving land partition and a Palestinian state. But it never acknowledged that West Bank developments had rendered such a solution impossible. Facing a default reality in which a one-state solution seemed the only option, Israel chose a third way—the continuation of the status quo. This unspoken strategic decision has dictated its policies and tactics for the past decade, simultaneously safeguarding political negotiations as a framework for the future and tightening Israel’s control over the West Bank. In essence, a “peace process” that allegedly is meant to bring the occupation to an end and achieve a two-state solution has become a mechanism to perpetuate the conflict and preserve the status quo.

This reality and its implications are best understood through a brief survey of the history that brought the Israelis and Palestinians to this impasse. The story is one of courage, sincere efforts, internal conflicts on both sides, persistent maneuvering and elements of folly.

IN AUGUST 1993, the foreign ministers of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Shimon Peres and Mahmoud Abbas, signed a declaration of principles. In September of that year, Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO chairman Yasir Arafat exchanged the “letters of recognition,” which led to an impressive signing ceremony on the White House lawn. Words about historical compromise, reconciliation and peace filled the air. The world perceived

a true, deep change sweeping the Middle East, with both sides resolved to divide the land into two states.

Nevertheless, the negotiating partners' starting points remained far apart. The Palestinians considered engaging in a process based on the acceptance of the 1967 borders to be a major compromise in itself. They believed their willingness to settle for territory representing 22 percent of mandatory Palestine was already an immense compromise foreclosing much further concession. Israel, in contrast, considered these borders the starting point for talks and never intended to withdraw fully from the occupied territory.

Prime Minister Rabin accentuated this position in seeking Knesset support for the interim agreement, or Oslo II:

We would like this to be an entity which is less than a state, and which will independently run the lives of Palestinians under its authority. The borders of the State of Israel, during the permanent solution, will be beyond the lines which existed before the Six Day War. We will not return to the 4 June 1967 lines.

Rabin further referred to different areas of the West Bank that Israel would insist on keeping, including regions that no Palestinian negotiator could give up.

Because of these differences, the Oslo accords were originally labeled an interim agreement "for a transitional period not exceeding five years," meant to lay the foundations for "a permanent settlement based on Security Council Resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973)." Yet, even though the final objective intentionally remained vague, the agreement itself listed detailed timetables for the implementation of interim phases, including, most remarkably, an Israeli withdrawal from the cities of Gaza and Jericho in three months. Already in this sensitive initial phase, cracks appeared. "No dates are sacred," said Rabin in December 1993, as the deadline for withdrawal was being postponed.

Nevertheless, despite the evident differences between both sides and the difficulties that were clear from the beginning, two-state-solution supporters believed the dynamics of the process would generate their own power, which would force the parties to take brave steps and reach an ultimate resolution. Whatever actual force these developments could have set in motion, the effort suffered a fatal blow on November 4, 1995, when an opponent of the agreement killed the prime minister.

SIX MONTHS later, Israel conducted elections between two candidates for prime minister—Shimon Peres, perceived as a progenitor of the Oslo plan, and Benjamin Netanyahu, a fierce opponent of the process throughout his time as head of the parliamentary opposition. Netanyahu won narrowly.

His election marked a new era in Israel's attitude toward the negotiations. Prior to Rabin's assassination, one could reasonably argue that the main motivation of the government was to conclude an agreement. But Netanyahu did everything possible to safeguard the negotiations

as a framework while concurrently evading their declared objective. All of his successors as prime minister followed this pattern.

Netanyahu himself testified to this scheme and his way of handling it in a private conversation in 2001, when he was out of office. Unaware that he was being recorded, he bragged about the manipulative tactics he had used in his first tenure as prime minister to undermine the Oslo accords. He explained that he had insisted the Clinton administration provide him with a written commitment that Israel alone would be able to determine the borders of the “defined military sites” that would remain under its control. He went on to say that by defining the entire Jordan Valley as a military location, he “actually stopped the Oslo Accord.” He was right. Without this large area, the Palestinians wouldn’t have a viable state.

