# ISRAEL IN THE POST OSLO ERA

## PROSPECTS FOR CONFLICT AND RECONCILIATION WITH THE PALESTINIANS

As'ad Ghanem, Mohanad Mustafa and Salim Brake

# Israel in the Post Oslo Era

*Israel in the Post Oslo Era* examines the official Israeli stands and policies towards the Palestinian problem from the beginning of the twenty-first century. The book argues that Israel is gradually withdrawing from the commitment of a two-state solution and from the general framework of the peace process that started in 1993 with the signing of the Oslo accord.

The main factor behind Israel's shift regarding the conflict and its resolution is related to the steady and gradual rise of the Israeli right since the 2009 general elections, to reach the "dominant block" status. These fundamental changes are the result of profound social transformations, such as the functional significance of marginal groups. The unprecedented growth of the right disputes basic questions, addressed in this book, including the official Israeli approach towards the Palestinian problem in general, particularly the two-state solution.

The book examines these developments and the overall Israeli withdrawal from the peace process and its commitment to a two-state solution. *Israel in the Post Oslo Era* is an invaluable resource for students and researchers interested in Arab-Israeli conflict resolutions, Middle East and Israeli Politics.

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Prospects for Conflict and Reconciliation with the Palestinians

**As'ad Ghanem, Mohanad Mustafa and Salim Brake**

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# Preface

This book is the product of years of complex collaborative effort. It began by our exchanging views on the rise of the "new" post-Oslo Israeli policy towards the solution of the Palestinian problem and on the implications of the rise of the "new" Israeli right. Over a long period, we have been following the political changes in Israel and their significance, both as part of our academic and research activity and as concerned participants in the public debate. We have followed the published materials and literature and tried to understand and explain the implications of these changes.

Three political events have taken place in the post-Oslo period, marking the direction Israel is taking. First, the 1996 election victory of the right-wing representation, Benjamin Netanyahu, over Shimon Peres, the architect of the Oslo Accords, marked the beginning of the post-peace-treaty phase between Israel and the Palestine. The second event was the rise of Ariel Sharon and his attempts to eliminate "the Palestinian problem" by means of open diplomatic and actual war against the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat. The third event was the re-emergence of Benjamin Netanyahu and his right-wing coalition in 2009.

The stage in which Netanyahu returned to power marked the beginning of an era in which the "new right", not the "classic right", is in control. Both "rights" are conservative movements, but the classic right is more delicate, connecting itself to a liberal social heritage and taking into account the principles of equality and human rights. The "new" right draws its inspiration and methods from the right that emerged in Europe and developed an alienation from the principles of democracy and a denial of the rights of minorities. This book traces these changes in Israeli politics and tries to analyze and understand their significance to Israel in particular and to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in general.

Over the years, we have developed ways of joint work agenda and common research interest that have been nurtured by the three of us. Here, we would like to thank all the parties who helped us to gather and process the materials, including our students and colleagues who work on related topics.

The original manuscript was thoroughly edited by the brilliant journalist Jonathan Cook and here we would like to thank him. We also thank two anonymous readers who read the draft and made comments that helped us improve the text.

Of course, the three of us together share equal responsibility for the text and its contents.

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As'ad Ghanem, Mohanad Mustafa and Salim Brake
August 1, 2018

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# 1 Re-framing the conflict – Israel in the post-Oslo era

The literature on conflicts and conflict resolution, including the extent to which they can be resolved, offers two similar analytical categories that traverse two continuums. First, the literature distinguishes a "simple" conflict from a "protracted" conflict. In the former, the matter of contention is control of a defined domain of resources, which may be territorial, symbolic, religious, material or other. A protracted conflict, by contrast, addresses control of multiple domains at one and the same time. Material, territorial, symbolic, religious, psychological and other resources are essential elements of the conflict, and the battle is waged concerning all of them. Each side attempts to overwhelm the other regarding all of them, and the solution is a zero-sum solution of profit and loss (see Coleman, 2003, 2006).

The literature also distinguishes between a controlled conflict and an uncontrolled conflict. The former is limited and focused on clearly defined issues; hence some kind of compromise is possible, based on the ability of the parties to distinguish the essential from the non-essential, or to determine what is important to each party and work out a division or solution based on a compromise. By contrast, an uncontrolled conflict takes place in multiple arenas and diverse domains simultaneously, and the parties believe that everything at issue is fundamental and cannot be forfeited. Any compromise is tantamount to surrender. Hence, the parties avoid or at least are unable to achieve even a partial resolution (Bar-Tal, 2007).

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is both protracted[1] and uncontrolled. There are key areas that leave no room for a solution. Not least, there is a protracted territorial conflict with Israel's gradual takeover, by means of force and violence, of the assets of the weaker Palestinian side. In addition, antithetical narratives exist that cannot be reconciled: a return to an ancestral home for Jews promised by God, versus a colonial enterprise to dispossess the native Palestinian population that resulted in the Nakba of 1948. On both sides, there is fierce opposition to any and all arrangements or compromises on the key issues, especially the most volatile of them, such as Jerusalem and the Right of Return for the Palestinian refugees. What is more, the Palestinians are sundered by a fierce internal ideological debate between Fatah (including the PLO and the PA) and Hamas, a rift that has grown much wider since the Oslo Accords and even more so since the rupture between the West Bank and Gaza after the 2007 coup in the latter (for details, see Ghanem, 2009). Considering that the Palestinian Authority currently rules over a small fraction of the Palestinian people, there are serious questions about its right or ability to represent them. Given that it does not represent the large Palestinian minority in Israel or the Palestinians of Gaza, and evidently represents only a minority of Palestinians in the diaspora, by the most generous estimates, it speaks for not more than 30% of all Palestinians.

On top of this, the conflict has a long history of violence and bloodshed that cannot be bridged. The wounds have never had a chance to heal; every period has witnessed traumatic events that make mutual trust impossible. The conflict has never been punctuated by a major and enduring truce, as in Northern Ireland. This point is crucial, given that the conflict is

paradigmatically uncontrolled. For example, a rightwing extremist, Baruch Marzel, carried out the Hebron Massacre in 1994, at a time when the Israeli Right was fearful that the Oslo negotiations might succeed. A year and a half later, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who lent the Oslo process credibility for many in the Israeli public, was assassinated. His governing coalition was replaced soon afterward. A somewhat similar dynamic took place on the other side. Forty days after the Hebron Massacre, Hamas launched its first suicide operations and dramatically stepped them up after the elimination of its chief bomb-maker Yihya Ayyash (the "Engineer") in January 1996. That, in turn, increased the strength of the Israeli Right and weakened the Left and Shimon Peres, its candidate in the elections that spring for prime minister.

As noted, this is a territorial dispute, but it also includes irrational ideological elements, such as a "divine promise", the "land of our fathers" and "Waqf land", and as such is not easily amenable to compromise. The intrinsic element of religion – Judaism versus Islam and Christianity, and the holiness ascribed to places such as Jerusalem and Hebron – further complicates the picture. It is hard to imagine a rational and logical resolution of a conflict based on deep convictions, religious heritage and age-old cultures that see the other side as a bitter and implacable enemy rather than an interlocutor.

The conflict is a zero-sum game with regard to both territory and resources. There is almost no area of real cooperation between the two sides (the win-win scenario). The conflict is not simply local but has foreign extensions: the Palestinian diaspora, the Arab and Islamic worlds, the Jewish people, and especially the Jews of the United States and France, who have great political influence over their respective decision-makers.

We could easily describe additional elements of the conflict that make it fundamental and irresolvable, especially in light of recent events in the Arab world, which have had major ramifications for the Palestinians and will continue to do so. Here, though, we would like to focus on the issue of whether the current round of negotiations between the Palestinians and Israel might lead to a permanent settlement. The basic argument advanced below is that the chances of reaching a settlement acceptable to both parties are negligible, if not nil. Here are the reasons.

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is deeply complex and features components not known to other conflicts. It is underpinned by a historical discourse loaded with religious, theological terminology, and compounded by a moral conflict over historical narratives and primacy over the land. The question of Palestine is not simply a colonial issue, in the classical sense of the word. Certainly, it includes traditional colonial dimensions of occupation and colonization, including the British Mandate over Palestine (1917–1948), similar to the mandate systems in the Arab and African regions. But, Palestine was further marked by another peculiar type of colonization – the Zionist colonialism that promised to resolve the Jewish problem.

Since the start of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, various political solutions have been proposed. Most significant was the 1947 Partition Plan, which the Palestinian leadership rejected as unfair and detrimental to their political, national and historical rights (Khalidi, 2006; Shlaim, 2000). Since then, the conflict has been marked by a series of transformations, most notably the 1948 war and Palestine's *Nakba,* and the June 1967 war that launched the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Aside from the dramatic effects on Israel, these events exerted an equally profound change on the Palestinian national movement, which shifted its discourse from liberation to one of statehood on 22% of Mandatory Palestine (Mustafa, 2007).

The Oslo Agreement of 1993, concluded under a global imbalance of powers and as a consequence of the 1987 Palestinian popular *Intifada* (uprising), signaled yet another phase in

the history of the Palestinian national movement and Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The establishment of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) had an immediate impact on Palestinian national goals, which have been ultimately limited to statehood. The PNA has also changed the nature of the national struggle, which has come to favor negotiation in place of armed resistance. This expedited shift from armed struggle within the PLO framework to the PNA-sponsored negotiation strategy led to a Palestinian recognition of the State of Israel. At the time, Palestinians considered this adequate to satisfy Israel's demands for political legitimacy from the Palestinians and Arab world (Ghanem, 2002; Mustafa, 2007).

In reality, the Palestinian strategic impasse began with the conclusion of the Oslo Agreement and the establishment of the PNA. It reached its climax with the collapse of the 2000 Camp David talks, after which no political alternatives could be found to exit the stalemate. The parties even failed to devise strategies to materialize their own political platforms. The contest for power has overwhelmed the Palestinian national project. Successive efforts at reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, from the Cairo Agreement of 2005 to the Mecca Agreement signed two years later, failed to overcome the crisis of the Palestinian political system and the entrenched division between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (Ghanem, 2009; Mustafa, 2007). In addition to the internal political deadlock within the Palestinian national movement, the Israeli-Palestinian negotiation process has seen recurrent predicaments. In Israel, the rise of right wing parties to power over the past decade has introduced major changes to Israel's vision of the conflict's resolution. This vision is an evolution from earlier transformations, including the Oslo Agreement of 1993, the Camp David summit of 2000, and the Disengagement Plan from Gaza and the Northern West Bank of 2005, and has resulted in the political impasse in negotiations over the past several years.

## Israel's approach to the conflict since Netanyahu's ascent to power (2009)[2]

We believe that Netanyahu's ascent to power in 2009 was the result of the clearly uneven power relations between the two parties. While imposing demands for a reconciliation on the weaker party, the stronger party has maneuvered within the framework of a settlement. In addition to an unequal reality created by a final resolution of the conflict, disproportionate power relations between parties who are willing to resolve the conflict render engagement with solutions, on which each party relies, disproportionate too. In this vein, we argue that the Israeli negotiations strategy seeks to reach an unbalanced settlement by proposing a political compromise to Palestinians in return for securing a Palestinian reconciliation for Israelis.

The Israeli approach under Netanyahu to a settlement with the Palestinians does not meet the basic requirements for solving a continuous and protracted conflict, such as the Israeli-Palestinian one. Such a conflict requires a balanced approach alongside mutual recognition and justice; any neglect or abuse of such principles will not lead to a final resolution, although it might lead to a weak and temporary settlement (see Abu-Nimer, 2001).

The official Israeli stand under Netanyahu accepts a limited Palestinian state alongside the settlements and any territories in the West Bank (Area C) and East Jerusalem that would be under Israeli sovereignty in a future settlement. Israeli discourse over the last four years has been part of a strategic and ideological adjustment by the Israeli right wing in the wake of the Oslo agreement and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority. Netanyahu, in this regard, has been consistent in his statements, including his famous speech at Bar-Ilan University, his speech at the United Nations in September 2011, and in his repeated speeches to the Israeli Knesset and the

public media.

Features of the political settlement that Netanyahu is willing to offer the Palestinians to resolve the conflict over the 1967 border are as follows:

1. Recognition of an unarmed Palestinian state.
2. Annexation of settlement blocs; i.e. a refusal to return to the June 4, 1967 border.
3. Israeli presence in the Jordan Valley area. This presence could range from a maximum of Israeli sovereignty to a minimum of long-term military control.
4. Jerusalem, especially the Old City, as the unified capital of Israel. In the best-case scenario, Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem would be conceded.

In return, Israel demands that the Palestinian side adopt reconciliation to resolve the conflict resulting from the 1948 war (Table 1.1). This includes:

1. Recognition of Israel as the state of the Jewish people; that is, recognition of Israel as a Jewish State.
2. Recognition of the Israeli narrative of the responsibility for the refugee problem. The refugee problem resulted from the Palestinian refusal of the 1947 Partition Plan and the engagement of Arab armies in the 1948 war with the intention to exterminate the Jewish political entity on the "Land of Israel".
3. Recognition of Jewish historical and religious rights in Palestine.

The reconciliation issues in Israel that does not wish to address with the Palestinian side include:

1. Recognition of Israel's historical responsibility for the refugee problem and the right of the refugees to return to areas inside the State of Israel as an integral part of acknowledging this moral responsibility.
2. Recognition of the Palestinian historical narrative, including the Palestinians' right to their land and their historical narrative of the conflict.
3. A willingness to atone for the historical injustice caused to Palestinians inside and outside Israel, translated into a recognition of this historical injustice and a readiness to pay compensations as a form of redress.

*Table 1.1* Reconciliation vs. settlement – Palestinian-vs. Israeli perspectives

| | Reconciliation from a Palestinian perspective | Settlement from an Israeli perspective |
|---|---|---|
| Final agreement | A Jewish state beyond the June 1967 border | An unarmed Palestinian state, beyond the 1967 border |
| Refugees | Exoneration of Israel for the creation and resolution of the refugee problem | Return of refugees to the Palestinian state, in best-case scenario |
| Historical narrative | Admission of Palestinian failure to accept the 1947 Partition Plan | No recognition of the Palestinian narrative of the conflict |
| Core of the conflict | Recognition of Israel as a Jewish state, dating back to 1948 | Recognition of an unarmed Palestinian state |

**Israel in the Oslo era – the changing nature of political approaches towards the peace process**

Since it first came to power in 1977, the Likud party has adopted a range of objectives typified by an unwillingness to part with the Occupied Territories (Begin, Sharon and Arens). Menachem Begin exploited Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's desire to reach a separate peace agreement with Israel so that he could regain control of Sinai. Begin proposed personal autonomy for Palestinians in the occupied territories, in line with his mentor Vladimir Jabotinsky's ideas of controlling the land while allowing a degree of freedom to its inhabitants. Begin drew on the notion of autonomy first advanced by Yigal Allon as part of an earlier settlement Allon had devised. The concept suited Begin, because it allowed him to avoid a discussion with Sadat about giving up parts of the Land of Israel. Begin conducted sterile negotiations over the occupied territories with Egypt, whose purpose was to gain time and avoid progress.[3] Sadat, followed by Hosni Mubarak, understood what the Israeli government was trying to achieve. Sadat, it should be noted, had prepared to negotiate a separate agreement with Israel, totally divorced from the Palestinian issue, even before the 1973 war. Statements to this effect were transmitted to the Americans quite clearly,[4] but Israel preferred to reject the Rogers Plan (1970). It was shot down by Prime Minister Golda Meir through US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Ambassadors Rabin and Dinitz.[5]

The method of sitting with arms folded was perfected by Yitzhak Shamir, who was the most inactive of Israel's Prime Ministers with regard to the conflict. Only in 1991 was he forced to become involved in negotiations with a Jordanian-Palestinian delegation at the Madrid Conference, in response to American pressure associated with the First Gulf War. He did so with an obvious lack of interest or expectation, stating explicitly that he hoped the negotiations would drag on for 20 years. In other words, the talks with the Palestinians were viewed not as a goal in themselves but as background music for a regional realignment. This was the attitude adopted by both Shamir and Netanyahu, then the Deputy Foreign Minister and in charge of the negotiations, when they attended the Conference. In a similar vein, in 1998, after he became Prime Minister, Netanyahu conducted forced and directionless negotiations with the Palestinians, as there was again the possibility of an attack on Iraq. In similar circumstances, in advance of a US-led invasion of Iraq in spring 2003, the Americans began speaking once more of creating a Palestinian state, only to abandon the Road Map later.

In all this time, only the government of Yitzhak Rabin, established in 1992 and which included a strong dovish element (Meretz), made any progress in negotiations with the Palestinians. It signed the Agreement of Principles and the Oslo 1 Accords in September 1993 and Oslo 2 Accords in May 1994. After Rabin was assassinated, in November 1995, the peace process was halted in its tracks.

As Netanyahu understood that the Israeli public would not allow him to renege on the Oslo Accords, he committed himself to the agreement during the course of the election campaign, in spring 1996. His subsequent actions, however, emptied the Oslo Accords of all substantive meaning. Netanyahu believed that the establishment of a Palestinian State 15 minutes from the coastal city of Tel Aviv would pose a mortal threat to the Jewish State (Netanyahu, 1995: 240). The strategy he adopted to kill the Oslo Accords was simple; in his words, "If they [Palestinians] give, they will get; if they don't give, they will not get" – a petition designed to entail maximum security for Israel. The issue of security was raised by Israel at all stages of the negotiations, not as a matter to be considered objectively but, chiefly, as a way to cast the blame on the

Palestinians for the failure to make progress and as a way to avoid addressing substantive issues such as borders and territory. The demand that Netanyahu has raised more recently, that Israel be recognized as the state of the Jewish people – never presented to any Arab interlocutor in the past, whether Egypt, Jordan or Syria – is intended to pull the rug from beneath the Palestinians' feet with regard to the rights of the refugees, the next issue that was to be discussed by the two sides. Beyond this, however, the demand is part of a tried and tested formula adopted by Netanyahu to sabotage negotiations and ensure they fail. Netanyahu wants the Palestinians to walk away from the negotiations so that they can be blamed for their failure.

As soon as he was elected Prime Minister in 1996, Netanyahu ended the settlement freeze imposed by the Rabin Government and launched a wave of mass construction across the Green Line. The failure of the Oslo Accords to specify a settlement freeze was a matter of what is often called constructive ambiguity, a diplomatic tactic that Kissinger developed. However, Israeli governments after Rabin's argued that "nowhere in the Accords does it say that settlement activity must be halted", as if it was possible to continue with massive construction in the settlements at the same time as asserting an interest in honest negotiations whose goal was a withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza. One goal of the Western Wall tunnel incident in 1996, which triggered the first severe crisis after Netanyahu's election, was to damage the peace process between Israel and the PLO. Netanyahu simply disregarded the warnings of his security experts that it would be dangerous to open the tunnel. When he did so, on September 24 of that year, it resulted in the deaths of 15 Israeli soldiers, including the most senior officer ever killed by the Palestinians until then, and 70 Palestinians. Another 1,300 Palestinians were wounded. There is no doubt that this provocation was intended to get the Palestinians to abandon the negotiations, so they could be blamed for dooming the process.

On January 15, 1997, Netanyahu and Arafat signed the Hebron Agreement, whose midwife was Dennis Ross. Netanyahu undertook to implement a partial withdrawal of Israeli soldiers from the West Bank city in early March. In practice, however, the redeployment did not take place until a year later. In the meantime, construction work began in *Har Homa,* between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. This settlement activity was a transparent provocation and crude violation of the Oslo Accords. The Americans, who should have served as honest brokers, or at least as sponsors of the negotiations, defended the settlement activity on Palestinian lands and imposed a veto to protect Israel in the UN Security Council.[6] Netanyahu never concealed his true intentions concerning the future of negotiations with the Palestinians and his eagerness to reassert control over all of the Occupied Territories. This is the core of his ideology. Shortly after he was elected in 1996, in an event in Ariel, a large West Bank settlement that grew considerably thanks to Russian immigration after the fall of the Soviet Union, he said:

> I remember myself walking here as part of navigation exercises we conducted when I was doing my military service. There was nothing here.… Today we see that if Jews want it, it is not a legend. It is indeed possible to erect a glorious city.… When I climb one of the hills here and look out over the coastal plain and see Tel Aviv and its suburbs below us, I know that the entire State of Israel will be more secure and stronger that Judah will dwell in security, Samaria will dwell in security, and Ariel will dwell in security.
>
> (Ben-Simon, 1999: 133)

Unlike Netanyahu, Ehud Barak, the elected Prime Minister in May 1999 as the Left's candidate and "Rabin's heir", was expected to make progress in the peace process. A highly decorated

former chief of staff (and before that head of Military Intelligence) who had opposed the Oslo Accords, Barak undertook to change Netanyahu's policy. However, he decided to tackle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict only after he failed to advance negotiations with the Syrians and after the collapse of the Geneva Summit between US President Bill Clinton and Syrian President Hafez Assad. In practice, he shattered the Oslo concept and aspired for internal unity at the expense of progress towards a political solution (Grinberg, 2007: 221–226).