Indeed, under Netanyahu’s first tenure as prime minister, which ended in 1999, little progress was made in implementing the agreed-upon phases or moving toward a final-status agreement. When the five years allocated for the transitional period passed, no Palestinian state seemed near.

During his first term, Netanyahu came under attack from both sides. Those opposed to dividing the land were furious that he didn’t spurn the peace process overtly. Supporters of the accords, meanwhile, protested against his foot-dragging in implementing the agreement’s provisions. All condemned Netanyahu’s indecision. But these critics failed to perceive that Israel’s new status quo approach was actually a choice—and, indeed, a policy.

No one publicly embraced this decision, and yet it seemed to generate its own momentum as various players quietly understood that it served their purposes. A report published by the International Crisis Group, tellingly titled “The Emperor Has No Clothes: Palestinians and the End of the Peace Process,” lists benefits to the various partners in the so-called peace process, including the entities known collectively as the “quartet” (the UN, United States, European Union and Russia). The Europeans, said the report, wanted influence in the Middle East, and by funding the Palestinian Authority (PA) they found they could get a seat at some prestigious diplomatic tables. Russia and the UN harbored similar desires for diplomatic advancement.

Meanwhile, Washington knew its support for the ongoing peace process, however much it may be a sham, allowed it to maintain good relations with Arab countries even as it nurtured its “special relationship” with Israel. Thus, the United States saw in the status quo an opportunity to preserve its influence in the Middle East by maintaining a delicate balance in its ties with most major regional players. But this approach is far removed from the evenhanded policy championed by President Dwight Eisenhower in the early years of Israel’s existence. Israel today shows immense confidence in the financial aid and large diplomatic umbrella it gets from America, as reflected in Netanyahu’s oft-quoted comment:

I know what America is. America is something that can be easily moved. Moved to the right [direction]. . . . They won’t get in our way. They won’t get in our way. . . . So let’s say they say something. So they said it! They said it! 80 percent of the Americans support us.

Even the Palestinians get sucked into this status quo game, although they pay the highest price for the current stalemate and have demonstrated in recent years open hostility to continuing the barren peace talks. But in reality, under such extremely asymmetrical circumstances, they likely would suffer the most if the process were to collapse. Since the days of Yasir Arafat, and more intensely since the beginning of Mahmoud Abbas's presidency, the PA leadership has relied almost solely on the international community for generous financial aid and global attention. Thus, the PA is highly dependent on foreign support. Its leaders fear that if they take actions that upset the international community, and particularly the United States, they will lose their aid—and consequently face a possible collapse in their political standing within the Palestinian community.

So, lacking any better alternative, the existence of the PA allows for a kind of welfare for large portions of the West Bank's political and economic elite. This is true of Fatah, whose *raison d'être* has become maintaining the ongoing process. It also includes tens of thousands of families whose livelihoods depend on the PA. For these families, stopping the aid would be disastrous. Thus, if the peace process has become an addiction for many participants, as the International Crisis Group report notes, this addiction has become an absolute reliance for the people of the PA.

WHATEVER MOTIVATES most participants in the process, Israel's embrace of it is most intense, for good reasons—including religion, historical traumas, national security, territorial aspirations, control over natural resources, the threat of internal social division and political survival. Yet, to understand how deeply rooted this imperative is for Israel, one must examine the foundation on which Israeli society and the ethos of its collective identity are built.

If Israeli citizens were to create a collective identification card, most would probably embrace the words "Jewish and democratic." From the 1940s, when Israel was yet to be established, up until today, these two adjectives have been almost a binding code, the vision with which the different elements of the state were to act. This sensibility was embodied in the country's declaration of independence, the basis of Israel's establishment. A body of commentary, scholarship and civic documents emerged that sought to examine whether those two terms were contradictory. These studies included the "basic laws," the groundwork for a possible future Israeli constitution, restrictions imposed on the platforms of parties running for the Knesset, and many hundreds of news and academic articles.