In March 2000, Barak began his sluggish run-up to negotiations with the Palestinians, but without engaging in any serious preparations. Evidently, he thought that in this arena too, he could dictate the steps (Drucker, 2002; Drucker and Shelah, 2005). Barak defined a number of basic guidelines. First, the negotiations with the Palestinians would no longer be conducted in stages. In contrast to the gradual approach of the Oslo Accords, Barak envisioned negotiations that would end the conflict once and for all. That would nullify all of the interim agreements and thereby render moot the obligations stemming from them, so that the withdrawals required by the interim agreements would turn into a card for pressuring the Palestinians. He had American approval for this.

Second, Barak's aim was to ensure that the Palestinians received nothing in terms of confidence-building measures, whether a suspension of construction in the settlements, the release of prisoners, family reunification, or implementation of the territorial withdrawal agreed on with Netanyahu in 1998. Barak's working assumption was that, if negotiations succeeded, the Palestinians would receive a lot, but, if the negotiations failed, it was better that they not receive "assets" that would otherwise remain in Israeli hands as bargaining chips. This approach coincided with his desire to weaken Arafat and show him up as impotent vis-à-vis Israel, in the hope that he would fold in the negotiations. This was sometimes expressed as scorn for the Palestinians and for Arafat himself (see Sher, 2006: 127–129). This undermined the Palestinians' faith in Barak's intentions and did not contribute to the success of the Camp David Summit in 2000. Additionally, Barak failed to understand the complexity of the cultural differences with the Palestinians and the critical influence that would have on the negotiations. Cultural aspects and symbolic aspects are extremely important: they are the building blocks of each sides' narrative and they have a major impact on the course of negotiations and their prospects for success.[7]

Third, Barak paid very close attention to public opinion. He was known to be addicted to the polls and made sure to receive daily updates, even when he was at the Camp David Summit, allowing these updates to influence his decisions there (Drucker, 2002). He was also attentive to the opposition parties, arguing that Rabin had made a mistake when he distanced himself from the Right. For this reason, he encouraged expansion of the settlements, at the very same time as he was proclaiming that an accord with the Palestinians would require significant territorial compromise. These steps further amplified the suspicions that both the Palestinians and the Israeli Left had of him.

In addition to his opposition to the Oslo Accords, Barak's political trajectory is an evidence of his natural rightist tendencies. He headed the hawkish wing of the Labor party. In the 1999 general elections, he did not conceal his preference to win a majority of the Jewish vote so that he would not have to depend on votes from Israel's large minority of Palestinian Arabs. Such an idea had never before been heard in Labor. As Prime Minister, he appointed a Housing Minister from the National Religious Party and gave him a free hand to expand the settlements and build to his heart's content. During the coalition negotiations, he tried to set up a government with the Likud party, headed by Ariel Sharon. Only when he learned that Sharon was himself trying to form a parliamentary bloc with the National Religious Party did he change his mind, fearing that

he risked losing control of his Government. He appointed David Levy, a former member of the Likud well known for his hawkish views, as foreign minister, even though Levy had been one of the ministers who earlier had tried to prevent Shamir from showing any political flexibility towards the Palestinians. After his defeat in the 2001 general election, Barak disappeared from politics for several years. But he served as a defense minister in both the Kadima government of Ehud Olmert and the government established by Netanyahu in 2009. Especially under Netanyahu, he played a significant role in shaping policy and was a senior partner in the Prime Minister's intransigent attitude towards the Palestinians. (For more on Barak's world view, see Beilin, 2001; Ben-Simon, 1991; Drucker, 2002; Kaspit, 2013; Kaspit and Kefir, 1998).

Under Barak, the expansion of the settlements took place in areas known by Israel as "settlement blocs", from which he believed Israel should not withdraw even in the context of an agreement with the Palestinians (Arieli, 2013). This meant that he was unilaterally dictating the final outcome of the negotiations even before they got under way. Before Camp David, the Palestinians issued stern warnings against trying to hold a summit without adequate preparations (Beilin, 2001: 119–128; Sher, 2006: 124–133). They understood that failure would inevitably lead to an explosion of anger and frustration on the Palestinian side, as well as a loss of support for the peace process on the Israeli side. Israel insisted on a "no-surprise rule" to limit room for maneuver in the negotiations (Malley and Agha, 2001: 90–94). Although the Americans were in no hurry to hold a summit without the preliminary spadework (Beilin, 2001; Sher, 2006), Barak insisted that the summit be convened, and on his terms (Sher, 2006: 119–121). Throughout, Barak made sure to avoid a positive relationship with Arafat, despite the importance of person-to-person contact in all negotiations. He even humiliated Arafat and the members of the Palestinian delegation, to the extent that US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright objected sharply (Beilin, 2001: 148–149; Grinberg, 2007: 233–240; Malley and Agha, 2001: 83–85).

Barak made some far-reaching offers, but his style and manner could not satisfy the Palestinians' expectations, and he was always careful to avoid putting any offers in writing. Nevertheless, Barak was able to create the impression that it was the Palestinians who were not interested in negotiations and that through the failure he had ripped the mask off Arafat's face (Grinberg, 2007: 240–244; Sher, 2006: 375–376). This was far from the truth, as many participants later conceded (Malley and Agha, Reinhart, Swisher). Nevertheless, at that time the Americans backed Israel's claims and blamed the Palestinians for the collapse of the summit (Barak and Morris, 2003; 99–102; Sher, 2006). As a result, Israel doubly benefited: it was seen as peace-loving government for entering the talks, and the Palestinians were blamed when the negotiations failed.

Much has been written about the failure of the Camp David Summit, but several factors require attention in this context:

1. Barak's method of negotiating was based on diktats, not on mutual respect.
2. Barak's was a "take it or leave it" approach. Although Barak did indeed make a generous offer, it was based on an ultimatum. He made it clear to the Palestinians that the talks' failure would not restore the status quo ante but would leave them worse off. He even enlisted the United States, and to an extent the Europeans, to impose sanctions on the Palestinians after they were blamed for the talks' collapse. In this way, the United States became a source of pressure rather than an honest broker, or a sponsor of negotiations between the two parties.

Some analysts have suggested that Barak wanted the talks to fail, so as to put an end to the internal debates in Israel about reaching a permanent settlement with the Palestinians and steer Israelis instead towards a rejection of Oslo (Grinberg, 2007; 233–234). That may be unfair. But we should not ignore the fact that his strategy and style significantly contributed to the failure.

When Barak's successor, Ariel Sharon, was elected Prime Minister in 2001, he sought to crush the Palestinians' military, social and economic infrastructures (Kimmerling, 2003). He showed no interest in political negotiations, except possibly those that had no hope of going anywhere. Revealingly, the director general of the Prime Minister's office spoke of the possibility of negotiating with the Palestinians only once they "turn into Swedes". When Sharon concluded that Israel could no longer control the Gaza Strip, he decided on unilateral action, his so-called Disengagement Plan, even though many of his advisors and security experts warned that any withdrawal should be coordinated with the Palestinian Authority. The step was taken with the blessing and assistance of Shimon Peres, who never abandoned his hope of establishing a separate Palestinian state in Gaza and a confederation between Jordan and the Palestinians. To the misplaced surprise of many observers, Peres agreed to become Sharon's deputy and supported the Gaza disengagement.

Sharon's desire to crush the Palestinian Authority rather than strengthen it was shared by his intimates and the ministers in his Government (Mofaz, Ya'alon and others). Only Olmert was substantially out of sympathy, and explicitly stated the need to separate from the Palestinians, including by making significant territorial withdrawals.

## Netanyahu's re-election (2009) and the "Peace Process"

Netanyahu, who had opposed the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and whose position vis-à-vis the Palestinians was farther to the right than Sharon's, returned to the Prime Minister's office in 2009. His goal was to end the negotiations with the Palestinians, but, as a skilled exponent of public relations, he understood that it would be better to conceal his aims. Instead, he made a show of his desire for political talks.

Barak Obama's election as US President, one who was seen to be less enthusiastically supportive of Israel than his recent predecessors, led Netanyahu to deliver his Bar-Ilan speech, apparently committing himself to support a two-state solution. The speech's lack of political substance was demonstrated by the fact that he made no efforts to realize any of the ideas he floated. Netanyahu soon found himself in a confrontation with the American president, especially over settlement building. However, with the fervent support of the Republicans in Congress, Netanyahu got the upper hand. As a result, he understood that he could rely on steadfast Congressional backing for his policy, even if it risked confrontation with the President.

The Bar-Ilan speech provided fodder to the media and many observers to assert that something could be expected to happen on the peace front. Netanyahu's government effectively exploited this breathing space to deflect American pressure even before it coalesced into action. Meanwhile, Israel dictated processes in the field, such as expanding settlements, and not only in the settlement blocs; tightening its grip on East Jerusalem; weakening the Palestinian Authority by impounding its funds[8]; seizing control of territory in Area C, and more.

Beyond this, Netanyahu was interested in gaining time in order to see how a number of pending regional issues would turn out.

Since 2010, Iran's nuclear aspirations had become a central issue of Israeli foreign policy. In 2012, in his speech to the UN General Assembly, Netanyahu asserted that the summer of 2013

would be the deadline for a decision about whether to prevent Iran's presumed goal of developing a nuclear weapon, because by then Tehran would supposedly have crossed a red line he sketched out on a cartoon image of bomb. He made it clear that it was important the United States deal with the Iranians, or, at the very least, back Israel should it attack Iran.

As the war in Syria became more severe, Israel waited to see how things would develop. Netanyahu was interested in exploiting the opportunity to deal with Syria's arsenal of chemical weapons and perhaps also its ground-to-ground missiles. Israel was also interested in weakening Hezbollah and rupturing its ties with Iran. Today, Syria is gripped by both a civil war and a proxy war, it has been largely stripped of its chemical weapons, which were a matter of grave concern for Israel, and is has therefore been removed from the array of threats against Israel. As a result, the Palestinian issue has become less urgent and troubling.

The Arab Spring, which began in late 2010, was also a source of concern for Israel. There were fears that the upheavals might spread to Jordan, though the protests there subsequently died down. The situation in Egypt also troubled Israel, especially the formation of a Muslim Brotherhood government under Mohammed Morsi. The fall of Morsi's government, however, weakened the Palestinians, not only because Egypt became preoccupied with domestic affairs, but also because the current regime under General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi is openly hostile to Hamas. This has left the Palestinians in a state of unprecedented weakness, given that Hamas had already parted company with Iran and Syria. There was a great temptation for the Israeli government to take advantage of this weakness to create new developments on the ground, ones that would reflect Israeli interests as the Netanyahu Government sees them, in a unilateral fashion that does not take account of Palestinian concerns. Israel had good reason to believe that the United States would not interfere with such steps.

Most of the members in Netanyahu's recent governments have had no interest in making progress on the Palestinian front and certainly have not wanted to withdraw from the territories. The Israeli political climate is far from ready for major withdrawals. Nor does the Government itself want to arrive at this point. That was evident in the choice for Housing Minister of Uri Ariel, who represents the Bayit Yehudi party, strongly allied with the extreme right of the settler movement. No Israeli politician has been more eager to expand construction in the Occupied Territories. On a number of occasions, he has emphasized that there is no room for another sovereign state between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean and that settlements should be built everywhere, and not only in areas that are expected to remain under Israeli control even after the establishment of a Palestinian state.[9] He ensured there were housing starts at every site and in every settlement, and especially East Jerusalem, which demonstrated that the Government was not really interested in serious negotiations with the Palestinians.

In this regard, the odd-couple alliance in the previous government (2013–2015) between Finance Minister Yair Lapid of the Yesh Atid Party and Economics Minister Naftali Bennett of the Bayit Yehudi Party was notable. It was a cynical pact driven by mutual interest in reinforcing the pro-settlement bloc in the Government. It allowed Bennett to expand settlements and establish new ones to bring nearer his hope that Israel would annex Area C. At the same time, the growth of the settlements promised to solve the housing crisis in the center of the country – a policy that would help the middle class that Lapid championed. Settlement expansion was also a good fit with the position of Yisrael Beteinu, which for a time merged with the Likud parliamentary bloc and coordinated policies through a direct Netanyahu-Liberman axis. Netanyahu's party, too, moved further to the right before the 2015 Knesset elections, giving top billing to fierce opponents of peace with the Palestinians, such as Moshe Ya'alon as Defense

Minister; Danny Danon, who frequently speaks and writes against negotiations with the Palestinians, as his deputy; Zeev Elkin, himself a settler, as deputy Foreign Minister; and others. They joined harsh opponents of any compromise with the Palestinian familiar from years past, including Limor Livnat, Yisrael Katz and Yuval Steinitz. Likud moderates such as Dan Meridor and Michael Eitan were dropped from its Knesset list. It is quite plausible that Netanyahu saw these ministers as a "brake" he could rely on to prevent any progress on peace talks and point to as his excuse with the US, Europe and others.

Other processes support the view presented here. The Likud, which opposed Olmert's negotiations with the Palestinians at the Annapolis Conference in 2007 and warned against any withdrawal from the Occupied Territories, grew stronger in the 2009 elections. The other political parties that gained, such as Yisrael Beiteinu and other rightwing parties, supported a militant line against the Palestinians and floated ideas that were incompatible with relaunching negotiations. On the other side of the spectrum, the parties that supported peace negotiations with the Palestinians almost disappeared. Meretz, for example, won only three seats, with less than 2.5% of the vote in 2009.

It is ironic that in the run-up to the 2013 elections, only two Zionist parties addressed the Palestinian issue: Meretz and Tzipi Livni's Movement, whose overt goal was to resolve the conflict with the Palestinians, which it saw as a clear Israeli and Zionist interest, because it would deal with the "demographic problem" posed by a growing Palestinian population. The fact that each of the two parties won only six seats in 2013 (with a total of 10% of the vote) said something about the marginal nature of the Palestinian issue in Israeli public opinion. This corroborates our thesis that there is no true and sincere desire on the Israeli side to conduct serious negotiations.

The Israeli objective under Netanyahu in negotiations is a return to the strategy of "process, not peace" (Shlaim, 2006).[10] Israelis are interested in launching a process for sundry reasons, but with no goal of achieving the objectives of the negotiations.

## Notes

1 The complexity of the conflict stems from its elements: deep and fundamental components such as identity and values; psychological components such as desires, aspirations and needs; and more pliable components such as interests or rights, where it is possible to reach a compromise or to bridge the disagreements. For more on the elements of the conflict and the prospects for a solution, see J. F. Rioux and V. N. Redekop (2013), Introduction to Conflict Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 4–15.

2 The following four paragraphs, until the end of "Table 1.1", were published in the past in Mohanad Mustafa and As'ad Ghanem (2013), "The Israeli negotiation strategy under Netanyahu: settlement without reconciliation," *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 24(3): 265–283.

3 Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the Egyptian foreign minister at the time, described the many tricks employed by Israeli Interior Minister Yosef Burg, who was in charge of the autonomy negotiations, to waste time and avoid progress; see, for example, Boutros-Ghali (1997: 269–275).

4 At a meeting on February 25, 1973, Sadat's national security advisor and emissary, Hafez Isma'il, informed Henry Kissinger that, so far as Egypt was concerned, the most important element in the conflict was the return of Sinai to Egyptian sovereignty. In return for a full withdrawal, Egypt would be ready to conclude a full peace with Israel (Vanetik and Shalom, 2012: 217).

5 Kissinger's undermined the negotiations is abundant, see the quotation from him in Vanetik and Shalom (2012: 216).

6 For more on Netanyahu's policies and the methods employed to prevent any progress in the negotiations, see, for example, Beilin (2001: 38–39), who quotes a senior source in Netanyahu's bureau as saying, "The Prime Minister's strategic goal has been achieved: the Oslo process was halted" (p. 39).

7 On the importance of cultural differences and how they influence perceptions and narratives, see, for example, M. H. Ross (2007b: 312–328).

8 This method of freezing the Palestinian Authority's funds whenever the Israeli government wanted to weaken it or extract concessions is not new. Barak did the same in order to undermine the PA and Arafat (see Sher 2001: 123).

9 Uri Ariel published a plan of unprecedented scope for the construction of 15,000 housing units across the West Bank, mainly in small and isolated settlements and in the E1 area east of Jerusalem, an extremely controversial region; a Jewish presence there is intended to totally isolate East Jerusalem from the West Bank. Ariel has never concealed his view that there should be no two-state solution, and that Israel should build all over the West Bank as a way to reduce the cost of housing in Israel. To learn more, see: Levinzon, C. "Uri Ariel promises to continue the momentum of building in the territories," *Haaretz*, 10.07.2013. www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.2177080; see also the declarations of then-Transport Minister Yisrael Katz on the most powerful politicians in the Likud party: Breyner, J. "Minister Katz: A Palestinian State is something unacceptable," *Walla*, 10.07.2013. http://news.walla.co.il/?w=/9/2659611

10 The American inclination to encourage a process rather than peace has come in for withering criticism, which has emphasized the paltry results of the various processes brokered by the Americans over the decades between Israel and the Arabs. (The peace with Egypt, which did involve active American mediation, is the exception. However, there is no space here to discuss the reasons.) For criticism of this sort, see Shlaim (2006). See also Reinhart (2005), who, to buttress her view, quotes Chomsky's savage criticism of the American focus on process rather than peace. Ross (2007a) acknowledged that the American mediation efforts had failed repeatedly.

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# 2 The Israeli right comeback to power (2009–2018)

In the first decades after the state's founding, a center-left coalition led by Mapai (the Land of Israel Workers' Party) governed Israel. The Israeli right emerged victorious for the first time only in the 1977 general election and again in 1981. In the elections of 1984 and 1988, the outcome was not decisive for either the right or left camps. A narrow victory for the left in 1992 produced a government led by Yitzhak Rabin, which signed the Oslo Accords and recognized the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) as the representative of the Palestinian people. The left's success on that occasion can be seen in part as a reaction by Israelis to the first Intifada and Israel's inability to crush the popular uprising by Palestinians.

Israel's failure to subdue its enemies led to a complex reality of alternating periods of confrontation and calm with the Palestinians and with other Arab parties such as Hezbollah in Lebanon. There was a growing perception that Israel's deterrence capability had eroded. Israel contended with internal challenges that were no less complex: in particular, severe economic problems and the difficulties of absorbing about a million new immigrants, from both the former Communist bloc and Ethiopia (see Al-Haj, 2004); as well as the challenge of political activism from Palestinian citizens of Israel, who presented an explicit demand to revoke the Jewish character of Israel and replace it with a bi-national regime (see, for example, Abulof, 2008; Jamal, 2008; Waxman and Peleg, 2008).

These and other challenges were the background to political changes that have been taking place in Israel over the last two decades. Intensive efforts to find a way out of this complex situation led to unprecedented political vicissitudes. The young political upstart Netanyahu won a surprise victory over the veteran Peres in 1996. The success of Barak in 1999 was quickly overturned by his electoral collapse a year and a half later in 2001. Barak's failure paved the way to the premiership for Ariel Sharon, whose political career had been written off back in the early 1980s. The Israeli public's support for Sharon led him to initiate the unilateral disengagement from Gaza. A short time later, he quit the Likud party and formed Kadima, which replaced Labor in the 2006 and 2009 elections as the main center-left party in Israel.

The most recent change entails the rise and consolidation of the right in the elections of 2009, 2013 and 2015. Since 2009, the Israeli right has been the dominant political player. The Likud grew from 12 seats in the 2006 Knesset election to 27 seats in 2009, creating the basis for a broad rightist government coalition that included Yisrael Beiteinu (15 seats), Shas (11), United Torah Judaism (5), National Union (4) and Habayit Hayehudi (3). This was a situation the right had not enjoyed since 1981.

In Israel's political system, the number of Knesset seats each party receives is important. But, even more important is the strength of each bloc in competing to form a government coalition supported by at least 61 members of the 120-seat Knesset.

Arian and Shamir (2004) believe that the rise of the right is the salient characteristic of Israeli politics since the 1970s. They argue that in the ten election campaigns held between 1969 and

2003, the rightist bloc consolidated its control, while support for the leftist bloc declined. The leftist bloc succeeded in attaining a majority of Knesset seats three times (1969, 1973 and 1992), but the rightist bloc won a small majority in all of the election campaigns after 1977 with the exception of the 1992 election (Table 2.1).

*Table 2.1* The balance of power between the right and left blocs in the Israeli political system, 1992–2009

|  | Leftist bloc | Centrist bloc | Rightist bloc | Arabs |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2009 | 16 | 28 | 65 | 11 |
| 2006 | 24 | 36 | 50 | 10 |
| 2003 | 28 | 15 | 69 | 8 |
| 1999 | 38 | 12 | 60 | 10 |
| 1996 | 43 | 4 | 64 | 9 |
| 1992 | 56 | – | 59 | 5 |
| 1988 | 47 | 2 | 65 | 6 |

Authors' own calculations.