Yet, since Israel is not merely an abstract idea but an actual political entity, these two concepts—one connected to a collective cultural and religious identity, the other a method for governing—must be merged with the realities of geography. The relationship between the three sides of this triangle—geography, demography and democracy—has influenced Israel's nature and policies from day one.

When the United Nations General Assembly voted on the partition plan in 1947, two-thirds of the inhabitants of mandatory Palestine were Arabs, while Jews constituted a third of the population. Of course, this situation did not allow for the existence of a state that would be both Jewish and democratic. But only a few months later, with the establishment of the state

inside what would become the 1949 armistice line, 84 percent of the population of newly born Israel—spread over 78 percent of the land—were Jews. The formation of an almost absolute identity between the geographic partition and the demographic division over the different parts of what had been mandatory Palestine was anything but accidental. Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, summarized the consequences of the 1948 war:

The IDF could have conquered the entire territory between the [Jordan] River and the Sea. But what kind of state would we have? . . . We would have a Knesset with an Arab majority. Having to choose between the wholeness of the land or a Jewish State, we chose the Jewish State.

In other words, the demographic concern was the dominant factor in Israel's decisions on how to conduct its first war—initially, by encouraging more than seven hundred thousand Arab inhabitants to leave the territories over which it took control, then by refraining from conquering additional territory.

However, this consonance between geography and demography changed dramatically nineteen years later, with Israel's decisive victory in the Six-Day War of 1967. Israel's military took control over vast amounts of land, including the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, the latter encompassing a 30 percent increase in territory over what Israel had controlled before the war. But these territories were not empty. And although many Palestinians on those lands left their homes, some for the second time, a large number remained. Thus did Israel's ability to retain simultaneously a Jewish and a democratic identity become endangered. But this departure from the Ben-Gurion formula was not quickly perceived by Israeli leaders, even though the triangle of demography, geography and democracy became much more complex and explosive.

ISRAEL'S GEOGRAPHIC expansion in the 1967 war—and the new demographic proportions between Jews and Arabs under its control—once again forced Israel to make a choice: Which sides of the triangle would strengthen, and which would weaken? Seemingly, the territorial conquests undermined the demographic edge, meaning the Jewish majority. However, no one intended to allow a weakening in this fundamental component of the state's identity.

“The key phrase in the Israeli experience is ‘a Jewish majority.’ Israelis will do anything—wage war or make peace—to maintain a Jewish majority and preserve the Israeli tribal bonfire.” These were the words of Daniel Ben-Simon, former journalist and current Labor Party member of the Knesset. A senior member of the rival party has expressed a similar position. In a conference held in March 2002, at the peak of the suicide bombings that killed many Israelis, Dan Meridor, deputy prime minister and minister of intelligence and atomic energy in the Israeli cabinet, said: “Of all the various questions—security, the Middle East peace process, etc.—the demographic-democratic problem is the chief imminent threat that we simply cannot evade.” More recently, the newly elected chairman of the Kadima Party, Shaul Mofaz, declared the so-called demographic threat the most dangerous of all to the existence of Israel.

This outlook, embraced by the most prominent figures of the mainstream political parties, is shared by the Jewish Israelis they represent. This is seen in public-opinion polls such as the

Democracy Index, which found in 2010 that 86 percent of Israeli Jews believed decisive choices for the state must be taken on the basis of a Jewish majority.

Therefore, a careful analysis of the triangle model cannot focus on the strength of each side independently but must focus on possible two-side combinations. On the collective identity card, the definition of “Jewish and democratic” is being replaced with “Jewish and geographic.” Whenever two of the edges are dominant, the third tends to weaken, and the third in this instance is the democratic component.