Notes
1. The rightist bloc includes the ultra-Orthodox parties such as Shas and United Torah Judaism.
2. In two election campaigns (1996, 1999), Knesset elections were held parallel to elections for the prime minister. In the 1996 elections, the candidate of the right, Benjamin Netanyahu, was victorious; and in the 1999 elections, the candidate of the left, Ehud Barak, won.
3. The Arabs appear in a separate category because they comprise a constant opposition to all Israeli governments, left and right, and have never been invited to join a coalition.

Efforts to understand the rise of the Israeli right in general, and the extreme right in particular, were developed over the last decade. Following the research of Mudde (1995, 1996, 1999, 2000) into "extreme right" political parties in Europe, Pedahzur (2000a, 2000b) and Pedahzur and Perliger (2004) presented a comprehensive analysis of the rise of the extreme right in Israel. They claim that such research requires a "combined approach" and that a cluster of variables must be considered, including ideological, economic, social and political factors. According to Pedahzur (2000b), the rise of the "extreme-right" parties in Israel can be best understood by using what he terms "the pyramid-shaped explanatory model". The model begins by examining factors in the foundational political culture; it then proceeds to the social level with an investigation of social cleavages; next it moves nearer to the top of the pyramid, where narrower, structural and political factors are explored; and it ends at the top of the pyramid with variables such as the party scene and party organization.

Filc and Lebel (2005) claim that Palestinian terror attacks against Israeli civilians, which began in response to Israeli policies toward the Palestinians in the post-Oslo period, have reshaped the Israeli political right wing that emerged following the 1967 war and Israel's occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. These attacks transformed the Israeli "extreme" right wing into what they call the "new" Israeli right. This "new-right" movement was similar to

right-wing movements that emerged in Europe in the 1990s.

These studies refer chiefly to historical developments that occurred until the early years of this century. Our aim in this chapter is to analyze more recent developments, including the rise of the right-wing parties in the 2009, 2013 and 2015 Israeli general elections. In the following section, we will analyze the decline in support for left parties and the consolidation of the support for right-wing parties in these elections.

## The rise of the right wing in Israel after Oslo: the 2009 elections[1]

The elections for the 18th Knesset in Israel were held on February 10, 2009. Some 71% of a total 4.8 million voters participated: 3,416,587 votes were cast, with a final tally of 3,373,490 votes after invalid ballots were subtracted. A total of 34 party lists competed, only 12 of which surpassed the threshold of 2% of the valid votes (see Table 2.2). [2]

The victory of the right was the most significant aspect of the elections for the 18th Knesset. From a historical perspective, after the electoral turnabout in 1977, there was a noticeable political trend of growing support for the right – and particularly the extreme right. Despite that, a balance of power was maintained between the two blocs, right and left, until the 2009 elections. The results of the 18th Knesset revealed a strong rightist bloc (with 65 seats), but even more distinctively the collapse of the Israeli left. The two parties of the Zionist left, Labor and Meretz, together won only 16 of the 120 Knesset seats, the lowest number since the establishment of the state in 1948.

In the previous election, for the 17th Knesset, held in 2006, the rightist bloc won 50 seats, including those of the ultra-Orthodox religious parties Shas and United Torah Judaism. The ultra-nationalist parties of the extreme right won 20 seats, while the Zionist leftist bloc, Labor and Meretz, won 24 seats. In the 2009 election, the right received an additional 15 seats at the expense of the center-left bloc. The support for extreme right-wing parties is also worth highlighting. They won 13 seats in the 15th Knesset elections (in 1999), maintained the same level of representation in 2003 election, and increased their strength to 20 seats in 2006. These parties reached their peak in 2009, winning a total of 38 seats. The gradual ascent of the Yisrael Beiteinu party, until the 2009 elections, was a clear indicator of the rise of the extreme right in Israel and its success in winning over a considerable part of Israeli society to the right's vision and outlook.

Table 2.2 Party lists that surpassed the threshold percentage, and their number of Knesset seats (2009)

| Party | No. of voters | No. of seats (of 120) |
|---|---|---|
| Labor Party, led by Ehud Barak | 334,900 | 13 |
| Habayit Hayehudi – the New Mafdal | 96,765 | 3 |
| United Torah Judaism – Agudath Yisrael – Degel Hatorah | 147,954 | 5 |
| Balad – al-Tajamu' al-Watani al-Dimuqrati | 83,736 | 3 |
| Hadash – The Democratic Front for Peace and Equality | 112,130 | 4 |
| National Union – Tekuma, Hatikva, Eretz Yisrael Shelanu, Moledet | 112,570 | 4 |
| Kadima – with Tzipi Livni for prime minister | 758,032 | 28 |
| Yisrael Beiteinu, led by Avigdor Lieberman | 394,577 | 15 |
| Likud – Achi, led by Benjamin Netanyahu for prime minister | 729,054 | 27 |
| The New Movement – Meretz | 99,611 | 3 |
| The United Arab List – The Arab Movement for Renewal | 113,954 | 4 |
| Shas – The Worldwide Sephardic Association of Torah Observers | 286,300 | 11 |

Authors' own calculations.

Source: Knesset Central Elections Committee for the 19th Knesset: www.votes-19.gov.il/nationalresults

The elections to the 18th Knesset, on February 10, 2009, intensified the polarization of Israeli society. The percentage of Arabs who stayed away from the polls held steady, at some 45% of registered Arab voters, but the Arab parties increased their strength to an unprecedented 11 mandates because of the sharp decline in the number of Arabs voting for Jewish parties. Yisrael Beitenu increased its strength significantly, receiving most of its support from Russians. The party voiced anti-Arab slogans during the campaign, such as "No citizenship without loyalty", while also running on a secular, anti-religious platform that generated friction with the religious parties, especially Shas. The religious parties maintained their strength: Shas won 11 mandates; United Torah Judaism, the Ashkenazi religious party, won five seats; and the religious Zionist Habayit Hayehudi (formerly the National Religious Party) took three seats.

To sum up, changes in the social composition of Israeli society, resulting from demographic processes and developments, led to the rise of the right in Israel. In general, Ashkenazi Jews – that is, Jews originating from Europe or America (before the arrival of Jews from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s) – tended to vote for the left, and for the Labor Party in particular, while the Mizrahim – Jews originating from Asia or Africa – tended to vote for the right, and for the Likud in particular (Arian, 2005). The growing percentage of Mizrahim in Israeli society in the 1960s and 1970s, and their shift toward the right, led to the political turnaround in Israel in

1977 and the ascent of the right. The decline of the left since the 1990s is also related to the changes in the demographic composition of Israeli society.

The 2009 elections were conducted in a general climate in which Israel found itself in a deteriorating security situation, with the Israeli public keen to "restore" Israel's ability to withstand internal and external threats. Those concerns were reflected in growing support for parties of the extreme right, as occurred in different European countries during the twentieth century.

## The consolidation of right-wing politics – the 2013 and the 2015 general elections

The results of Israel's general election in January 2013, for the 19th Knesset, and in March 2015, for the 20th Knesset, highlighted the deepening power of the Israeli right, and its transformation into a dominant bloc in Israeli politics following two decades of rough balance between the right, the left and the center. The outcome surprised many observers, given that during the campaign polls consistently predicted a close race between the right and left, in general, and between the Likud party and the Labor party, as its main challenger, in particular. However, the outcome can be seen as a natural consequence of two trends that have marked Israeli politics over the past several decades, and that have important implications for Israeli democracy.

In this section, we posit that the 2015 elections inaugurated a new phase in Israeli politics, one characterized by the dominance of an ideological and sectarian bloc, rather than, as in the past, by one or two dominating parties. We further suggest that this phase may precede the emergence of a dominant block. Similar to the early decades of the state, when Israeli politics was dominated by the leftist Mapai, Israeli politics appears to be proceeding in the direction of undermining democratic principles. This time, however, it is the right's discourse which dominates the public sphere.

In the following, we first ground our argument in theoretical work on the notion of the dominant party, and examine an earlier period of dominant party politics in Israel. We then summarize and analyze the last two elections' results. Finally, we relate this analysis to the inauguration of the dominant bloc phase, and discuss the likely direction of Israel's political system in the future.

Our main argument in the following pages is that the right wing, headed by the Likud party, achieved a victory in the 2009 and 2013 elections, a victory that was transformed into dominance in 2015. That situation is very close to the political dominance over Israeli politics during the early decades of Israel, when Mapai party was a dominant party until 1977. While the results of the 2013 election provided Likud and Netanyahu with a plurality of Knesset seats, the Likud Party and its leader suffered a serious setback, Although the joint Likud-Israel-Beitenu list came out as the single largest political faction with 31 seats, it lost support throughout the campaign, from a starting point of 42 seats (27 + 15). Nevertheless, it achieved its ultimate goal – to secure its chance of leading the coalition. At the same time, Labor, which presented itself as the main alternative to Netanyahu, lagged behind with only 15 seats, much less than both the polls and the party leaders expected (for details, see, Rubin, Navot and Ghanem, 2014).

On the other hand, the 2015 election witnessed a big victory of the Likud and the right-wing parties. This achievement made the right-wing the dominant political camp in Israeli politics, and paved the way for the Likud to become the dominant party in Israeli politics.

Israeli researchers have employed the theoretical construct "dominant party" – introduced by

Maurice Duverger (1964) in his *Political Parties: Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State* (1964) – to describe the dominance by Mapai (later the Labor Party) of the Israeli political apparatus during the country's first three decades. The notion of a dominant party does not imply the emergence of a system based on a single party, or even that the dominant party necessarily receives the most votes or possesses a majority of parliamentary seats. A dominant party is one that, despite existing within a multiplicity of parties and holding (potentially) a limited number of seats, maintains extensive and even exclusive influence over a broad swathe of social and political life, and on the relationship between party and country. The "revolution" of 1977, when Likud rose to power for the first time, represented the end of dominant party politics in Israel (Shapiro, 1980). The 1977 elections then inaugurated a stage of two dominant parties, which lasted until 1996, when Israel temporarily introduced direct elections for Prime Minister.[3]

Since Duverger's book, an abundant literature on the dominant party system has emerged within political scholarship. Differences among them notwithstanding, scholars generally agree on six characteristics of a dominant party: (a) it consistently receives the largest number of votes, though not necessarily a majority of votes; (b) it remains in power for a prolonged period of time; (c) it occupies a central position in the formation of governing coalitions; (d) it regards the persistent pursuit of power as a key part of its agenda; (e) it penetrates deeply into the nation's psyche, such that it is regarded as an essential component of national life; and (f) the dominant party tends to be a relatively large party in a system where it competes with small- or medium-sized opposition parties (Templeman, 2014: 3). During the 1950s and 1960s, Israel's dominant party (Mapai) largely met all six of these criteria. Indeed, during that period, government institutions – particularly the intelligence apparatus – worked in close relationship with the founding party and its historic leader, David Ben-Gurion, even to the point of routine political corruption (Navot, 2012).

While the domination of the Mapai party was clear, it is still too early to claim that the Likud is now a dominant party. Although the Likud gained a plurality of seats in 2015 (30 out of 120), this number remains moderate in relation to the number of seats held by Mapai during the 1950s and 1960s, or even by the two major parties – Likud and Labor – during the 1970s and 1980s. In addition, Israel has military, academic, media, political and cultural elites that continue to resist the Likud's attempts to penetrate the nation. Therefore, the construct of the dominant party, as defined above, fails to help us understand Israel's current political situation.

In this context, it is helpful to evoke Kharis Templeman's categorizations and distinctions regarding political systems, and particularly the qualities of the party system. Templeman distinguishes between single-party systems of the type often seen in authoritative polities, and the dominant party system found in democracies. In the former, the ruling party delegitimizes or marginalizes internal opposition, so that opposition parties have no chance of becoming a viable alternative; in the latter, a legitimate opposition competes for rule, but mostly to no avail (Templeman, 2014: 10–11). In addition to Templeman's understanding and related definitions, which focus on the dominating party's influence on the country and the public sphere, we may also borrow more simple procedural definitions, such as those presented by Pierre du Toit and Nicola de Jager. Both categorize a party system as a dominant party system if the same party wins at least four consecutive elections (du Toit and de Jager, 2014).

We suggest that the political situation in Israel following the 2015 elections can be best explained as a dominant party bloc system. During this period, though Israel has had no single dominant party, the Likud has emerged as the clear center of a dominant bloc, with various smaller parties orbiting around it. In other words, the domination of the Likud is grounded in its

ability to construct around it a governing coalition, serving as the gravitational core for a set of small- and medium-sized parties, including religious Zionist parties and the radical right, at a time when the parties on the left struggle to find common ground (Pedahzur, 2012). Could the Likud eventually enter a new phase in which it is capable of dominating Israeli politics by itself, much like Mapai in the early decades of the state? If so, this suggests a possible new route for the emergence of a dominant party.

Templeman (2014: 20–22) empirically identified three possible ways in which a dominant party may emerge. First, a party may achieve dominance through democratic elections. The Justice and Development party (AKP) in Turkey, dominant since 2002, including in the 2015 elections, is illustrative (Musil, 2015). Second, the dominant party may emerge as a result of its central role in the foundation of the state and the construction of the political system. This is the route that characterizes the Mapai party in Israel under the leadership of Ben-Gurion. The third route refers to the formation of the dominant party in an autocracy. In an autocracy, multiple parties may formally participate in elections, but manipulations at the ballot box ensure that the dominant party always wins. This route is exemplified by the National Party in Egypt during the reign of Hosni Mubarak.

What we propose here is a new, fourth route inaugurated by the Israeli right under the leadership of Likud. This proposed fourth route is similar to Templeman's first category, with the exception that the entire right-wing camp, centering on the Likud, has become dominant, and not the Likud alone. On the other hand, the Likud is the dominant party in the camp, with no other contestant apparent. Concomitantly, the right has taken advantage of its dominance to impose its agenda on the nation through legislation and regulation – narrowing citizens' freedoms, limiting freedom of speech, and even, to some extent, delegitimizing the Supreme Court (Fox, Blander and Kremnitzer, 2015). Could the Likud eventually enter a new phase in which it is capable of dominating Israeli politics by itself, much like Mapai in the early decades of the state? If so, this suggests a possible new route for the emergence of a dominant party.

## The 19th Knesset elections – 2013

In the following, we intend to present an analysis of the results of the 19th Knesset elections, of January 2013, which preceded the social and political changes that have occurred and are still occurring in Israel, such as the retreat of the larger parties and the continuance of certain conventional voting patterns. Nonetheless, the election also revealed new transformations, such as the consolidation of the right's dominance of the Israeli political scene and the absence of a worthwhile political alternative to Likud. This was the first time that another party did not compete against Likud to form a government, reflecting the increasing strength of the right and the decline of the leftist bloc, as well as the appearance of the Yesh Atid party, representing a larger part of the well-to-do, secular middle class.

The 19th Knesset elections were held early due to disputes between the factions in the government regarding the upcoming government budget, faced with a fiscal deficit of approximately $10 billion. Netanyahu wanted to cut government spending and raise taxes to plug the deficit. Other coalition parties objected to his approach and to the suggested budget.[4]

Netanyahu additionally needed early elections to renew the public's confidence in his and his party's leadership. He wanted to cash in on what he assumed was his popularity to achieve a convincing victory before presenting the budget. He also needed the public's support for legitimizing his position on the Iranian nuclear file and other strategic matters. In particular, he

called the elections in October 2012 after his famous speech on the Iranian nuclear project at the United Nations a month earlier. Netanyahu presented himself as the only candidate able to confront these challenges and believed that the Israeli public would give him and his party backing to deal with strategic security challenges. With these considerations in mind, Netanyahu preferred to advance the elections rather than dismantle his government in response to the state budget, a step that could have led to a vote of no-confidence in the government.

Netanyahu further hoped to enhance the Likud party's representation in the Knesset. In the previous elections, it had received 27 seats, behind Kadima with 28 seats. Netanyahu had the chance to form the government only because Tzipi Livni, leader of Kadima, was reluctant to enter a coalition with the religious parties. By the time of the elections, Netanyahu's government was the longest-ruling since 1992, having completed its fourth year. To fulfill his ambition of turning Likud into by far the largest party, and to avoid the possibility of other parties coalescing and trying to prevent him from forming the next government, as well as to release himself from pressure from coalition partners, Netanyahu established an alliance between Likud and Yisrael Beteinu.

There were several reasons why Netanyahu agreed to establish an electoral alliance with the Russian party Yisrael Beteinu, headed by Avigdor Lieberman. The alliance was negotiated in complete secrecy and its announcement was greeted with surprise. The goal was to create a party that would receive more than 40 seats, thereby reviving the era of the historic big parties, and to guarantee the formation of a stable government that would not be dependent on bartering with small- and medium-sized parties. Moreover, Netanyahu wanted to be sure that Lieberman and his party would remain in the next government to establish a balance between the oppositional parties and Likud and its allies. However, Lieberman, who started his political career in Likud and later founded a sectorial party that relied on the Russian community, aspired to become leader of the right and Netanyahu's heir. For Lieberman, the alliance was an opportunity to seek the leadership of Likud and become its candidate for prime minister.

Rather simplistically, the two leaders assumed their alliance, dubbed Likud-Beteinu, would perform as well as it did in the previous election (27 + 15 = 42 seats). Lieberman pledged that the new list would receive at least 40 seats. He handpicked the members of his party for the alliance list, whereas the Likud engaged in internal primary elections to choose its candidates. The primary revealed the dominance of the neo-right in the Likud, overpowering the old liberal-nationalist leadership and winning the top spots on the list. This elite, the third generation in the Likud, is in many ways similar to the radical right rising across Europe, which views the demands of ethnic minorities as a threat to the country's socio-cultural fabric. The second-generation elite, which included Benny Begin (son of Menachem Begin, a former leader of the Likud and a former Prime Minister), Dan Meridor and Michael Eitan, were all ousted. They represented the liberal wing of the Likud, opposing the legislative and political initiatives of the new elite.

To the right of the Likud, a separate alliance was formed between the religious-nationalist current and the settler right in the form of Habayit Hayehudi (The Jewish Home) party. Naftali Bennett, who was elected to lead this new party, started his political career as the administrator of Netanyahu's office, and then became general director of the center of settlement councils. Considered a representative of the new generation of religious Zionists, Bennett is a veteran of the elite military unit Matkal, which is dominated by religious Zionists who prioritize religion over nation and military honor codes.

Bennett presented a new discourse that did not solely focus on the conflict and the settlements.

He himself does not live in a settlement, but rather in Ranana, one of the more affluent areas inside the Green Line. He made his wealth in the hi-tech industries. Bennett aims to make Habayit Hayehudi a political home for Jews regardless of their location. In his discourse, he focuses on Jewish values, and equality of economic and military burden (i.e., compulsory military and civil service). He included a non-religious member on the party list to address new sectors in Israeli society, promoting himself as religious, modern and enlightened. In the campaign, Habayit Hayehudi supported Netanyahu for prime minister so as to attract sectors within Likud to vote for it. The officials argued that voting for the party would not damage Netanyahu, but rather strengthen him from the right because Habayit Hayehudi does support the establishment of a Palestinian state and demands the inclusion of Area C (approximately 60% of the West Bank) under Israeli sovereignty.[5]

On the other side, the Labor party, headed by a former journalist, Shelly Yahimovich, concentrated on socio-economic issues. Yahimovich's campaign asserted that Israel's welfare model would be severely eroded by another Netanyahu government, exploiting concerns raised during the middle-class's large economic protests during the summer of 2011. The Labor party excluded the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and security matters from its agenda because these were seen as Netanyahu's strong points with the public. Yahimovich even adopted right-wing political stances, such as her claim that construction in the settlements and the occupation had no bearing on the difficult economic situation inside the Green Line. She also stated that the settlements were legitimate because their construction was based on government decisions, and she supported the founding of a university in the settlement of Ariel. In another announcement – to guard against any accusations of Labor being leftist – Yahimovich claimed that Labor never was a leftist party, but rather a party of the political center.[6]

Yahimovich hoped to polarize the Israeli middle class through the party's focus on socio-economic matters, in the hope of returning to Labor its traditional social bases after their decade-long abandonment of the party, especially during Ehud Barak's reign. Yahimovich's policy looked to be successful, as polls showed Labor with more than 20 seats. Her approach also allowed some of the leaders of the social protest to join the party, strengthening confidence that it would serve as an economic and social alternative to Netanyahu's government, sidelining political and security issues.

Labor's internal primary elections introduced new candidates competing for places on the party list. Among the first ten places, there were two important figures, each under age 30, from the social protest movement. Also, Omer Bar Lev, the son of the eighth Israeli Chief of Staff, Haim Bar Lev, was elected. Bar Lev, who served as a lieutenant in the elite unit Matkal, was the only new military veteran on the party list. Labor failed to attract other influential military figures. The rest of the candidates belonged to Labor's old traditional leadership. Yahimovich cancelled the principle of sectorial representation in the primary elections, ensuring that Arabs and representatives of the kibbutz movement ranked low on the party list.[7]

Within the Orthodox religious current, two movements competed in the election. Yahdut Hatorah (United Torah Judaism) is a non-Zionist Orthodox religious movement that enjoys support within the Ashkenazi sector. Its public is characterized by stability, reflected in consistent electoral support, because its voters back it for purely religious reasons. The party's electoral force has grown over time because of the natural population increase in the sector (Ben Moshe, 2011: 28). Its bases are concentrated in Ashkenazi Orthodox religious communities in Jerusalem, Modi'in and Bet Shemesh. The party has undergone a shorter process of Zionization than the Eastern Orthodox religious movement Shas.

Shas, founded in the 1980s, is heavily engaged in identity politics among Eastern Jews. Its bases are divided between religiously Orthodox communities and economically weak classes of Eastern origins. In contrast to Yahdut Hatorah, its bases are not stable. It competes with the Likud for the economically weak classes of Eastern origins, and it employs identity politics to confront the Ashkenazi Likud. The movement has been largely Zionized and defines itself as right-leaning in security and political issues (Mustafa, 2010). Shas expected to increase its parliamentary representation in the 19th Knesset elections for three reasons. First, socio-economic issues were prominent in the general public's discourse, and prioritized over security issues. Second, Shas hoped to cut into Likud's social bases after its retreat on its economic policies. Third, its historic leader, Arieh Dery, had recently returned to politics, having served jail time for crimes of corruption – crimes that were described as political persecution by supporters.

The final major party referred here is Yesh Atid (There is a Future), founded by popular media figure Yair Lapid. His father, the late journalist Tommy Lapid (1931–2008), had joined the earlier Shinui (Change) party, which defined itself as centrist and launched a hostile campaign against religiously Orthodox Jews. The party made great electoral achievements, but shared the fate of other parties that had identified themselves as center parties, appearing and disappearing from the political scene following temporary electoral success.[8]

Lapid founded Yesh Atid as a center party, and addressed the Israeli middle class. He focused on "Equality of burden" – that is, imposing economic and military burdens on all sectors, based on an assumption that the secular middle class had so far carried these burdens by itself whereas others, particularly religious sectors, shirked them. The word "burden" is commonly used in reference to those who fulfil their duties while others exercise their rights without making a contribution. Lapid presented this discourse as if it belonged to the center of the political map. In reality, however, it is very firmly a right-wing discourse. Yisrael Beteinu, headed by Lieberman, had run in the 2009 elections with the similar slogan "No rights without duties", which was directed at Palestinians inside Israel. Lapid handpicked the members of his party, in line with the behavior of religious parties, such as Shas and Yahdut Hatorah, where clerics choose the party's representatives, and the behavior of personal parties such as Lieberman's Yisrael Beteinu. Lapid's party was composed of figures sharing similar attitudes, principally brought together by the issue of "Equality of burden".

Lapid did not promote his party as hostile to the religious sectors, but as a champion of the middle class. He recruited religious men who adopted progressive positions on social and economic issues. On the party's website, its ideology was presented under the category of "Who we are". The outlines of its ideological approach in political, economic and social issues, as well as its vision of the nation's identity, are explained: "We believe Israel to be Jewish and democratic, as envisioned by Israel's prophets. We believe in our right to exist as a Jewish majority in our state with secure and defendable borders". Also, referring to the relation between Israel and world Jewry, it stated: "We believe that the nation should serve as a center for all Jews, and embrace any persecuted Jew in the world based on his Judaic identity".[9]

The ideological foundation of the party derives from the Zionist-Jewish consensus regarding the nation's identity. For Yesh Atid, the nation need not be Jewish in its identity and accordingly in culture, but rather it needs to contain a Jewish majority and serve as the country for all Jews regardless of location. On the economic level, the party called for an increase by all sectors, including those that are generally not active in Israeli society, of participation in the labor market. The country should also give particular attention to the middle class because it was the

most productive class.

The party's right-wing tendencies are evident in its political program:

> Yesh Atid does not agree to individual accusations by parts of the Israeli-Jewish public regarding the issue of peace. We believe that the Palestinians … have consistently rejected Israel's extended hand for peace during the first and second Intifada as well as during the unilateral retreat from Gaza. Instead of building hospitals and schools in place of the settlement of Gush Katif in Gaza, they have launched thousands of rockets on the civil population and rejected Ehud Olmert's suggestion for solving the conflict.

The party suggests adopting the two-state solution, but not based on an admission of the Palestinians' national rights. Rather, it wants to preserve a Jewish majority in the Jewish state. The settlers are considered to be true Zionists. The program states: "Peace is the only rational solution to the demographic threat, the idea of a country for all its citizens, and the bi-national state solution". The two-state solution proposed by the party does not require a return to the borders of June 1967, and the settlements in the West Bank can be maintained, as can an undivided Jerusalem as the eternal capital of Israel. The problem of refugees is to be solved in the Palestinian state, and Israel retains exclusive rights to fight "terrorism", even inside a future Palestinian state. The program clarifies that the party does not present a different vision from what Netanyahu presented in the Bar-Ilan speech, except for Netanyahu's demand that the Palestinians recognize Israel as a Jewish state. Lapid expects to elicit this on the ground.

The Kadima party also participated. Its support had eroded in the previous election and resulted in damaging splits, most notably when its former leader, Tzipi Livni, left to establish her own party, Hatnuah (The Movement), with an exclusive focus on the issue of arriving at a settlement with the Palestinians. The leftist Meretz party, also standing, announced that it would not sit in any government formed by Netanyahu. The party has been in the opposition since 2001.

In addition to the Jewish parties, three Arab parties took part in the elections. The National Democratic Assembly represents the national democratic current among Palestinians in Israel. The United Arab List is made up of a section of the Islamic movement that agrees to participate in Israeli elections, as well as other factions. Lastly, the Democratic Front for Equality and Peace defines itself as an Arab-Jewish movement and is essentially based on the Israeli Communist party.

## A political reading of the 19th elections results

Voter turnout for the 19th elections reached 66.6%, compared to 65% in the previous election. Turnout has been relatively stable since a decline that followed the election for prime minister in 2001.[10] Some 12 party lists, out of 32, passed the electoral threshold of 2%. The majority of those that fell below the threshold were from the leftist camp. The results show that the left-wing camp lost around five seats because of wasted votes cast for these small parties.

The results revealed the failure of the Likud-Beteinu alliance. Both Netanyahu and Lieberman expected to receive at least 40 seats[11] but did not even manage the 35 seats predicted in polls.[12] The alliance received 31 seats, winning 23.3% of the vote. In 2009, the two parties separately had won 42 seats, with 33% of the vote. In short, they lost a quarter of their seats. Netanyahu and Lieberman expected that the alliance would bring together their social bases, as well as attracting new constituencies from the right. Instead, the alliance actually alienated several of their traditional constituencies.

Results showed that in cities with a Russian majority, many Russians abstained from voting. Turnout declined by 10% – that was significant, given that the electoral weight of the Russians can account for 20 seats.[13] Turnout declined in part because they were disappointed that Yisrael Beteinu had not sufficiently achieved its goals in the previous government. Surveys show that Russians belong to the lower-middle class in Israel, but the Netanyahu-Lieberman alliance had not courted this sector. Instead, it imposed heavy economic burdens on them.[14] Also, as a result of its alliance with Likud, Yisrael Beteinu lost its identity as a sectorial party serving the special economic, cultural and social needs of the million Russian immigrants.[15] In addition, the alliance between a secular base hostile to religious movements and the conservative religious currents within Likud left many Russians feeling reluctant to vote for this new alliance, particularly following the rise of the new elite in Likud, many of whom were conservative and religious.

Before its alliance with Yisrael Beteinu, the polls indicated that Likud would win more than 30 seats. The alliance caused heavy losses to its social bases, particularly its liberal constituency, which saw Lieberman as on the radical right. They wanted Likud to be liberal and close to the center of the political map. The results of the internal primary elections only accentuated this perception given that the radical right won the leading spots on the party list, leaving the liberal candidates to fill lower slots. This change pushed liberals on the right toward Yesh Atid.[16] The alliance with Lieberman also pushed many of nationalist-religious voters to Habayit Hayehudi,[17] and religious voters of Eastern origins toward Shas. These religious sectors saw the alliance between Likud and a party hostile to religion as a blow to their values. They may have shared common ground with the two parties on political and security matters, but not on social and religious issues.

Furthermore, the difficult socio-economic conditions that emerged during Netanyahu's previous term in office played a significant role in the deterioration of the party's standing. Its economic policies had hit the lower classes, and increased burdens on the middle class, particularly regarding housing. As socio-economic issues became the prime battlefield in the elections, Likud-Beteinu started to lose ground, particularly following the publication of data revealing the deterioration in the economy and the fiscal deficit awaiting Israel in 2013. That would demand heavy cuts in government spending and the imposition of new taxes to wipe out the deficit and overcome the crisis. These considerations led middle-class Likud voters to prefer parties that proposed policies supporting the middle class and sharing the burdens more widely, such as Yesh Atid.

Yesh Atid's success was the biggest surprise. The party won 19 seats (14.3% of the vote) in its first participation in an election, becoming the second largest party. There were many factors that led to the party's success. One was Lapid's personality, which resonated with aspiring Israelis who wanted to live "normal lives" and prosper without the political games indulged by other parties.[18] In contrast to his father, Lapid's discourse was not hostile to the religious sectors. This does not mean that his social bases felt any affinity for the religiously Orthodox sectors, but they preferred not to focus on this issue. Also, Lapid presented a list of candidates who had not previously been members of the parliament. Rather, he founded a party that merged distinct sectors of Israeli society that all shared a Zionist consensus on political, social and economic matters.

In its political and economic discourse, Yesh Atid merged ideas from the liberal right and others from the welfare model. The party's economic discourse focused on supporting the middle class geographically concentrated in the center of Israel and mostly of Ashkenazi origins. The

party did not demand that Israel should become a social democracy – that is, its discourse did not highlight support for weak and marginalized classes, but only for the upper-middle classes.[19]

Yesh Atid's surprising success can also be explained by the public's lack of confidence in the traditional parties, particularly Labor. The Labor party and the Israeli left had lost much of its credibility over the preceding decade (Lahat, 2004). Lapid arrived on the scene with a discourse he could communicate both to the left and right. Moreover, the party succeeded in attracting upper-middle social bases that had considered voting Labor in light of the recent social protests but were dissuaded by the party's internal feuds. These constituencies saw in Yesh Atid an alternative to Labor. Polls showed Yesh Atid's advancement at the cost of Labor's decline.

When Shelly Yahimovich became Labor's leader, she spearheaded a discourse that emphasized socio-economic issues to attack the right at its most vulnerable spot. However, the party's focus on socio-economic issues was insufficient: its traditional social bases wanted a political alternative to Likud, not merely a socio-economic alternative. They understood that Labor lacked an alternative political proposal to that of the right (Lahat, 2004: 13). Yahimovich believed that evading political issues would highlight Labor as a socio-economic alternative to the Likud. The renowned Israeli literary figure Amos Oz attacked her for this approach: "Worse than Ehud Barak. He claimed that there was no solution. She claims that there is no problem".[20] Yahimovich's exclusive focus on socio-economic issues brought her politically closer to the right, in the sense that she tried to speak to right-wing bases about socio-economic issues.[21]

Yahimovich thought that she could break the historic support for Likud from its lower-class and conservative religious bases. Yahimovich did not understand that a temporary economic crisis was not enough to disrupt this alliance, particularly given that the Arab-Israeli conflict had yet to be solved. Yahimovich's attitude to these constituencies led to the loss of Labor's traditional bases. Simultaneously, she failed to attract Likud's economically weak bases – they preferred to vote for the Eastern religious Shas, not Labor, when they prioritized socio-economic factors. Labor received 15 seats, adding only two seats to its 2009 tally and winning three fewer seats than it had in 2006. Yahimovich failed to revive the party as one that could credibly form a government, coming third after Likud and Yesh Atid.

In the decade up to 2013, Labor witnessed a desertion by four of its leaders to other parties. Shimon Peres joined Kadima under the leadership of Sharon. Amir Peretz, the leader during the 2006 elections, split to join Hatnuah under Livni. Amiram Mitzna, who headed the party in 2003, also joined Livni's party. After them, Ehud Barak broke away, following the party's decision to leave Netanyahu's government, and took several Labor members with him, severely weakening the party. In other words, of the party's six leaders since the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995, four have left to join parties that lean rightwards.

The Kadima party collapsed in 2013 elections, winning only two seats. Historical reasons related to the party's foundation and internal feuds were likely among the reasons. When Sharon established the party in 2005, he was at the peak of his popularity. In fact, the party's success was rooted in Sharon's popularity. He was the glue holding together very different elements in the party. Moreover, the way it was established meant Kadima was an authoritative party more than an oppositional one (Abisher, 2011: 10). When the party engaged in elections for the first time in 2006 – it did so without Sharon, who had suffered brain paralysis – Olmert won 29 seats. The results showed that the party's bases were the upper-middle classes that had previously voted for the Labor and Likud parties (Arian, 2008: 36).

Kadima's place in the opposition following the 2009 election provoked internal strife that eventually broke up the party. After Livni lost the leadership to Shaul Mofaz in 2012, she split

from the party shortly before the 2013 elections. Under Mofaz, the party joined the government in an attempt to pass the law of compulsory military service for the religiously Orthodox sectors. In this way, Mofaz rescued Netanyahu's government from falling as a result of its differences with its religious partners, who opposed this legislation. Mofaz failed to pass the law and left the government, with the party bitterly divided. Several of its members joined Likud, and others joined Labor. The rest joined Livni's new party Hatnuah.

Likud-Beteinu's decline in the right-wing camp helped bolster Habayit Hayehudi's representation. The party included the Zionist-religious Mafdal and the National Union parties. Combined, they received 7 seats in the previous election, while Habayit Hayehudi won 12 seats in 2013. This increase was due to a new discourse promoted by the party's new leader, Naftali Bennett, that was directed at all social sectors, and not merely at the settlers, the party's traditional base. He created the slogan "The Jewish Home is a Home for All". Also, the party emphasized socio-economic issues in addition to focusing on the conflict and settlements. The party addressed the concerns of the middle class with its adoption of the slogan "Equality in burden". It also pursued an electoral tactic that attracted Likud's bases: it emphasized that it would join Netanyahu's government from the right. That is, those who voted for Habayit Hayehudi would not endanger Netanyahu's position as prime minister.

To sum up, the results of the 19th Knesset elections show the consolidation of the political right in Israel. Despite Likud's loss of a quarter of its seats, no rival party vied to form the government. In addition, the right-wing camp maintained its electoral force, given that Yesh Atid is much closer to the right than the left.

In another vein, this election continued the changes that began to occur on the political map two decades ago. There was a continuing decline in support for the big parties, something Netanyahu futilely attempted to overcome through his alliance with Lieberman. Moreover, the elections revealed that historic voting blocs were still relevant, such as those of Eastern Jews, Orthodox religious voters, settlers and the middle class.

## The twentieth Knesset elections – 2015

The 2015 elections were called in December 2014, after Netanyahu proposed dissolving the 19th Knesset. The Israeli political system suffers from both a structural deficiency and a somewhat free-wheeling political culture, which together result in a lack of parliamentary stability. No government since 1988 has served a full term. The longest-serving government during this period was Netanyahu's second government (2009–2013), in which Likud held 27 seats.

Even with this history, the 2013 government was problematic. During the months leading up to the dissolution of parliament, all the party heads behaved as if they were viable future candidates for prime minister. Likud, though the governing party, lacked sufficient seats to exert much discipline. In addition, the government was dealt with a number of heavy blows, including the decision by Lieberman, leader of Yisrael Beteinu, to dismantle his party's alliance with Likud during the war with Gaza in summer 2014. In general, internal tensions over the war were revealed to the media in a manner unprecedented in Israel. The government also confronted internal challenges on a number of other fronts, including the 2105 budget and the controversial "Jewish state" bill. These events revealed Netanyahu's weakness as a prime minister, which in turn was rooted in his party's dependence on coalition partners. However, despite this weakness, Netanyahu's personal popularity exceeded that of any other potential candidate for prime minister. This was one of the reasons that Netanyahu saw as a favorable opportunity to hold an

election, which, he hoped, would return Likud to power with a strong mandate and enough seats to form a stable new government.

In the remainder of this section, we analyze the results of the March 2015 elections and their political semantics, with an emphasis on electoral mobility during the campaign compared to previous elections (see Table 2.3).

*Table 2.3* The results of the past four elections

|  | 2006 | 2009 | 2013 | 2015 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | Seats | Seats | Seats | Seats |
| Likud | 12 | 27 | 31 | 30 |
| Kadima | 29 | 28 | 2 | The party didn't compete |
| Labor | 19 | 13 | 15 | 24 |
| The Joint List |  |  |  | 13 |
| Yesh Atid | N/A | N/A | 19 | 11 |
| Shas | 12 | 11 | 11 | 7 |
| Yisrael Beteinu | 11 | 15 | Allied with Likud | 6 |
| Meretz | 5 | 3 | 6 | 5 |
| Mafdal/ Habayit Hayehudi | 9 | 3 | 12 | 8 |
| The National Union | N/A | 3.3 4 | Allied with other parties in Habayit Hayehudi | – |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gil- The Pensioners' Party | 7 | | | |
| Hatnuah | | | 6 | Allied with Labor Party |
| Kulanu | | | | 10 |
| The National Democratic assembly | 3 | 3 | 3 | See: The Joint List |
| The Democratic Front | 4 | 4 | 4 | See: The Joint List |
| The United Arab List | 3 | 4 | 4 | See: The Joint List |
| Yehadut Hatorah | 6 | 5 | 7 | 6 |

Authors' own design.

### The Zionist Camp and Meretz

The Zionist Camp came about through an alliance between the Labor party, headed by Yitzhak Herzog, and Hatnuah, led by Tzipi Livni. The latter had served as Minister of Justice in Netanyahu's 2013 government, but Netanyahu fired her, along with Minister of Finance Yair Lapid, shortly before he dissolved the government.[22] In 2013, Hatnuah had won 6 seats and Labor 15. The two leaders agreed that together they might outperform Likud, which had won only 19 seats in 2013. The alliance was called the Zionist Camp in response to Likud's accusations that some members of Labor were post-Zionists, or even anti-Zionists. However, the chosen name served mainly to highlight Labor's sense of inferiority against Likud, and the right's self-proclaimed status as the "authentic heralds" of Zionist nationalism.

With regard to its platform, the Zionist Camp focused on socio-economic issues, expending little effort on political issues, such as the occupation and the conflict with the Palestinians. In that respect, while the allied parties' positions differed from those of Likud in technical details, and perhaps even in their general approach, they failed to propose an alternative to Likud's discourse in essential matters such as the border between Israel and any future Palestinian state, the status of Jerusalem, terrorism, and the Iranian nuclear threat. On all these issues, the Zionist Camp's stated positions were similar to those of Netanyahu.

Pre-election polls correctly predicted that the Zionist Camp would win 24 seats. Notably, however, this number remained roughly the same throughout the three-month campaign, indicating that the Zionist Camp was incapable of attracting voters who were not loyal to it from the outset. In an effort to strengthen the party's standing, the two leaders abandoned their initial plan for a rotating prime minister-ship, and Livni ceded the position to Herzog. Even so, it made no tangible progress in attracting new sectors. On the day of election, the Zionist Camp drew all

its votes from upper-middle-class voters living in high-income towns and cities. The Zionist Camp marked a clear victory over Likud in only two major cities (Tel Aviv and Haifa), whereas in towns characterized by lower-middle class populations, its presence was very low.

To the left of the Zionist Camp, the Meretz party also focused on economic issues and social justice, though with some attention to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Meretz won five seats, one less than in the 2013 elections. It appears that this seat moved to the Zionist Camp, with voters from the left hoping that a strengthened Zionist Camp might be able to form the government.

### Likud

As noted above, Likud won only 19 seats (31 in alliance with Lieberman) in 2013. Although it headed the government, it was a weak link in the coalition. During its 2015 campaign, Likud's strategy was to focus public discussion, as far as possible, on the dangers posed by Israel due to political and strategic changes in the region, while absenting socio-economic issues from its discourse.

Likud faced challenges from noted figures in the media, military, intelligence community and academia. In February 2015, 200 senior military and intelligence officials signed a petition warning of the dangers Israel would face if Netanyahu was elected, and in particular criticizing what they perceived as character flaws in him that would hurt the country's strategic position. These figures launched a movement under the name "Military Leadership for the Sake of Israel's Security". Its main aim was to counter the impression, carefully fostered by Netanyahu, that he was the most capable protector of Israel's security (Cohen, 2015).