THE MOVE toward a “Jewish and geographic” state became even more prominent following changes undergone by Israeli society in recent decades. Settlers, although they composed a relatively small fraction of the population, became the vanguard that directed political thinking for most of the Jewish religious public. The ultra-Orthodox political parties, which previously had been considered the swing faction between dovish and hawkish political camps, accepted the settlers’ doctrine that occupied territories represented Israeli land. They stood by the right-wing parties in opposing partition. This political drift took place at a time when religious groups in Israel became larger in both absolute and relative terms. A survey conducted by Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics in 2008 showed that only 40 percent of Israeli Jews between the ages of twenty and twenty-four identified themselves as nonreligious or secular. This trend has great influence on the direction Israeli society is taking nowadays.

In a survey conducted on the tenth anniversary of Prime Minister Rabin’s assassination, Israeli Jews were asked to assess whether the decision to engage in the Oslo process had been correct. While 62 percent of the secular respondents answered affirmatively, the answer given by religious and ultra-Orthodox respondents was the complete opposite; among those respondents, representing a growing segment of Israeli society, more than 70 percent said it had been wrong. Placing “greater Israel” at the top of the value system meant that democracy and demography were undermined among the wider public, to the point where they believed the executive and the Knesset did not have the mandate to decide on territorial withdrawals. This is reflected in a recent statement by Benny Katzover, former chairman of the Shomron settlers’ regional council and a settler leader: “The main role of Israeli democracy now is to disappear. Israeli democracy has finished its role, and it must disassemble and give way to Judaism.”

Gabriel Sheffer, a prominent expert on the study of regime and societal relations in Israel, views the lack of separation between religion and state in Israel as the key factor in understanding the country’s recent history. In a 2005 article, he stressed that the historical failure to separate ethnic-national identity and religious belief is the primary cause of events in Jewish society and in the relationship between Israelis, Arabs and Palestinians. He explained that this issue distorts Israeli democracy. More recently, he characterized Israel as a Jewish-national-religious state that naturally excludes many citizen groups from any serious influence on public policy.

Even so, it would be a mistake to explain Israeli society's right-wing drift only in terms of the growing power of religious groups. Another factor is the mass immigration of the early 1990s and the corollary collapse of the so-called Zionist Left.

In 1992, Israeli general elections ended with a change of government: the Labor and Meretz parties, which represented the Zionist Left in parliament, together won fifty-six of the Knesset's 120 seats. This outcome enabled Rabin to form a Center-Left coalition government that set in motion the historical recognition of the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people and signed the declaration of principles. Seventeen years later, during the 2009 elections—the most recent in Israel—these two parties won only sixteen seats. Public-opinion surveys prior to the elections showed that 72 percent of Jewish respondents defined themselves as “right-wing.” These results illustrate the rise of the Israeli political Right, which has been growing in force since 1967.

During the 1990s, nearly a million immigrants arrived in Israel, about 85 percent from the former Soviet Union. This group's size and demographic characteristics had a crucial effect on the composition and nature of Israeli society. These newcomers found in Israel a refuge from a crumbling communist empire that had shaped much of their historical and cultural thinking. Natan Sharansky, a “refusenik” and an immigrant from the Soviet Union, explained to President Clinton, perhaps jocularly, why he was the only Israeli cabinet member who opposed the peace agreement the president was trying to promote at Camp David in 2000: “I can't vote for this, I'm Russian. . . . I come from one of the biggest countries in the world to one of the smallest. You want me to cut it in half. No, thank you.”

The 2009 Democracy Index revealed that “in general, the immigrants' attitudes are less liberal and less tolerant in almost every realm and concerning every topic examined.” For example, 77 percent of former Soviet immigrants in the survey supported policies to encourage Arab emigration from Israel. The right-wing sensibility of these people, who are largely secular, stems not from religious attitudes but from a perception of the Jewish society as “landlord” of Israel, with aspirations to exercise strong national sovereignty over a territory that should be as extensive and secure as possible.

Former Knesset member Mossi Raz of Meretz, in analyzing the rise of the immigrant Right and the dovish political camp's unprecedented decline in the latest elections, said that “these million and a half immigrants, who arrived in recent decades, constitute 20 percent of the voters, but Meretz and the Labor Party together received only 5 percent of their votes.”

Even traditional supporters of the Zionist Left, such as secular people of the middle and upper classes, shifted toward the Right, in part due to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and the Likud Party's success in creating a conceptual turnabout in Israeli political culture. The conservative Right successfully separated the notion of “prosperity” from the term “peace” and convinced many Israelis that economic growth would emerge if the government merely managed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and practiced a neoliberal economic policy. This trend accelerated when the West declared a “war on terror” following the September 11, 2001, attacks, which gave Israeli enterprises new access to wide markets. As *Forbes* magazine noted, Israel became

the destination for those seeking antiterrorism technology. The stability and prosperity of Israel's economy, even without conflict resolution, diminished the imperative of peace for many.

Israel's Palestinian citizens also have undergone significant political changes since Oslo. These shifts, seen in voting patterns, result from the deterioration in the relationship between the Jewish and Arab populations. These, in turn, reflect a growing sense of Israel's changing nature as a state; a mistrust between the two population groups; and a rise in the intensity of hostility and violence between Israel and the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

This process had a twofold impact on voting patterns: first, Arab voter participation declined; and second, more Arabs who did participate gave their votes to Arab rather than Zionist parties. In 1996, for instance, 79.3 percent of eligible Arab voters took part in the first elections after Rabin's assassination. In 2003, it was 63 percent; in 2009, only 53.6 percent. Yet, as more of these Arab participants voted for Arab parties, the number of parliamentary seats granted to the three Arab political parties rose to eleven, the highest ever. In 1992, only 47.7 percent of Arab voters supported these parties, but in the elections of 1996, after the assassination of Rabin, sectarian voting jumped to 67.3 percent. In the latest elections, 82.1 percent of Palestinians who are Israeli citizens voted for one of these three parties.

THE BALANCE of political power inside Israel is unsustainable, given the demographic facts between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. For the first time since the establishment of the state, the proportion of Jews and Arabs living under Israeli jurisdiction is approaching equilibrium. Sharon, who was aware of this, tried in 2005 to exclude a million and a half Palestinians from this calculation by withdrawing Israeli forces and settlers from the Gaza Strip. Yet, since Israel continued to exercise control over Gaza's airspace and sea—and to a very large extent over its land borders—Israel is still responsible for this territory and its inhabitants, according to a widely accepted interpretation of international law. Sergio della Pergola, an expert on demography, estimates that by Israel's hundredth anniversary, the demographic balance between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River will return to what it was before Israel's declaration of independence: two-thirds Arabs and non-Jews and one-third Jews. Demographers estimate that by 2030, the proportion of Jews in the population will decline to 46 percent. According to another estimate, a similar percentage will be reached by 2020, and some even suggest that by that time Jews will constitute only 40 percent of the population. Regardless, by the end of the present decade, Jews are expected to become a minority between the sea and the river.

The Oslo accords were intended to mark the beginning of a gradual end to the Israeli presence in the occupied territories. Instead, the accords opened a new era for the settlement enterprise, which continues its expansion in the so-called C areas, which encompass 60.2 percent of the West Bank territory and remain under full Israeli control. "This is one of the strangest maps of existing and potential autonomous territories ever agreed-upon by two conflicting parties," said Elisha Efrat, Israel Prize winner for geographical research. He referred to the way 176 "orange stains" (B areas), representing the Palestinian rural space, are spread

throughout the map, with C areas separating them from one another and leaving Palestinians with mere isolated enclaves that preclude any national self-sustainment. Jeff Halper, a human-rights activist, compares this to the Japanese game of Go, in which “you win by immobilizing your opponent, by gaining control of key points of a matrix so that every time s/he moves s/he encounters an obstacle of some kind.”