In addition to these attempts to undermine Netanyahu's character as a man of security, the opposition attempted to attack his government on socio-economic issues. In this, the opposition made use of two State Comptroller reports that cast a negative light on Netanyahu and his government. One centered on the expenses of the Prime Minister's household, and the other related to a housing crisis in Israel. While the timing of the reports' publication was a coincidence, both were clearly aimed at Netanyahu and his government. In addition, a private NGO called V15 worked in support of the left, knocking on doors, particularly in left-leaning areas, and encouraging residents to vote. Likud countered by accusing the Israeli left of collaborating with foreign elements to bring down the government, and reiterated Netanyahu's claim that only Likud was capable of securing Israel's national interests. In Netanyahu's words, "If they have V15, we have Order 8", referring to the order calling up reserves in the Israeli military during times of war.[23]

Despite these attempts to undermine the party, Likud won 30 seats in the election, a convincing victory that far exceeded poll estimates of 22–24 seats. Afterward, observers concluded that Netanyahu had determined the outcome in the final three days of the campaign. Two statements in particular seem to have turned the tide in his favor. In the first, Netanyahu directly expressed his opposition to the establishment of a Palestinian state. This damaged Habayit Hayehudi, a religious Zionist party that had claimed to be the only party to oppose a Palestinian state, by bringing Likud support from within the settlements, Habayit Hayehudi's stronghold. By election day, support for Likud within the settlements rose to 23%, whereas support for Habayit Hayehudi declined to 38%.[24] This shift brought Likud an estimated four additional seats (see below).

In the second statement, delivered on election day, Netanyahu addressed his dormant right-wing base, asking them to vote because the country's Arab citizens "were voting in droves".

Similarly, Netanyahu declared in a televised interview that V15 groups were transporting Arabs to the polls in buses, and that Arab members of Knesset would bring Livni and Herzog to power, endangering Likud's rule.[25] These statements were meant to frighten elements of the Likud base that had been wary of supporting Likud because of its economic policies. The tactic worked. Many former Likud voters in low-income and developing areas who had intended to vote for Shas (an ultra-Orthodox party with a strong Mizrahi base) or Habayit Hayehudi returned to Likud. Similarly, Likud supporters who had planned to abstain in protest against Netanyahu's economic policies also decided at the last minute to go to the polls.

Another factor that played a major role in the campaign was the revival of identity politics, which lured many voters of Middle Eastern origin back to Likud, in particular following statements by leftist Ashkenazi figures who were seen as hostile to Middle Eastern Jewry and its culture. These were reminiscent of similar utterances made before the elections in 1981, when sectarian and ethnic tension reached a climax that plunged Jews of Middle Eastern origin into the arms of Likud. Despite being led almost solely by Ashkenazim, Likud at that time was perceived as more like a family than a political party, and it offered Mizrahi Jews a vehicle to express their protests against Labor's policies during the state's early decades (Cohen and Leon, 2011).

## Other right-wing parties

The two extreme right-wing parties retreated in 2015, with Habayit Hayehudi falling from 12 to 8 seats, and Yisrael Beteinu dropping from 12 to 6. Most of these parties' lost votes are thought to have gone to Likud. With respect to Habayit Hayehudi, the decline can be attributed mainly to attempts by the party's leader, Naftali Bennett, to make the party more pluralist. Bennett treated the party like a corporation and tried to transform it too quickly, without fully comprehending that the party's base mostly comprised religious Zionists who wanted to maintain Habayit Hayehudi's national-religious character. Habayit Hayehudi also suffered from Netanyahu's last-minute declaration abjuring a Palestinian state, which gave some of the party's right-wing base implicit justification for transferring their support to Likud. In addition, some right-wing voters did not look favorably on Bennett's project of incorporating the part of the West Bank known as Area C into Greater Israel, which would mean granting citizenship to 70,000 Palestinians.

The even more radical decline of Yisrael Beteinu can be traced, in part, to accusations of political and financial corruption leveled against dozens of the party's leaders, including the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs. This was not the first time that members of the party had faced such accusations, but on this occasion the taint of corruption was perhaps too much for many voters.

## Religious parties

Three religious parties took part in the elections. The first, Yahadut Hatorah, the ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazi party, again won six seats, as it had done in the previous two elections. Shas, the ultra-Orthodox party drawing on support from lower-class sectors of Middle Eastern descent, faced a major crisis after the death in late 2013 of its spiritual leader, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, who had maintained a sense of unity in the movement. In particular, Rabbi Yosef had soothed tensions between Eli Yishai, who led the party between 1999 and 2013, and Shas's current head, Aryeh Deri, who led the party before Yishai and until his imprisonment for corruption. With Yosef no longer there to hold the party together, Yishai left Shas to find a new religious party

under the name Yachad (an early name was HaAm Itanu, "The People Are With Us"). Shas eventually won seven seats in the 2015 election, a fall of four from 2013, with tens of thousands of its votes going to Likud. Yishai's party, which failed to reach the electoral threshold, won no seats.

## Centrist parties

Two parties defined themselves as centrist: Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid party, and Kulanu ("All of Us"), headed by Moshe Kahlon. Lapid's party won 11 seats in 2015, a steep fall from the 19 seats it secured in 2013. Kulanu, a new party, won ten seats, many of them at the expense of Yesh Atid. Moshe Kahlon had previously been part of the Likud leadership, but he maintained a more socialist economic platform designed to appeal to both the middle and lower classes, and his support came from the right and center of the electoral map. Kahlon, aware of his natural base – the right-leaning middle class – was the same as Lapid's, aimed his campaign primarily against Lapid and Yesh Atid, rather than against Netanyahu.[26] In turn, in an attempt to win over some of Kahlon's supporters, Netanyahu declared that he would appoint Kahlon as Finance Minister regardless of the number of seats won by Kulanu. Netanyahu duly appointed him to the post once the new government was formed.

## The Joint List

The Joint (Arab) List was the outcome of an electoral alliance between four Arab parties that have participated in Knesset elections for two decades: the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality, the National Democratic Assembly, the Islamic Movement and the Arab Movement for Change. This alliance came about in response to an increase in the electoral threshold from 2 to 3.25%, which threatened the parties' ability to win seats on their own, as well as concern that many Arab voters would avoid the polls if the parties did not unite to meet the needs of the broader Israeli Arab population. In the 2013 elections, the Arab parties had won a total of 11 seats, and increased this to 13 seats as a result of their alliance. The Joint Arab List focused on civic discourse and the everyday concerns of the Arab public. The voting rate in the Arab sector rose from 55% in 2013 to 63% in 2015, with the Joint Arab List receiving 83% of the Arab vote (Brake, 2018).

In general, the 2015 elections were certainly characterized by tribal voting behavior. There was nothing new about this on the Israeli scene, but over the preceding decade it was thought to have retreated in the face of socio-economic issues and class considerations. The Israeli left, in particular, convinced itself that middle-class voters would rebel against the right's economic policies and would return a left-wing coalition to power. Yet in 2013, the Labor party gambled strongly on such middle-class protests against Likud's economic policies and was rewarded with only 15 seats, while its target voters remained loyal to right-wing, center and religious parties.

In general, Likud has easily preserved its lead among lower and lower-middle-class voters, many of them in developing areas, while maintaining a presence even among the upper-middle classes, where the left's power is strongest. Of the ten socio-economic clusters identified by Israel's Ministry of the Interior (in which the first cluster represents the lowest socioeconomic status and the tenth the highest), all contributed some support to Likud. In 2015, Likud led among clusters three through seven, while the Zionist Camp led only in clusters eight through ten. (This will be discussed further in the section "A Sociological Reading of the Election

Results").

The durability of ethnic voting reflects a persistent belief among Middle Eastern sectors that the old Ashkenazi elites still despise them. And indeed, some statements made during the recent campaign contributed to the reinforcement of this belief. For instance, during a demonstration in support of the left, painter Yair Garbuz described Israeli society as being controlled by "amulet-kissers", interpreted as a reference to conservative and religious Middle Eastern Jews. The comment recalled similar remarks made in earlier decades. In 1981, Dudu Topaz, then one of the most prominent figures in Israeli entertainment, described Likud supporters as "tchach-tchachim", a derogatory term for Jews of Middle Eastern descent. That incident prompted then-Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Likud, himself an Ashkenazi, to proclaim, "Iraqi, Ashkenazi, they are all Jews, brothers in arms". Similarly, in 1999, the actress Tiki Dayan called the supporters of Netanyahu as "rabble from the *shuk* [market]", referring to the place where many Middle Eastern Jews make their living, and where every Likud leader traditionally makes the rounds, particularly in Jerusalem, during their election campaigns. Following Dayan's statement, Likud supporters produced a sticker reading "rabble and proud".

One group to capitalize on ethnic tension during the 2015 campaign was Shas, which has always employed identity politics and sectarian discourse in combination with class politics. Emphasizing his Middle Eastern roots, the party's leader insisted on using his full name, Aryeh Machluf Deri (with its Middle Eastern tenor), and emphasized that "Mizrahim vote for Mizrahim". On the other hand, Deri realized that cultural and sectarian discourse would not necessarily be sufficient to attract support from Middle Eastern Jews, who for historical reasons have been saturated with a nationalist discourse that is hostile to Arabs as a national collectivity. Therefore, Deri announced his support for Netanyahu as prime minister, thus reassuring voters torn between Likud and Shas that they could have their cake and eat it: that is, they could express their sectarian and cultural affiliation by voting for Shas and still ensure a strong right-wing leadership in the next government. In the end, however, this strategy failed to prevent Shas dropping from 11 to 7 seats. This result is thought to be mainly a consequence of Netanyahu's last-minute statements about Arab citizens going to the polls. But votes were also likely to have been lost to Eli Yishai's breakaway extremist right-wing Yachad party, which allied itself with the remnants of various Kahanist groups formed in the wake of Meir Kahane's outlawed Kach party.

Interestingly, intellectual elites among Middle Eastern Jews also supported Shas, despite their secular and leftist tendencies. This Eastern elite backed Shas because they saw it as dedicated to preserving a Middle Eastern cultural identity, rather than for its political stance. Their support was made possible by a shift in Shas's language from a sectarian to a cultural perspective, reflected in greater use of the term Mizrahi rather than the competing term "Sephardi", which refers to religious Jews of mainly Middle Eastern origins.[27]

The majority of Russian Jews (or, more formally, Russian-speaking Jews from the former Soviet Union) voted for parties on the right. Results of a preliminary study of voting patterns across 42 polls in 18 towns and cities that reflect the distribution of Russians in Israel showed that 42% voted for Lieberman's Yisrael Beteinu, while 30% voted for Likud. Labor received less than 7% of the Russian vote (Tanser, 2015). Russians constitute the core voting bloc in Yisrael Beteinu, traditionally providing at least 75% of its votes (Tanser, 2013). The party, formed in 1999, won its biggest mandate in 2009, when it took 15 seats (Mustafa and Ghanem, 2010). In the two most recent elections, however, Yisrael Beteinu suffered from several factors: the involvement of a number of its leading members in corruption scandals; a drop in voter turnout

in the Russian sector below the national average; and the transfer by a significant number of Russians of their loyalties from Yisrael Beteinu to Likud. In 2015, the party fell to 6 seats, down from 12 in 2013 (when it was formally allied with the Likud).

The Zionist Camp, as noted above, did well among the upper echelons of Israeli society. The party came first in 28 out of 33 residential areas classified as belonging to the top three of the ten socio-economic clusters identified by the Interior Ministry, whereas Likud came in first in 64 out of 77 residential areas classified as middle class.

Another feature of recent discourse in Israel relates to the imagined distinction between the "state of Tel Aviv", with its relatively well-off, mostly Ashkenazi population, and the "state of Jerusalem", where most residents are of non-European origin. The term "state of Tel Aviv" was coined by the geographer Arnon Sofer in his 2006 book *The State of Tel Aviv — An Existential Threat to Israel* (Sofer and Bistrof, 2006). Sofer focuses on the population density of greater Tel Aviv and, in particular, the concentration of Israel's Jewish population in that area, with the concomitant relative paucity of Jews in relation to Palestinians in the more remote areas of Israel's north and south. However, Sofer's idea inspired several analysts to broaden his metaphor to encompass the cultural and economic forces that have widened the socio-economic gap between Jews in Tel Aviv and those in the rest of the country, and that have supposedly created a sense of indifference in the former toward the latter. In the elections of 2015, the "state of Tel Aviv" voted for the Zionist Camp and other leftist or centrist parties with Ashkenazi bases, such as Meretz or Yesh Atid. If, hypothetically, the state of Israel was like Tel Aviv, these parties would have won nearly 70 seats, and effortlessly formed the next government. At the same time, if the whole country were like "the state of Jerusalem", the right-wing parties would have won 93 seats and formed the next government with even less effort (Shtarkman, 2015).

Among Arabs in Israel, voting in 2015 was largely based on nationalist ethnic considerations, a substantial development for this group. The Joint Arab List focused on civic discourse and concerns of daily life. It also proposed a political program formulating the Palestinians' vision for national issues and particularly for ending the occupation, the establishment of a Palestinian state, and recognizing Palestinians in Israel as a national minority with collective rights. Voter turnout in the Arab community increased from 53% in 2013 to approximately 63% in the 2015 election, and the Joint Arab List won 84% of the Arab vote, the largest percentage in the history of Arab parties participating in the Knesset, to take 13 seats. Concomitantly, support among Arabs for Zionist parties reached its lowest percentage in the history of the Palestinian population in Israel.

## A sociological reading of the election results – Likud as a representative of the "Israeli People"

As discussed above, the center and left camps focused their campaigns on socio-economic issues during the 2015 election, with the aim of embarrassing the ruling Likud party and its leader in light of the economic difficulties facing the urban middle classes and lower-middle classes in the periphery, both of which have traditionally served as Likud bases (Arian, 1997). A hike in the cost of living, rising housing prices, and a fall in job opportunities in the south and other areas all seemed destined to turn voters away from the existing leadership. As mentioned above, the left and center camps felt increasingly confident as two State Comptroller reports were published during the campaign (the publication dates had been set long before the Knesset scheduled early elections). The first dealt with the expenses of the Prime Minister's household, and revealed a

squandering of public funds, particularly by the Prime Minister's wife. The left and center took advantage of the report to portray Netanyahu and his family as oblivious to the suffering of ordinary families, living in luxury at a time when a middle-class family in Israel could barely make ends meet. A second report followed, dealing with the housing crisis in Israel and the responsibility of Netanyahu's second government (2009–2013) for failing to present a clear policy to confront housing shortages and rising prices.

While the left and center parties strove to keep socio-economic issues on the nation's agenda, Likud highlighted political and security concerns, in particular the Iranian nuclear program, growing regional instability, and the rise of jihadi movements. These attempts culminated in Netanyahu's speech to the US Congress two weeks before the election on the perceived Iranian threat. This speech became the focus of a short-lived controversy in the Israeli media. Likud's efforts to keep public discourse focused on security rather than economics extended even to its election platform, which conspicuously included no economic vision for its next term.

With this background in mind, it is instructive to consider voting patterns in the 2015 elections against socio-economic data. As noted earlier in this chapter, the Ministry of the Interior classifies residential areas in Israel into ten socio-economic clusters, based on variables such as annual income, level of education, employment rates, social services and municipal finances, among others. The first cluster covers the most underprivileged residential areas, and the tenth, the most privileged. Demographically, the residents of the lowest clusters tend to be Arabs and ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Jews. Most of Israel's Jewish population lives in towns in the fourth through seventh clusters, which we call the urban middle classes.

Table 2.4 presents voting patterns among Jewish Israelis based on socio-economic clusters.[28] As the table makes clear, Likud has a presence in all the socio-economic clusters. Notably, the Likud was by far the largest electoral force among clusters three through seven, the middle and lower-middle classes, which had suffered the most under Likud's economic policies and had protested against Netanyahu's government on more than one occasion. The Zionist Camp outperformed Likud only in the upper three clusters – the privileged classes in Israeli society. These results show that socio-economic considerations did not play a major role in influencing voting patterns in Jewish society.

*Table 2.4* Voting patterns in Jewish residential areas based on socio-economic clusters

| Cluster | Likud | The Zionist Camp | Kulanu | Yesh Atid | Shas | Habayit Hayehudi | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 13.6 | 0.07 | 0.1 | 0.05 | 20.2 | 1 | 64.9 |
| 2 | 4.7 | 1.1 | 1 | 0.5 | 27.1 | 2.7 | 62.9 |
| 3 | 31.6 | 4.2 | 4.9 | 2.8 | 15.5 | 8.1 | 32.9 |
| 4 | 29.5 | 9.2 | 5.8 | 4.7 | 12.2 | 8.3 | 30.3 |
| 5 | 22.5 | 10.6 | 9 | 7.3 | 6 | 6.3 | 38.3 |
| 6 | 31.7 | 16.7 | 10.5 | 10.6 | 5.9 | 7.4 | 17.1 |
| 7 | 24.7 | 25.8 | 9.7 | 13.7 | 2.6 | 5.4 | 18 |
| 8 | 20.4 | 32.8 | 7.7 | 13.6 | 3.1 | 6.1 | 16.3 |
| 9 | 17.1 | 40.58 | 7.3 | 15.4 | 1.4 | 4.5 | 13.8 |
| 10 | 19.2 | 41.8 | 6.6 | 16.2 | 1.13 | 4.18 | 11.8 |

Note: Prepared by the authors based on data from the Israel Ministry of the Interior and the Central Elections Committee. See www.votes20.gov.il (last accessed June 21, 2015).

Table 2.4 also shows that the parties which came second among the urban middle classes in 2015 were centrist parties – a pattern that, again, points to the importance of political and security issues over socio-economic concerns among this population. In the 2013 elections, Lapid's Yesh Atid was the main centrist ticket, with a political program whose positions on the Israel-Palestinian conflict were very close to Netanyahu's; in that election it won 19 seats. In 2015, Yesh Atid faced competition for the centrist vote from Kulanu – a party headed by Moshe Kahlon, a former Likud member, whose positions on the Palestinian conflict also resembled those of Netanyahu. Together, the two won 21 seats in 2015. In terms of their economic platforms, these centrist parties can be thought of as on the "socialist right", as opposed to the "liberal right" represented by Likud. The Zionist Camp, meanwhile, came in third among the urban middle classes, despite the left's appeal to their economic interests.

*Table 2.5* Elections results in major cities (100,000 votes and above)

| | Number of votes | Likud | Zionist Camp | Yesh Atid | Kulanu |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jerusalem | 255,286 | 24.2 | 9.6 | 4.2 | 4.6 |
| Tel Aviv-Jaffa | 261,345 | 18.1 | 34.2 | 11.5 | 6.8 |
| Haifa | 149,560 | 20.7 | 25.2 | 11.2 | 8.4 |
| Bersheva | 97,153 | 37.6 | 12.2 | 7.5 | 8.8 |
| Ashdod | 113,203 | 31.4 | 8.5 | 7.8 | 7.6 |
| Rishon Letzion | 137,810 | 30 | 22.8 | 14.4 | 11.4 |
| Netanya | 105,468 | 33.5 | 13.8 | 10.4 | 11.1 |
| Petach Tikva | 124,410 | 28.1 | 17.7 | 11.7 | 9.5 |

Authors' own calculations.

Source: The Knesset Central Committee for the 20th elections. www.votes20.gov.il (last accessed June 21, 2015).

The pattern seen in Table 2.4 is buttressed by the data in Table 2.3, which breaks down the election results for Israel's large urban areas. As the table shows, Likud outperformed the Zionist Camp in six out of eight major cities, with only Haifa and Tel Aviv as exceptions (Table 2.5).

In conclusion, despite the left and center parties' efforts to keep the national agenda focused on socio-economic issues, Likud was able to win the support of nearly all of Israel's social sectors, even those that had been severely hurt by the policies of Netanyahu's governments during the past six years. The results presented in Tables 2.4 and 2.5 show that the gamble on socio-economic issues to bring down the right was unsuccessful. They also suggest that the left failed to internalize the lessons of the 2013 elections, when Labor also emphasized socio-economic issues and yet won not more than 15 seats (Mustafa, 2013). Likud's nationalist discourse, especially in the final days of the campaign, combined with its revival of identity politics to win the day for the right.

## Explaining the rise of the right wing in the last decade: sectorial politics, ethnonationalism and a "Nation under Siege"[29]

The rise of the right in Israel is not a new phenomenon (see Sprinzak, 1991, 1998). It began in the 1980s and has grown stronger over the last decade, reflecting a mounting sense in Israeli society of a "nation under siege" – expressed through a public mood that the state and Israeli society are facing protracted and complicated problems. The perception is that these problems will be extremely difficult to overcome using the "traditional democratic" methods already in use. Parts of Israeli society have started to search for new approaches to confront these challenges.

The sense of the "nation under siege" emerged and deepened in light of, on the one hand, the failure of the peace process and the intensification of the conflict with the Palestinians and neighboring Arab states (Lebanon and Syria), and, on the other, demographic and social changes that paved the way for the consolidation of right-wing political power in Israel. These developments are analyzed below.

Recent years have been characterized by the Israeli right's attempts to re-structure the

boundaries of political legitimacy in general, and particularly in relation to the country's ruling elites. The lines demarcating these boundaries were drawn first by David Ben-Gurion, leader of the socialist Mapai party in the decades after the establishment of the State of Israel. Ben-Gurion pledged that any government he headed would be formed "without Herut and Maki", the first being the party of Menachem Begin and the core of today's Likud, and the second the Israeli Communist Party. Ben-Gurion kept his promise, and neither Herut nor Maki was ever part of a coalition he led. Ben-Gurion also denied Ze'ev Jabotinsky's revisionist Zionism and its military wings (e.g., Etzel) any official place in Israel's historic memory (Libel, 2007). In recent elections, by contrast, it was the right that sought to establish the parameters of legitimacy, intensifying its campaign to delegitimize the left as a governing force in Israel. As Israeli historian Elie Podeh points out,

> the left has been in a position of defense since the right rose to power in 1977 … when Likud appropriated the concept of the 'national camp', it was … meant to delegitimize their political rivals as not sufficiently 'national' … The importance attached to branding was reflected in the Labor Party's decision, before the last election, to change its name to 'the Zionist Union [Zionist Camp]'.[30] It didn't signal an ideological change, but rather a response to the right, by way of saying: we are Zionists, too.
>
> (Podeh, 2015)

Moreover, the 2015 election marked the first time a right-wing candidate for prime minister persistently forswore the inclusion of parties on the left or center-left in any coalition he had the chance to form – a declaration that was not reciprocated by the other side.

Podeh's position is in agreement with what the late Israeli sociologist Baruch Kimmerling called the end of the old elites' rule in his book *The End of the Ashkenazi Hegemony*. The term Kimmerling invented, *ha-Ahosalim*, refers to the old secular-socialist-nationalist-Ashkenazi elites who established the state and were largely responsible for crystalizing its identity during the decades thereafter. The Ahosalim still exist as a social class, but their role as a hegemonic political elite ended over the past two decades (Kimmerling, 2001). Some researchers argued that the results of the 2013 elections, and specifically the rise of the Yesh Atid party headed by Yair Lapid, the son of Ahosalim, heralded a return of these elites to influence. Yesh Atid surprised everyone by winning 19 seats in 2013. But in 2015, it fell back to only 11 seats, unable to influence the changes in Israel initiated by the right.

Danny Gutwein (2009) offers a sociological explanation for the rise of the right-wing parties, citing the decline of the welfare state and the inability of the Israeli left to provide a social democratic alternative:

> As the privatization of the welfare state condemns more and more of the public to social and economic insecurity, exacerbated by the global economic crisis, the popularity of Lieberman rises. Though Lieberman supports Netanyahu's economic outlook, he is perceived by his supporters as being the person who will rescue them from it…. Lieberman's strength is fed by that same mix that has aroused the extreme right in Europe since the latter part of the 19th century: a combination of economic woes and a lack of social security (and in the case of Israel also a lack of personal security because of the security situation), which creates a feeling that the nation's end is drawing near. This feeling is transferred to 'internal enemies' and arouses a yearning for 'a strong leader' who will

replace democracy – which is perceived as failing – with certainty and stability … a welfare state is a *sine qua non* for the struggle against fascism and the theories of hatred that it disseminates. The neo-liberal Israeli left, which supports the privatization regime out of class considerations, is blind to the fact that this regime, much more than any deep-seated hatred, is the fertile ground from which Lieberman sprouted.

(Gutwein, 2009: B2)

While Gutwein focuses on social explanations for the rise of right-wing parties, we argue that the explanation for the rise of the extreme right may be found in the political sphere. Our explanation mainly addresses changes in the structure of power, the character of ethnic nationalism in Israel, and its cultural and political expressions in situations of pressure that approximate the reality of "a nation under siege", as occurred in Italy, Germany, Spain and Turkey following World War I. As in these countries, in situations of pressure stemming from external crises vis-à-vis neighboring countries or internal situations of social or economic crisis, ethnic nationalism based on blood ties and an imagined forefather tends to converge inwards and seeks salvation by strengthening the internal solidarity of the ethnic nation. This includes searching for a strong and unifying leadership that promises to suitably contend with the challenges facing the nation (Kitschelt, 1997). The right-wing parties and leaders in these cases made big efforts to merge "external dangers" with the internal weaknesses and fragmentation and present them as one complex entity that poses a concrete danger to the future of the nation.

## *Demographic and social changes*

The first of these trends is the growing fragmentation of Israeli society along sectarian – i.e., ethnic and ideological – lines. This fragmentation should not be confused with the well-known multiplicity of Israel's political parties. It is important to distinguish between a multiplicity of parties in a political democracy and social fragmentation, which may lead to gaps that the democratic game may not easily bridge, particularly, when accompanied by sectarian and sectorial identities that have transformed into political identities and voting patterns.

Social fragmentation is not new in Israel. Indeed, in terms of sectarian divisions within the Jewish population, the most divisive election in Israel's history was in 1981, when grass-roots disaffection between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews (i.e., Jews of mainly European and mainly Middle Eastern origin, respectively) led to extreme and even dangerous rhetoric, which played a major role in the campaign. In that election, two-thirds of the Ashkenazi Jewish population voted for the Labor party, while two-thirds of the Mizrahi population voted for Likud; the two parties won 47 and 48 seats, respectively (Arian, 1990: 246).

What was new in 2015 was the source of the animosity. In 1981, sectarian fragmentation grew out of dramatic social events that inflamed divisions in the Jewish street. In the 2015 election, we argue, it was political figures who pulled the strings, and who revived latent divisions by way of a single-minded pursuit of identity politics.

During the 1990s, relations between the main groups composing Israeli society underwent a transformation. The peace process with the Palestinians created the illusion of progress toward a resolution of the Palestinian problem, paving the way for an intensification of internal conflicts once peace was achieved. Elections were held every three years, and each time the opposition parties managed to form the new government. Palestinians within Israel took up their Palestinian nationalist identity with greater passion, now that it had been legitimized by the peace agreement

with the PLO and the emergence of a new generation of political leaders among them. Russian immigrants gained demographic and cultural momentum following a massive wave of immigration from countries of the former Communist bloc and proceeded to set up two new political parties, Yisrael ba'aliya and Yisrael Beitenu. The religious continued to press their demands for enhanced status, while Shas, the religious Mizrahi party, enjoyed unprecedented support. Feeling threatened, the secular set up the Shinui party, led by journalist Tommy Lapid, in 1999. Some of the Israeli elites began to internalize the fact that the success of the peace process would intensify internal conflicts by exacerbating social divides.

Ariel Sharon's ascent to power in 2001 signified Israel's abandonment of the Oslo peace process with the Palestinians. The escalation of external threats to Israel posed by the Palestinians and by the Arabs in general fostered a certain stability in Israel, at least among Jewish groups. Israel's transition under Sharon from an attempt to find a solution to the Palestinian problem to a new approach of managing the conflict rather than resolving it was a calculated step. One of the key motives was the fear that the success of the peace process with the Palestinians would further polarize and divide Israeli society.

Following the outbreak of the second Intifada in 2000, the Israeli leadership and Israeli elites drew a sharp distinction between Jewish groups, who were on the "inside" and the "outside" group of Palestinian citizens of Israel. The goals, approach and policy applied to the two were different, and even oppositional. Exclusionary policies that removed Palestinian citizens from the in-group gathered steam. At the same time, efforts were made to reduce tensions and strengthen solidarity among Jewish groups as part of coping with the external threat, which was bolstered daily by the second Intifada and Palestinian resistance to the Israeli occupation.

The contour lines on the political map of relations between the main groups in Israeli society display a complex reality of different groups seeking to maintain their differences. Over the last two decades, the Palestinians in Israel have become more isolated, more threatening, and more threatened than they were in the past. The profile sketched by Rouhana and Ghanem in 1998 remains valid, despite the intensification of the crisis in relations between the Jewish majority and the Palestinian minority (Rouhana and Ghanem, 1998). The crisis may eventually lead to a rupture in relations between the two groups, caused by Jewish society's refusal to compromise on the Jewish character of the state, on the one hand, and the unyielding insistence of Israel's Palestinian citizens that there should be a change in this Jewish character, on the other.

Relations between the secular Ashkenazim and the various religious streams are becoming a complex combination of segregation and integration in the various spheres of life. The Mizrahim seem to have accepted their marginal position; they demand equality while displaying a willingness to come to terms with the Ashkenazi system as it is. Russian immigrants, who have achieved optimal recognition, status and impact, are beginning to reach for political power, mostly on the right, while preserving their culture and their separate status. What follows analyzes these trends and their impact on the Israeli elections during the last two decades.

The changes in the Israeli political culture are related to the demographic changes in the composition of the population. Between the years 1990 and 2001, more than 900,000 people immigrated to Israel from the former Soviet Union. At the end of 2001, some 805,000 of these immigrants were living in Israel, comprising about 12% of the population and 16% of its Jewish population (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2007: 11).

About a third of the Jews in Israel in 2005 were Israeli-born (at least second generation in Israel). Some 40% of Israeli Jews were of European or American origin (including immigrants from the 1990s), with about 64% of this group born in Israel. About 12.4% were of Asian origin,

with 30% Israeli-born. And about 15.4% were of African descent, of whom some 37% were born outside Israel (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2008: 16). The population of ultra-Orthodox Jews, who voted en masse for right-wing parties (religious parties), is estimated at 700,000, comprising 15.8% of the Jewish population. The fertility rate of ultra-Orthodox women is 7.7 children, compared to 2.6 children for Jewish women who are not ultra-Orthodox. The ultra-Orthodox population is expected to grow to 2.9 million by 2025 (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2005).

The population of Jewish settlers, who tend to vote for the extreme right in Israel, has also grown, doubling in number despite the peace process between the Palestinians and Israelis. Over the past 12 years, the population of settlers in the West Bank grew by 107%, from about 130,000 in 1995 to about 270,000 in 2007. This compares to a growth of about 29% of Israel's overall population during this period. This trend also continued during the last three years of this period (2005–2007), when the Jewish population in the West Bank grew at a rate three times higher (about 5% annually) than the average growth rate in the overall population of Israel (1.7% annually). None of the other regions in Israel experienced such dramatic growth during the same period. Consequently, the West Bank settlers' share of Israel's overall population grew to 3.8% at the end of 2007 and about 4.9% of the Jewish population in the country (Statistical Annual for Judea and Samaria, 2008).

## Sectarianism and politics during the post-Oslo period

Political scholars have written extensively about electoral behavior motivated by ethnic and sectarian considerations. Some consider such voting patterns to reflect dogmatism and emotion. In contrast, theorists of the rationalist school regard voting along ethnic and sectarian lines to be a rational decision, designed to serve the voter's individual interests. Indeed, Mizrahi Jews still carry a historical burden of anger against the discrimination their parents suffered, as well as their marginalization by the left, in the decades after Israel's establishment.

In this context, the Israeli historian Alon Gancontends argues that all voting in Israel is tribal:

> People feel they belong to the sides that represent them, and this explains their voting more than the political question of who they vote for. The so-called white tribe, the settlers' tribe, the Likud tribe, weighs heavily in their decision to vote, even if the Likud supporter is unsatisfied with his candidate's performance. His hands shake at the poll and a mythic power moves his hand and makes it vote for the Likud.

> (Georgy, 2015)

In fact, Middle Eastern Jews' attitudes toward the Ashkenazi elite are not uniform. An initial look at sectarian factors in recent elections suggests that such Jews directed their anger primarily toward the Ashkenazi elites on the left, and much less toward those on the right. The Mizrahi population seems to have merged their emotional reaction toward Israel's historic elites with a rational reaction to contemporary leftist elites. Hence, when Netanyahu sought to oust the traditional elites during his first term, this was not a matter of personal vengeance, but rather an attempt to satisfy the wishes of his core social base.

Within the Jewish community, the Oslo agreement reshaped identity patterns at the same time as structuring a political discourse marked by numerous elements of conflict. The peace process relocated the spheres of conflict and identity politics within Jewish society. Oslo greatly reduced the function of the Palestinians as an "external threat" in the eyes of most of the Jewish

population. This restructuring created an opening for an intensification of identity politics and for attempts by various Jewish cultural groups to redefine their demands in the internal Jewish arena. Most of our focus in this context will be on the three biggest divides in Israeli society – between the Mizrahim and the Ashkenazim, the religious and the secular, and veteran Israelis and Russians (immigrants from the former Soviet Union).

The 1990s were a time of "conflict-oriented sectarianism" or multi-cultural competition among sectors of Israeli society, primarily within the Jewish majority. The recasting, or even manipulation, of the "external threat" – from a picture of an Israel surrounded by a sea of Arab hatred to an almost messianic vision of peace between Israel and its neighbors – was accompanied by a meteoric rise in demands for cultural recognition of the constituent groups within the Jewish community. Shas, for instance, which highlighted the ethnic divide between the Ashkenazi elite and the Mizrahim, found itself on an electoral roll. The party was part of every government coalition during the 1990s, doubling its strength in the 1996 elections and tripling it in 1999, to an astonishing 17 mandates, the third-largest faction in the Knesset.

Despite challenges and crises, such as criminal indictments of Shas Knesset members and the conviction of its charismatic leader, Aryeh Deri, Mizrahis' identity seemed to be on the ascent. At the height of Shas' power, after the 1999 elections, it was difficult to form a coalition without it. The coalition negotiations that followed Ehud Barak's election as prime minister in 1999 were marked by a broad-based public campaign to exclude Shas, with the slogan "Just Not Shas". This campaign may have been an attempt by the Ashkenazi elite to stuff the "ethnic genie" back into the bottle by resurrecting the call for "unity", meaning the reassertion of Ashkenazi hegemony in culture and society, in the Jewish-Israeli discourse. But Shas's power as the third-largest party, together with other coalition constraints, made this impossible (Kimmerling, 2001).

A number of other events reflected the crisis- and schism-ridden politics of the 1990s. "The Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow", founded in 1996, advocates a multicultural society, equal allocation of resources, and the promotion of previously suppressed Mizrahi discourse and culture. Sami Shalom Chetrit established the "Kedma" school network in 1994 to provide egalitarian education for residents of the Israeli periphery while shaping the content of "Israeliness" according to multicultural rather than hegemonic codes. A State Commission of Inquiry to investigate the disappearance of Yemenite children during the 1940s and 1950s was set up in 1998. David Levy's Gesher party, while not stressing a Mizrahi ethnic affiliation the way Shas did, was surely identified as such by voters and was considered an electoral asset by candidates for prime minister, because of its presumed appeal to the Mizrahim.[31] Finally, Ehud Barak, the "One Israel" candidate for prime minister in 1999, issued a public apology for the injustices the state had perpetrated against the Mizrahim.

All these activities rapidly disappeared with the outbreak of the second Intifada in September 2000 and particularly after the snap election for prime minister, won by Ariel Sharon, in 2001. The "return" of the "external threat" effectively silenced internal Jewish demands. What is interesting is that the reinsertion of the external threat into the Israeli discourse was common to all the Jewish Zionist political parties. Public opinion was unanimous in condemning the cycle of violence as of exclusively Palestinian origin and in blaming it on Yasser Arafat. The argument that it was the visit in 2000 by Sharon, then leader of the opposition, to the Haram Al-Sharef in the Old City of Jerusalem that sparked the violence was repeatedly stifled in the Israeli discourse. During the 2001 election campaign, even Barak explicitly rejected Sharon's responsibility and held that the Palestinians alone were responsible for the cycle of violence.

Given the sense of crisis among the Ashkenazi elite, constructing such a narrative and

nurturing an external enemy were needs of the highest order. They longed to restore their lost hegemony and to retrieve their decisive influence by resuming their battle cry of "unity" (see Grinberg, 2007: 347).

Shas's electoral strength has declined in every election since 2001, reversing the trend that had characterized it since its founding in 1984. To this we can add the disappearance of the Gesher party before the 2003 elections and the resurrection of the "unity" discourse that has been integral to the Israeli Zionist narrative in times of crisis. This discourse is a convenient tool for silencing threatening rival voices, such as the Mizrahi discourse. A similar phenomenon, but with a completely different outcome, can be seen in the split between "Israelis" and "Russians" during these years.

The crisis-oriented discourse of the 1990s strengthened the voices of the immigrants from the former Soviet Union who arrived during that decade. In this case, the autonomous cultural pattern was far clearer and more dominant. The Yisrael ba'aliya party, founded before the 1996 elections, won seven Knesset seats. Al-Haj studied the immigrants' efforts to preserve their culture by promoting their mother tongue, setting up alternative schools to maintain their children's fluency in Russian, following different consumer trends, and establishing their own media outlets (Al-Haj, 2004). In political terms, the immigrants veered toward the extreme right with the establishment of the Yisrael Beitenu party. They adhered to their cultural segregation even after the unity discourse returned with the outbreak of the second Intifada. Moreover, it was in 2002, as the internal Jewish unity discourse was gathering strength that "Israel Plus", a commercial Russophone television station, took to the airwaves. This was an unprecedented phenomenon among the cultural groups that make up secular Jewish society and had previously been part of the "melting pot".

The sectoral parties won 48 Knesset seats in 1999, compared with 34 in 1996. The change was even more striking when compared with the stagnation of the non-sectoral parties, which received the same number of seats as in 1988 and 1992. In the 2003 election, the sectoral trend weakened and changed direction. The sectoral parties received 41 mandates, seven fewer than in 1999; they polled similarly in 2006.

The most conspicuous change was experienced by parties like Shas, which lost almost a third of its 1999 vote in 2003. This was another sign of the weakening of the sectoral Mizrahi identity. In addition, the Gesher party, which had been considered a magnet for Mizrahi votes during the 1990s, disappeared. Further evidence of change lay in the performance of Yisrael ba'aliya, composed mainly of immigrants from the former Soviet Union. It won seven seats in the 1996 elections and six in 1999, but collapsed almost completely in 2003, winning only two seats and then folding itself into the Likud. Some may argue, however, that Yisrael Beitenu, headed by Avigdor Lieberman, is a political home for "Russian" voters, though it presents itself as non-sectoral. The attempt to brand Yisrael Beitenu as a mainstream party may be one explanation of the increase in its electoral strength.

The repeal of the direct-election reform did not affect the Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox parties, which maintained their strength, but it did influence the rapid rise and decline of the secular Shinui party. The meteoric rise of Shinui began in the 1999 elections and reached its zenith in 2003, when it won 15 mandates and created a new internal-Jewish political order. Shinui was perceived, correctly to a large extent, as a party with an anti-ultra-Orthodox agenda that strove to fight against "religious coercion, the exploitation of government funds for religious purposes, and the attempt to turn the State of Israel into a halakhic state" (from the Shinui platform).

Shinui's growing strength and the fact that it was one of the first parties to be included in the

coalition after the 2003 election redressed the "balance of power" in relation to the ultra-Orthodox parties. Sharp exchanges between the ultra-Orthodox parties and Shinui became a frequent event during the 15th and 16th Knessets (elected in 1999 and 2003, respectively). Notwithstanding these verbal clashes, the demands of the ultra-Orthodox parties and the budgetary resources allocated to them changed significantly. When they acted as kingmaker, the ultra-Orthodox enjoyed considerable budgetary and legislative resources, especially in the interface between state and religion. Thanks to Shinui's aggressive campaign, which carried the day with Likud leader Ariel Sharon, a coalition was formed for the first time in 20 years that excluded the ultra-Orthodox parties, both Ashkenazi and Mizrahi.

The effect was sharp and immediate, and brought with it far-reaching changes among the ultra-Orthodox sector in Israel. The changes were registered in a number of ways. For one thing, the number of yeshiva students dropped considerably. Between 1983 and 1999, the number of yeshiva students who received an exemption from military service tripled, reaching a peak of 186,313. In 2004, the trend reversed itself, and for the first time in Israeli history there was no increase in the number of those granted exemptions.[32] To this can be added the closure of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the dispersal of its authority among various government ministries. As a result, financial support for religious institutions and religious services declined by 6.3% in 2004.[33] Shinui did not stay in the coalition; however, after its vote against the 2005 State Budget bill, which included supplementary budgets for ultra-Orthodox education, its ministers were dismissed. This paved the way for the ultra-Orthodox parties to re-enter the government.