Since Israel refuses to undertake any commitment to freeze settlement, it uses the interim phases, whose purpose was to advance toward a two-state solution, to create obstacles that would impede a fair, agreed-upon partition of the territory. In the decade following the Oslo accords from 1993 to 2003, the number of West Bank settlers doubled, from 110,000 to 224,000 (not including East Jerusalem). Since then, the figure has risen to more than 340,000. Together with Israelis residing in Israeli-constructed neighborhoods in East Jerusalem, they now represent more than six hundred thousand people. The number of existing settlements authorized by Israel is 124, to which one should add twelve East Jerusalem neighborhoods and more than a hundred “outposts” built by settlers without formal approval by the state (though with the help of public authorities and branches of the government). Many of those outposts were located carefully to prevent any territorial contiguity in a future Palestinian state. It is in these strategic areas of the mountain strip and across the separation wall that the Jewish West Bank population grew the most during 2011.

At the same time, and more formally, Israeli governments worked to increase the settler population in “block settlements” in order to eventually annex these areas, as was openly declared. Some of these blocks are close to the 1967 borders, and, in informal negotiations (such as the Geneva Initiative), Palestinians agreed in principle to the idea that they would be annexed, as long as the Palestinian state would be compensated with separate territory equivalent in size. However, they strongly rejected Israeli annexation of areas such as the Ariel and Karnei Shomron blocks, necessary for any viable Palestinian state with territorial contiguity.

To exercise control over the land without giving up its Jewish identity, Israel has embraced various policies of “separation.” It has separate legal systems for traditional Israeli territory and for the territory it occupies; it divides those who reside in occupied lands based on ethnic identity; it has retained control over occupied lands but evaded responsibility for the people living there; and it has created a conceptual distinction between its democratic principles and its actual practices in the occupied territories. These separations have allowed Israel to manage the occupation for forty-five years while maintaining its identity and international status. No other state in the twenty-first century has been able to get away with this, but it works for Israel, which has little incentive to change it.

THIS ARTICLE was written shortly after a coalition government controlling ninety-four seats out of 120 was formed in Israel. The coalition agreement between the two largest parties, Likud and Kadima, does not leave room for hope regarding a future breakthrough toward a two-state solution. The sides talked only in general terms about the resumption of the political process and instead emphasized the importance of maintaining Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. For this reason, they added a clarification regarding “the importance of maintaining defensible

borders,” a phrase implying that any compromise contemplated by the coalition government centers on gaps between the positions of Likud and Kadima more than on those between Israelis and Palestinians.

At present, only fourteen Knesset members (a little more than 10 percent) constitute the opposition, which supports dividing the land into two states on the basis of the 1967 borders. Eleven of them are Palestinians who are Israeli citizens, and three are members of Meretz representing the Zionist Left. Even if we include the Labor Party, which facilitated the formation of Rabin’s cabinet some two decades ago with a majority of sixty-one seats, this faction’s presence has now been reduced to twenty-two Knesset members. Recent opinion polls indicate that, if the elections were held today, this political bloc would win thirty-two seats, a little more than a quarter of the parliament. Thus, the formation of the new unity government represents the monolithic nature of Israeli society. For decades, the boundaries of Israeli Jewish society, based on the Jews’ relationship with the Palestinians and the question of dividing the land, were the focus of disputes that at times split Israelis into separate groups. But now a consensual answer has emerged. While the hawkish political camp has adopted some rhetoric that used to characterize the dovish bloc, the latter has been forced to accept the political reality of being dominated. Thus does Israel’s grip on the occupied territories tighten, even as the issue wanes on Israelis’ public agenda.

No doubt, the present unity government can promote almost anything it wishes. That means it is unlikely to use its power to promote a new partition of the land into two states in any way acceptable to Palestinians. History teaches us that Israelis are only willing to take brave and honest steps toward peace when they know the cost of failing to do so will be even greater. Unfortunately, given the realities of the current situation, there is little reason to think that the Israelis will take these steps anytime soon.

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