Nevertheless, Shinui, with its anti-ultra-Orthodox agenda that swept up over a quarter of a million Israelis, has left a lasting imprint on the conduct of the ultra-Orthodox sector in general and of its political parties in particular. In an explanation of why the ultra-Orthodox parties had to moderate their demands, ultra-Orthodox journalist Moshe Grylak provides an interesting example of how Shinui helped curb ultra-Orthodox demands through the creation of a "balance of terror":

> When Tommy Lapid succeeded in turning his anti-ultra-Orthodox sentiment into success at the ballot box, all of the lay leaders in the ultra-Orthodox community, particularly the Knesset members, admitted that 'We are also to blame.' Our lay leaders [learned to] lower their profiles in their public utterances. In practice, this lower profile helped us a great deal. Shinui disappeared, and now there is a risk that the cumulative effect will evoke a new Shinui, Heaven forfend!
>
> (Mustafa and Ghanem, 2010)

Sharon's ascent to power marked an important stage in the evolution of Israel's conflict with the Palestinians. It signaled the end of a hopeful period in the history of Israel and the Palestinians, in which the two sides sought to reach an agreement on separation and the end of the conflict. This attempt climaxed at the Camp David summit in 2000, which brought together Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, with U.S. President Bill Clinton acting as intermediary. Arafat's refusal to accept the parameters of an agreement advanced by Barak led to a deep crisis in the peace talks and to the eruption of the second Palestinian Intifada shortly thereafter.

Sharon, who was elected Israel's prime minister in 2001, led the transition away from attempts at reaching an agreement with the Palestinians toward efforts simply to manage the conflict

(Ghanem, 2006). Putting the peace process into deep freeze boosted Sharon's popularity to unprecedented heights. It also helped – with the assistance of other factors, as explained above – to pacify the tense inter-group relations among the Jewish public.

Sharon's illness during the campaign for the 17th Knesset, held in January 2006, brought Ehud Olmert to power. He served as Prime Minister for three years until elections for the 18th Knesset, in February 2009. During his first months, the coalition benefited from the calm Sharon had achieved in inter-Jewish relations. Shas and the ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazi parties were smaller, and became, along with Lieberman's Yisrael Beteinu, central components in Olmert's coalition. The stability of his government led Olmert to try to reach a new agreement with the Palestinians under the leadership of Arafat's successor, Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen). This attempt deviated from the model Sharon had constructed. Under investigation for corruption, Olmert was forced to resign in late 2008. His successor as head of the Kadima party, Tzipi Livni, failed in her attempts to form a coalition. The Knesset voted in favor of new elections, which were held in February 2009.

Livni's difficulties were intimately linked to the weakening, during Olmert's tenure, of the inter-group relations Sharon had forged. Quarrels erupted between representatives of different groups, primarily regarding the inclusion of Shas in the government Livni hoped to set up. The Olmert government's earlier efforts to reach a peace agreement based on separation from the Palestinians led to the re-emergence of the internal Jewish sectoral discourse.

Livni, who had served as foreign minister under Olmert, announced her failure to set up a government in October 2008 after she tried unsuccessfully to persuade Shas to join her coalition and rejected, on nationalist grounds, negotiating with the Arab parties. Preparations were begun at once for elections to the 18th Knesset, which were fixed for February 10, 2009. Immediately after the decision to call new elections, Industry and Trade Minister Eli Yishai signaled how he intended to conduct the campaign. He attacked Livni vigorously, accusing her of racism because, in his eyes, she was both anti-religious and anti-Mizrahi. He maintained:

> When they portrayed us as extortionists, it was racism. Unequivocal racism. After the negotiations with us broke down on Friday, Livni continued to negotiate with United Torah Judaism. Their demands were similar to ours, but no one called them extortionists. It was Kadima that released the ethnic genie when it claimed that we were extortionists.[34]

The clash ended abruptly when war broke out in Gaza at the end of December 2008 and continued until mid-January 2009. Israel claimed that the aim of the war was to stop Hamas from firing rockets into southern Israel. During its course, Israel bombarded the Gaza Strip from the air and killed and injured the Palestinians. The war had the effect of calming inter-group tensions among the Jewish majority during the election campaign.

On the other hand, the Gaza war meant that once again Palestinians in Israel were ignored because Livni refused to conduct coalition negotiations with the Arab parties in the Knesset. She was prepared to sacrifice her only hope of forming a government rather than rely on Arab votes in her coalition. These tensions were exacerbated when the Arab leadership accused Israel of war crimes in Gaza. In tandem, the Arab population in Israel showed an unprecedented willingness to protest against the war itself and Israel's conduct of it. Many Arabs participated in spontaneous demonstrations, with some arrested and charged with disturbing the peace. On January 3, 2009, the Higher Follow-Up Committee – representing the community's wider political leadership – organized an anti-war protest in the Arab town of Sakhnin that attracted some 150,000 Arabs and a small number of Jews. The size of the demonstration was unprecedented in the history of Palestinians in Israel. It expressed their frustration, disappointment, and opposition to Israeli

policy on the Arab-Israeli conflict in general and the war in Gaza in particular.

Among Jewish groups the situation was entirely different. On the one hand, the elections reignited inter-group tensions; on the other, the war in Gaza served to alleviate these tensions, as Jews united in solidarity against the "threat" from Gaza. This situation changed with the approach of election day. The main parties (Likud, Kadima and Labor) continued to argue that they had the public interest at heart and represented all Israelis. By contrast, the Arab parties (along with Hadash, a mixed Arab and Jewish party) championed an Arab nationalist ideology while emphasizing their national and political differences from the other parties. Shas mobilized on behalf of religious and Mizrahi Jews in light of the increasing strength of Lieberman's Yisrael Beitenu, considered a secular Russian party.[35] The old divides within Israeli society deepened in all these different ways.

## *Ethnocentric political culture*

It is not coincidental that the results of the 2009, 2013 and 2015 Knesset elections showed both a rightward shift among the public and a collapse of the Israeli left. Both trends were the product of a political culture that is non-democratic, even anti-democratic. The political culture that has coalesced in Israel reflects a trend of mounting extremism among the Jewish majority and a tendency to justify the use of aggressive methods toward the Other, the Arab and the Palestinian, including Palestinian citizens of Israel (Arian, Ben-Nun and Barnea, 2004; Smooha, 2005; Sultani, 2005). Studies that have examined the views of the Israeli public and the youth disclose the essence of the political culture, which advocates encouraging Arab citizens to emigrate and revoking their rights, as well as a longing for strong leadership as an alternative to a liberal, democratic regime.

An annual survey conducted by the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University found in 2002 that 46% of Israeli Jews supported the transfer of the Palestinian residents of the occupied territories, and 31% support the transfer of Arab citizens of Israel. About 60% of respondents said that they supported encouraging the emigration of Arab citizens from the state, and 61% believed they constituted a security threat (Arieli, Schwartz and Tagari, 2006: 36).

In the Israeli Democracy Index, conducted in 2003, some 53% of Jewish citizens opposed full equality of rights for Arabs, and 77% believed that there must be a Jewish majority when making crucial decisions. The majority (57%) were in favor of encouraging emigration of Arabs (Arian, Nachmias, Navot and Shani, 2003). In the 2004 Index, conducted among teenagers, 60% expressed a longing for a strong leader as a substitute for a legal framework. Support among adults for this was nearly as strong, reaching 58%. Some 43% of the youth and 51% of the adults supported prohibiting speeches that included criticism of the State of Israel (Arian, Ben-Nun and Barnea, 2004). In the 2006 Index, most of the respondents (61%) said that strong leaders could benefit the state more than discussions and laws (Arian, Atmore and Hadar, 2006).

The Index of Arab-Jewish Relations in Israel, conducted in 2006, showed 80% of Israeli Jews believed that decisions about the character of the state and its borders must be backed by a Jewish majority and not just a majority of citizens (Smooha, 2006). In the 2007 Index, a third of the Jews supported stripping the Arabs of Israel of their right to vote, and 37% supported adopting a policy of encouraging the emigration of Arab citizens from Israel (Smooha, 2007).

In an extensive study in 2004 on political extremism, conducted by the Center for National Security Studies at the University of Haifa, about 63% of the Jewish respondents said that the government of Israel should encourage Arab citizens to emigrate, and 55.3% thought that the

Arabs of Israel pose a danger to the state. Some 45.3% supported revoking the right of Arabs in Israel to vote and to be elected, and 25% said they would consider voting for an explicitly anti-Arab party like Kach (Zelkowotz, 2004).

The growth of the extreme right in Israel led to several legislative attempts that were invalidated by the Knesset presidium, such as the "Soul for a Soul" bill submitted by the National Union party in 2004. Article 3 of the bill stipulated:

> If a decision is made to evacuate a Jewish settlement, an Arab settlement located within the domain of the State of Israel, with a similar number of residents, will be evacuated in parallel, as specified in an order, and its residents will be transferred to the area [of the occupied territories].

> (Sultani, 2005: 27)

This bill was one of dozens of legislative proposals that have attempted to restrict the rights of Arab citizens of Israel. A well-known example of such legislation that was approved by the Knesset is the amendment to the Citizenship and Entry into Israeli Law, which prevents family reunification of Arab citizens of Israel with their Palestinian spouses from the occupied territories (For more on legislative efforts directed against Arab citizens, see: Shihadeh, 2006; Sultani, 2003, 2005).

## Ethnic nationalism and "a nation under siege"

The main reason why so many Israelis looked to the right for answers derived from a cumulative sense of Israel being "a nation under siege". Several events occurred during the 1990s that intensified such feelings on the part of Israeli Jews – for example, the failure of the Oslo Accords and the beginning of a new stage in the armed struggle of the Palestinians; the massive influx of immigrants from the former Soviet Union, who came with right-wing and nationalistic ideas and views; and the erosion of the Israeli left's standing because of the failure of the peace process and also because of its inability to provide a socio-economic alternative to the liberal approach and market economics of the right.

We summarize below the main reasons that led to an intensification of a collective sense of siege among Israelis and the leadership's inability to offer a solution to the difficulties faced by Israel over the last two decades. These difficulties fuelled the longing in Israel for strong leadership, the decisive rise of the Israeli right, and Israel's aggressive approach toward actors it perceived to be a threat – illustrated by the Lebanon War of 2006, the war in Gaza in late 2008, and a toughening stance toward Israel's Palestinian citizens.

*First*, the "unilateral withdrawal" plan of 2004, and the disengagement from Gaza a year later, followed the failure to reach an immediate solution in the framework of the flawed Oslo peace process at Camp David in 2000. The plan was based on the idea of incremental progress that had been promoted by the US and Europe. Ariel Sharon, elected prime minister in 2001, sought to harness massive political and popular support to pursue a long-term "solution" over a span of many years. Sharon's rationale was based on an Israeli political axiom shared by the right and left: The time is not yet ripe to achieve a comprehensive solution with the Palestinians (Kimmerling, 2001).

The incarnation of Sharon's strategy was the "unilateral withdrawal" plan (Ghanem, 2006), part of post-Oslo objectives that included: Unilateral demarcation of Israel's permanent borders

(in place of bilateral agreements); the preservation of a demographic Jewish majority within these new borders; and the creation of a malleable and cooperative authority on the Palestinian side to ensure security and provide for the basic services and economic needs of the local Palestinian population (Ghanem, 2006). It was clear after Hamas took control of Gaza and adopted a policy that rejected Israel's "offers" that Sharon's vision was in tatters. Israel's elite and public feelings of dismay and depression deepened in light of Hamas' empowerment and the deterioration of the status of Fatah among the Palestinians, which meant that Israel could not realize the fruits of the unilateral withdrawal.

*Second,* among the factors that lead Israel to wage war on Gaza were the endurance of Hamas's authority, despite strong opposition to the movement from the Israeli, international, official Arab and even internal Palestinian levels, and Hamas's political commitment to pursuing a just and viable settlement. Throughout the war in Gaza, Israeli leaders expressed as a key aim the weakening or toppling of the Hamas authority, and agreed on this aim with the Arab and Palestinian sides. Only after their relative failure to achieve their goal did they claim that they in fact never had it as an aim.

*Third,* the growing relevance of demographic discourse. A new demographic reality emerged in which Jewish politicians and academics warned that the number of Palestinians under Israeli control roughly equaled the number of Jews. They became increasingly worried about the state's nature and identity, to the extent that many started looking for ways to preserve a Jewish majority, especially in light of a falling rate of Jewish immigration, which had in previous decades bolstered the Jewish majority (Ghanem, 2006).

Demographic concerns were not restricted to individuals. Working groups were established to demarcate the borders of disengagement in response to demographic factors above security ones. These concerns were transmitted to the general public, which led to public demands for adopting solutions premised on the idea of getting rid of the Palestinians, including Israel's Palestinian citizens, as soon as possible, whether by besieging them, "urging" them to migrate, or displacing them by force.

*Fourth,* the Palestinians in Israel dramatically increased their demands for individual and collective rights over the last two decades. This development reached its peak in 2006, when a group of politicians and intellectuals headed by Shawki Khatib, head of the Higher Follow-up Committee of the Palestinians in Israel, the most authoritative representative body, and of the National Committee of the Heads of Arab Local Councils, published the "Future Vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel". This document attracted national and international interest and elicited a wide variety of responses across the political spectrum of Jews, Arabs and others (see Ghanem and Mustafa, 2009; Ozacky-Lazar and Kabha, 2008).

The document was a historic turning-point in relations between Palestinians in Israel and the Jewish majority and the Israeli establishment. This was the first time a representative national body of Palestinians in Israel had prepared and published a major document describing both the existing situation across a broad spectrum of Arab life in Israel and urged wholesale reform. The authors demanded the replacement of the existing system with a constitutional regime. In response, most of the Jewish public accused Palestinians in Israel of undermining Israel's foundations as a "Jewish and democratic" state. Jewish leaders and public figures claimed the document was proof that Palestinians in Israel were not loyal to the Jewish state. Subsequently, a divisive debate emerged in Israel concerning the status of the Palestinians in Israel and their civil rights as citizens, polarizing positions between the Jewish and Arab publics (Smooha, 2005).

*Fifth,* Israelis became more aware of what was required to achieve a lasting settlement with

the Palestinians. During heated discussions on the future of an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement, Palestinian positions became clearer to Israelis. Including wider Palestinian opinions, not simply those of official negotiators or those expressed at roundtable discussions sponsored by Europe, the US or Israel. The atmosphere created by the Palestinian refusal to accept the Clinton plan offered to Arafat at Camp David in 2000 had a significant impact in stirring this public debate, in which both Palestinian organizations and the public participated, along with scholars and civil society activists.

Furthermore, the popular Palestinian leadership, NGO activists and others condemned the Palestinian positions expressed in joint documents with Israelis, such as the understandings of 1995 between Mahmoud Abbas and Yossi Beilin, the document authored in 2002 by Sari Nussaibeh and Ami Ayalon, and the 2003 Geneva Accord. The signatories to these documents were, generally, described as "conspiring" against key Palestinian demands. The rise of Hamas, through the overwhelming vote it received in the 2006 parliamentary elections, was also seen as clarifying the Palestinians' stance. The Palestinians in Israel, too, adopted a clearer posture, revealed in public opinion polls, the "Future Vision" document, and demands that Israel should become a bi-national state (Smooha, 2009).

*Sixth*, Israel's deterrence power significantly weakened following the first Palestinian Intifada in 1987. Israel had fought earlier wars against regular Arab armies, during the course of which it had advanced a concept of deterrence based on an assumption that Israel had an "undefeatable army". The Israeli army, it was argued, could win any war against the combined Arab armies, and this was the main factor behind the Arabs' desire to reconcile with Israel. Several Arab actors, official and popular, accepted this logic and justified the need to turn a new page in relations with Israel. It would be better, this view held, to resign oneself to the current situation rather than risk a confrontation in which even greater losses would be incurred.

The first Palestinian Intifada marked the beginning of a progressive deterioration in Israelis' confidence in the security situation, as well as a turning point for the Arab regimes. During the first Intifada, it became apparent that there was no clearly visible Palestinian force Israel could defeat. The Palestinian national goal of overthrowing the occupation enjoyed such wide public support that it was meaningless for Israel to imprison the leadership of the Intifada. The components of the Intifada included a popular boycott of Israeli products, civil disobedience and direct confrontations, the documentation and publicizing of Israeli abuses, official and popular support from Arab publics, as well as of some foreign states. All these made an Israeli victory impossible, forcing Israel to search for a peaceful solution with the Palestinians by recognizing the PLO.

Israeli deterrence power deteriorated further with the second Palestinian Intifada that erupted in 2000, and in south Lebanon, through Israel's inability to take the initiative in confrontations with the Lebanese and Palestinian resistance movements. This loss of deterrence power culminated in, and was exacerbated by, Israel's confrontation against Hezbollah in Lebanon in summer 2006. Israel ended the Lebanon war relatively defeated. Israeli analyses mostly attributed this loss variously to internal Israeli failures of planning and administration, changing lifestyles and readiness among Israelis to make sacrifices, and a deterioration in the capabilities of the Israeli political and military leadership. Few analyses attributed this defeat to an increase in Arab resolve, fighting skills and supplies, or to a greater readiness for sacrifice, more efficient leadership and a purposeful, mostly Islamic doctrine. Naturally, no single factor can be cited. All played a part to some extent.

Perhaps, the most important factor in Israel's confrontations with Hezbollah in 2006 and

Hamas in Gaza in late 2008 was that it faced resistance organizations, not regular armies. In these cases, the traditional conception of "victory-loss" was not helpful, because the enemy could not be defeated. At best, Israel could only deal these organizations and their supporting publics' vengeful military blows, as indeed it did in both Lebanon and Gaza. During these two wars, the Palestinians and the Lebanese paid a heavy price in deaths and destruction for undermining Israel's deterrence power, which Israelis believed could only be re-established with revenge rather than victory.

In conclusion, several factors encouraged a sense among the Israeli leadership, political activists and large sections of the public that they were a "nation under siege". These included a Palestinian negotiating position that insisted on the return of the refugees, a demand from Palestinians in Israel that Israel be transformed into a bi-national state, support for Hamas in the 2006 elections by Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and the Palestinians' rejection of a truncated resolution that did not contain a just solution to their problems.

## Summary

In view of the cumulative experience of the years that followed the Oslo agreement, and particularly since the outbreak of the second Intifada in 2000, one can sum up inter-group relations in Israeli society as oscillating between stability, conferred by the external danger of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and sharp contrasts and extreme instability issuing from internal fissures within Israeli society. The latter are fraught with ideological, political, cultural and class tensions. Five groups – Ashkenazim, Palestinians, Mizrahim, religious Jews and Russians – are the axes of the Israeli political scene. Relations among the groups are structured around the principle of group mobilization in opposition to other groups.

In elections in the post-Oslo period, the achievements of the right in Israel have been unprecedented. This change is profound, comprehensive and reflects deep processes in Israeli society and politics, especially the growing importance of religious Jews, the Mizrahim, the Russians and the settlers as forces opposed to the model originally forged by the labor movement in Israel. These forces, for various reasons, tend to support the right and, in fact, constitute the human infrastructure for its ascent and for its potential growth in the future. The "Israel" that established the labor movement is in deep crisis and steadily disappearing.

Based on the theoretical framework of the "dominant party" developed by Templeman, we argue that the Israeli political scene moved from a situation of a simple victory for the right wing in general, and specifically the joint list of Likud and Israel Beteinu, in 2009 and 2013 to a situation characterized by a "dominant bloc" revolving around Likud as a dominant party in 2015. We believe that the last Knesset election will eventually give way to a new period of dominance by one party, this time from the right. We base this prediction on several inter-related developments.

The first is a hardening of positions within the electoral camps, and the end of pragmatism in Israeli politics. Parties typically now announce their support for a prime ministerial candidate even before the election. This enables electoral mobility within each camp, but contributes to the sharp division between camps and the difficulty of establishing alliances among them. As a result, options for alliances before the elections – and for prospective government coalitions afterward – are increasingly narrow. For example, the former religious Zionist party Mafdal was willing to enter government coalitions with leftist parties. Today, Habayit Hayehudi under Naftali Bennett is not prepared to do so.

The second development is an ideological split not only at the party level, but also within society as a whole. This trend became particularly prominent following the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 and the eruption of the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000. Naturally, this development drastically reduces electoral mobility between the political camps. Today, each camp's social base is relatively stable, as opposed to during the two-party stage, when voters would move from one camp to the other. Consider the results of the 2015 elections, particularly in light of the results predicted by pollsters over the two months leading up to election day. They indicate clearly that Likud's strong 30-seat showing reflected increased turnout among right-wing voters, rather than a shift in voters' allegiance from the left to the right. Indeed, from 2013 to 2015, the number of seats held by the right bloc as a whole (Likud, Habayit Hayehudi and Yisrael Beteinu) rose by only 1, from 43 to 44. The major change was that this time Likud won 30 seats by itself, compared to 31 in alliance with Yisraeli Beteinu in 2013. However, if we include the centrist parties, whose politics tend to be right-wing, as well as right-leaning religious parties, particularly Shas, then the right-wing camp has been the largest in Israeli politics for a decade and a half.

A third crucial point is that Likud is the only party with a presence among all classes of Jewish Israelis. In contrast, Labor – despite its socialist positions and its efforts to reach out to the lower-middle classes – has strong backing only in the upper echelons of Israeli society.

The final, related development is the absence of authentic competition among the parties for leadership in forming the government. In 2013 and again in 2015, Likud single-handedly formed the government without serious competition. Indeed, the process of forming the government started before election day, particularly on the right. Given that the social bases of the two main camps are ideologically, politically, and even socio-economically close to each other, every party within each camp attempts to manipulate this population for their own benefit through various political and electoral tactics. For example, in 2015, right-wing parties announced early on that they would support Netanyahu for Prime Minister in order to attract Likud voters.

In short, the present phase in Israeli politics is characterized by a hardening of ideological positions as well as sectarian identity politics; stability in the different blocs' social bases, with a near-absence of voter mobility between the blocs; widespread support throughout Israeli society for the right-wing bloc, headed by Likud; and the absence of an effective challenger to Likud from either within or outside the right-wing bloc. This state of affairs both bolsters and reflects Likud's success in changing the Israeli landscape – leaving their mark on the Supreme Court, academic institutions, and civil society as well as changing conceptualizations of Zionist patriotism and delegitimizing the left, human rights movements and others.

Netanyahu's twentieth Knesset government (2015–) is the most right-wing in the history of Israel. Such a government may be stable for a long period of time, as long as it maintains its successful strategy with respect to the Israel-Palestinian conflict – namely, managing the conflict without resolving it.

## Notes

1 The following six paragraphs – until the end of this section – were published previously in Mohanad Mustafa and As'ad Ghanem. "The Empowering of the Israeli Extreme Right in the 18th Knesset Elections," *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (March 2010), pp. 25–44.

2 For detailed results, see: www.knesset.gov.il/elections18/heb/Results/main_results.aspx

3 This experiment in direct elections undermined the major parties, and it was abandoned in 2001.

4 Leese, Y. "Netanyahu Announces Elections in Three Months," *Haaretz*, 9.10.2012, p. 1.

5 Bennett, N. "Practical Plan for Managing the Israeli- Palestinian Conflict," Tel Aviv: *The Institute for National Security*

*Studies*, 2012. http://heb.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4667.

6 Leese, Y. "Yahimovich: Describing the Labor Party as Leftist is a Historic Injustice," *Haaretz*, 8.11.2012, p. 1.

7 Leese, Y. "Despite Voices of Opposition, Yahimovich Cancels the Immune Seats in Labor," *Haaretz* 30.10.2012, p. 4.

8 For the phenomenon of center parties on the Israeli political map in general, and *Shinui* in particular, see Mustafa (2006: 54–61).

9 See party site: http://www.yeshatid.org.il/?languagecode=en (Last View 19.6.2015).

10 The Site of the Central Knesset Committee for the 19th Elections: http://votes-19.gov.il/nationalresults (last view 19.6.2015).

11 Yaghna, Y. "Lieberman: Estimate Polls do not reflect reality, we will receive 40 seats," *Haaretz*, 19.1.2013.

12 See for example *Haaretz*'s estimate poll before the elections; *Haaretz*, 18.1.2013: p. 1–3.

13 Tanser, A. "The Forgotten Russians," *Haaretz*, 26.2.2013, p. 15.

14 Ibid.

15 Davidovich, F. "Demographic Data Regarding the Citizens of Israel: Presenting the Research, Jerusalem," *The Knesset's Research and Information Center*, 2011, p. 8.

16 Fox, A. "The Liberal Right has determined its Case," *Haaretz*, 30.1.2013, p. 2.

17 Levenson, H. "*Habayit Hayehudi* has Succeeded in Attracting Conservative Likud Voters," *Haaretz*, 23.1.2013, p. 5.

18 Shadmi, A. "Yair Bennett," *Haaretz*, 25.1.2013, p. 23.

19 See Yesh Atid's socio-economic program through this link: www.yeshatid.org.il/economy (last view, 19.6.2015).

20 Verter, Y. "Amos Oz: Yahimovich is Worse than Barak – He Says that There is no Solution, she says that There is no Problem," *Haaretz*, 11.1.2013, p. 13.

21 Levy, G., Libek, A. "Bar Ilan is Hers," *Haaretz*, 21.12.2012, p. 13.

22 Netanyahu proposed legislation dissolving the Knesset on December 9, 2014, and it was passed the same day by 93 of the Knesset's 120 members, with no opposition.

23 "Netanyahu to Channel 7: Order 8". Interview on Channel 7, 17 March 2015. Available at www.inn.co.il/News/News.aspx/294714 (last accessed 21 June 2015).

24 See the Council of Settlements (Yesha'a) website, http://www.myesha.org.il/?Category ID=251&ArticleID=6681 (last accessed 21 June 2015).

25 "Netanyahu to Channel 7: Order 8". Interview on Channel 7, 17 March 2015. Available at www.inn.co.il/News/News.aspx/294714 (last accessed 21 June 2015).

26 See the official Kulanu website in English: http://www.kulanu-party.co.il/kahlon_lang/homepage/ (last accessed 21 June 2015).

27 The name Shas, in Hebrew, itself is an acronym that means roughly "Sephardi Torah Guardians", emphasizing the religious rather than the cultural dimension in the identities of Middle Eastern Jews.

28 Arab areas are not included in Table 2.4, since our concern here is voting patterns within the Jewish population.

29 The following, until the end of this chapter were published in Mohanad Mustafa and As'ad Ghanem. "The Empowering of the Israeli Extreme Right in the 18th Knesset Elections," *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (March), pp. 25–44.

30 See: Podeh, E. *+972 Mag*: http://972mag.com/to-win-the-israeli-left-needs-to-learn-from-bibi/106569/. Downloaded in August 12, 2015.

31 This is despite the fact that Gesher stopped running as a separate list in 1996 and was, instead, guaranteed safe spots on the Knesset lists of the parties it ran with.

32 See the Draft budgets of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, 1983–2000; *Statistical Abstract of Israel 2005*. Note that, in 2005, the number of those exempted from military service for religious reasons increased again, and the trend continued in 2006 as well. The "Tal Law" passed to create a new arrangement for yeshiva students has not led to any appreciable change and has served chiefly as a lightning rod for criticism from both sides of the political barricades. Another effect was in the increase in the number of ultra-Orthodox students enrolled in "kollels" (institutions for married men) who joined the workforce. This was due to cuts in National Insurance allowances (such as the repeal of the Halpert law, officially known as the "Large Families Law").

33 2005 draft budget, www.pmo.gov.il.

34 Tzror, R. "Yeshai: We assume we'll get 15 seats," *NRG*, 1.11.2008: www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART1/805/361.html.

35 For instance, three days before the election, Shas's spiritual leader, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, said that "whoever votes for Lieberman strengthens the devil". The party's political leader, MK Eli Yishai, went as far as to say "Heaven forfend that a son of Israel whose ancestors stood at Mount Sinai should vote for such a party. Their electoral platform is to open stores selling pork, to introduce civil marriage.… Woe to these people". See: Ben-Haim, A. "Rabbi Ovadia Josef: Voting to Libeman – Giving fore to the devi," *NRG*, 7.2.2009: www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART1/850/?hp=0&loc=1&tmp=3427757.html?hp=0&loc=1&tmp=3427.

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# 3 Israeli approaches for handling the conflict with the Palestinians in the post-Oslo era

Despite the fact that many analysts regard the Oslo accords as the cornerstone of more than two decades of peace-making efforts between Israelis and Palestinians, it has become clear in recent years that the political situation has changed fundamentally since the signing of the agreements. Reflecting a new internal politics caused by frustration at their inability to establish an independent state alongside Israel, the Palestinian public elected a government and Legislative Council dominated by Hamas in 2006. In doing so, the Palestinians effectively brought the Oslo chapter to a close and declared the beginning of a new stage of confrontation. They were following the footsteps of Israel. In what amounted to a rejection of Oslo and Israel's bilateral agreements, Ehud Barak deliberately thwarted efforts to reach an interim agreement with Yasser Arafat at the Camp David summit in 2000. His successor, Ariel Sharon, had boasted of his bloody record in dealing with the Palestinians and his refusal to "shake hands with Arafat", even when he was a minister in the Netanyahu government and a member of the Israeli negotiations team between 1996 and 1999. Sharon launched a new Israeli project, to be detailed later, that avoided any official negotiations with the Palestinians, even after the death of Arafat and the "positive" transfer of power to Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen). Sharon succeeded in establishing a new political "game", based on shifting from a policy of seeking a solution to the conflict to a policy of "conflict management" in the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967.

The discourse on the future of Israeli policy towards the occupied territories is dominated for most Israelis by what is known in Israel as the "demographic danger". A related fear is that, sooner or later, Israel risks turning into a "bi-national" state, either within extended borders that include the West Bank and Gaza, or within its pre-167 borders. The following is an attempt to analyze the attitudes of Israeli officials and the public on this issue and to provide background to this debate, especially in the period immediately after Israel ended the Oslo process.

## The politics of fear: the "demographic danger" vs. the "bi-national" reality

Demography has constituted the central policy concern for the Zionist movement in its dealings with the Palestinians before and after Israel's establishment. During the mandate period, Zionist leaders considered strategies of ethnic cleansing, ones that would be put into effect later, in 1948. In reference to the Palestinians, Theodor Herzl, the father of modern Zionism, wrote that the goal was to "spirit the penniless [indigenous] population across the border" to create a Jewish state (Masalha, 1992).

After the state's establishment, Israel continued to consider Palestinians chiefly in terms of a demographic threat, including those who were Israeli citizens. Since the 1950s, Israeli planning and housing policies have focused on improving the general demographic ratio, and locally by settling Jews in Arab areas. The Judaization of the Galilee project was the first step in this

regard, aimed at enforcing control over the land by spreading Jewish settlements and communities over large areas of land to create a Jewish majority in the Galilee (Bashir, 2016). As part of the implementation of this project, Arab lands were confiscated, and tens of new Jewish settlements and towns were built close to Arab villages.

The Galilee Judaization project was followed by an additional Judaization project for the Negev desert, whose aim is to concentrate all of the Negev's Arab residents into seven tightly bounded, government-planned communities. These programs are inherently repugnant to the native Arab Bedouin population, whose traditionally distinct clans and nomadic lifestyles had been previously unrestricted. While the Bedouins have been subjected to restricted herding to prevent them inhabiting too much land, dozens of cooperative villages and communities continue to be established for Jews in the Negev area. The government planning for the future aims to absorb thousands of Jews in the area. These general Judaization policies were coupled with downgrading the status of major Arab communities across the country. The city of Natzaret Ilit (Upper Nazareth) was established, for example, to demographically check the population of the Arab city of Nazareth, and Beer Sheva was developed as the central city of the Negev.

Demography has been at the core of the conflict; and in recent years, many conferences have been held, and articles written, to address its effect on the character of the Jewish state and a possible future solution with the Palestinians. It is the catalyst for debates about the benefits of withdrawing from the 1967 occupied territories, and about solutions to the Palestinian refugee problem. The demographic discussion has also broadened to include tying withdrawal from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to the possibility of relinquishing predominantly Arab areas inside Israel close to the Green Line to a future Palestinian state. The goal of this demographic discussion is, of course, to find ways to preserve and ensure the steady growth of the Jewish majority.

Israeli sociologists have exploited statistics to bolster political positions, whether encouraging withdrawal from, or annexation of, the 1967 occupied lands (Arieli, Schwartz and Tagari 2006). In one study, the Jewish demographer Sergio de la Pergula concluded that Jews constituted 78% of Israel's population and predicted that would decline to a range between 65% and 69% in 2050. Pergula also forecast that the Jewish proportion of the population in historic Palestine would dwindle from 53% to 26%–35% by 2050 (*Haaretz*, 13.2.2002). This prompted Pergula to call for Israel's speedy disengagement from the Palestinians.

The demographic situation has disturbed Jewish politicians and academics because they are concerned about the effects on the character and identity of the state. This has prompted many to seek new ways to guarantee a Jewish majority in light of a decline in Jewish immigration that in earlier decades had helped to maintain a Jewish majority. Proposals have included surrendering Arab areas within the Green Line, as part of a final settlement with the Palestinians.

One of the most prominent people to bring this discussion to light was Prof. Arnon Soffer. Shortly after Sharon came to power in 2001, Soffer presented a paper to him detailing his vision for how to solve the "demographic crisis". The paper was discussed by the Knesset's Foreign and Security Committee and at the Herzliya Conference for Security and National Defence. Soffer proposed transferring the Triangle (*Muthallath*) area and East Jerusalem to the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), to reduce the Arab population of Israel by 400,000–210,000 in East Jerusalem and 190,000 in the Triangle area. Emphasizing the demographic dangers, he noted that these 400,000 Arabs were expected to increase to 800,000 by 2020. Without these Arabs, Israel would expect to have 1,350,000 Arabs, compared to the six million Jews in 2020 (Soffer, 2003, 2010).

Soffer's demographic concerns and his justification for disengagement, including from East Jerusalem, were explicit in his paper. He wrote to Sharon warning: "The absence of disengagement means the establishment of an Arab majority, and consequently the end of the Jewish state of Israel". He added:

> It's important to remember that when the Israeli army makes efforts and succeeds in assassinating a militant here or there, at the same time 400 children are born in the western land of Israel, some of them will become new militants, everyday 400 children! Do you understand that?

<div align="right">(<em>Haaretz</em>, 28.6.2002)</div>

After reading the paper, Richard Harris, the Director of Planning at the US State Department, asked Soffer how much of his project was based on security and how much on demography. Soffer responded it was "100% based on demography" (*Haaretz*, 28.6.2002).

The obsession with demography and related debates about annexation or disengagement was not the preserve of a few activists. For example, working groups were established to draft border demarcations based on demographic factors rather than security. In 2006, several demography and geography researchers held a series of meetings with settlers at the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem. This group drafted various scenarios for demarcating the most suitable borders to ensure at least 80% of Israeli citizens were Jews and not more than 20% Arabs. Every dunum included for annexation to Israel had to have a population ratio of 8:2 to ensure a Jewish majority. The Van Leer Institute was far from the only venue holding discussions of demography and annexation. Such issues were also discussed at universities and research institutes, the Israeli National Security Council and even the US State Department and the CIA (*Haaretz*, 28.6.2002). In addition, the Herzliya Center, one of Israel's elite security and academic research establishments, held several meetings to discuss the demographic issue in Israel.

The late Shimon Peres, a recent Israeli president and the founder of the Peres Center for Peace, was an ardent believer in the importance of demography in the post-Oslo era. He based his vision for "peace" and withdrawal on supposed demographic benefits in the hope that it would convince Israelis to support the Oslo agreements. This was especially true during the right-wing surge in Israel, when he became concerned about growing support for settlement expansion and annexation of Palestinian land. Uncharacteristically, Sharon adopted Peres' thinking when he assumed the Prime Minister's office. They found common ground in the Kadima party, and promoted the "necessity" of withdrawing to maintain a "demographic balance".

When Sharon assumed office in 2001, he faced a dilemma unresolved since Israel occupied the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in 1967. It resulted from the contradiction between Israeli expansion into the occupied territories and the need to preserve the Jewish character of Israel. Annexation of occupied Palestinian land would effectively abolish the Jewish character of Israel and make it a bi-national state with a growing Arab Palestinian majority. Withdrawal, on the other hand, violated Sharon's core commitment to the "Greater Land of Israel". Because of this demographic dilemma, Sharon sought a compromise: unilaterally separating from the Palestinians while also rejecting a withdrawal to the June 4, 1967 border. Sharon's vision was for Israel to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and 42% of the occupied Palestinian West Bank in return for annexing Palestinian areas where Jewish settlements had been established and other West Bank areas with coveted resources (chiefly water and land).

The Kadima party established by Sharon won a sizeable victory in the March 2006 Knesset

elections and continued to stress the need to unilaterally withdraw from parts of the West Bank. In an interview on Israeli TV aired on February 7, 2006, Ehud Olmert, Kadima's designate leader, said:

> We shall keep the Jordan Valley, we can't abandon control over Israel's eastern borders … Our intention is clear. We are heading for disengagement with the Palestinians [in the West Bank] and for establishing final borders for the state of Israel … We shall disengage from most of the Palestinian residents in Judea and Samaria [the West Bank].

He added: "This would force us to abandon territories presently held by Israel". The Kadima platform included keeping "the state of Israel as the safe national homeland for the Jewish people in the land of Israel", and introducing "a national component to the character of the state of Israel besides providing full equality in rights for the minorities living in Israel so as to ensure … a balanced Jewish democratic state". In this context, Kadima envisioned using the negotiation process with the Palestinians as a means to demarcate and develop the permanent borders of Israel. The leaders of Kadima hoped this strategy would achieve calm and realize the national and security interests of Israel. So, "the interest in keeping Israel as a Jewish national state requires accepting the principle of two nationalist states, on demographic bases, that live side by side in peace and security" (Madar website www.madarcenter.org).

## Israel's strategy on the "demographic danger" and the "bi-national" reality

Sharon depended on significant public support to pursue his gradual long-term interim solution. He believed that the time had not yet arrived for achieving a comprehensive peace with the Palestinians on the basis of US-European understandings, and that "fast solutions" were likely to fail, in the light of what happened at the Camp David summit of 2000. Sharon realized that retaining Israel's control over the Palestinians of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip would add an economic burden to Israel. He saw it would also make Israel passive in the face of any peace drives, such as the Geneva Initiative, agreed by Yossi Beilin and Yassir Abed Rabbo, and the Nussaibeh-Ayalon Initiative. Both gained wide Israeli public support after they were proposed.

Despite attempts to revive them, the Oslo accords, which involved mutual recognition by Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), and established the PNA, ceased to be the basis for the negotiation process after Sharon assumed office. He developed a new Israeli vision for dealing with the issue of occupation and the future of the Palestinians. Instead of pursuing a solution with the Palestinians based on the Oslo accords and related US-sponsored agreements, he concentrated on "conflict management". Such "management" was designed to ensure Jewish "demographic" superiority within Israeli borders, while satisfying the Israeli public's demand for a period of calm. This calm was necessarily fragile, however, as Sharon was not ready to pay the price required by international resolutions, or the majority of Israelis, who support establishing a Palestinian state with a limited sovereignty and independence. Sadly, although these Israelis consider themselves to be part of the peace camp, their stance falls far short of the minimum required either by Palestinians or international resolutions.

Sharon provided a political context for his vision in the form of his unilateral withdrawal project. This was effectively old wine in a new bottle: the project was based on Sharon's long-standing vision of annexing large areas of the West Bank, close to the Green Line and in the Jordan Valley, while concentrating the Palestinians in separate enclaves or, at best, enclaves connected by narrow strips of land (roads, tunnels and bridges). Gaza was the first enclave to be established. The substantive change in Sharon's position was not that he accepted the need to

divide the "Land of Israel" but that he put a new gloss on these Palestinian enclaves as a "state".

In October 2004, in a lengthy interview with the Haaretz newspaper, Dov Weissglass, the architect of the Gaza disengagement plan, revealed the chief aims of this new policy. He said the goal was to neutralize and freeze alternative political plans, particularly George W Bush's Road Map, and to portray "terrorism" as the main cause of the conflict. He added that the disengagement plan also served to strengthen the Israeli claim that "There is no Palestinian partner", averting demands for Israeli "concessions" and making the Road Map plan irrelevant (*Haaretz*, 15.10.2004).

Sharon decided to make public his new policy at the Herzliya conference, which was held in December 2003. The main points outlined in Sharon's speech were as follows:

1. Israel would continue to commit itself to the Road Map peace plan.
2. Israel conditioned implementing the Road Map on the cessation of terrorism, on the eradication of "terrorist" organizations, and on reform of the PNA.
3. Israel warned the Palestinians that, if they did not eradicate the "infrastructure of terror" and adopt comprehensive reforms within a few months, Israel would take unilateral measures to disengage, steps Sharon described as based solely on security concerns.
4. An Israeli disengagement would require a redeployment of the Israeli army along a new "security line" within the Palestinian territories, and would include evacuating some settlements. The settlements to be evacuated were those that would not be included in Israel "in any possible future solution". Israel would strengthen its hold over parts of the occupied Palestinian territories that were expected to become indivisible parts of the state of Israel in the future.
5. Israel would accelerate the building of the separation barrier.
6. Israel would coordinate its unilateral measures with the US.
7. Israel would remove the remote "illegal" settlement outposts and commit itself to a settlement freeze, as agreed with the US.
8. The plan was designed to provide the greatest security for Israelis and the least amount of friction with the Palestinians.

When he assumed office after Sharon fell seriously ill, Olmert adopted the same vision: that is, to continue the disengagement plan by unilaterally dismantling a number of West Bank settlements over the next few years. Olmert stressed on the last day of the Herzliya conference on Israeli security, which was held in late January 2006, that Israel's most important goal was to "demarcate permanent Israeli borders so as to ensure a Jewish majority in the state". Echoing Ze'ev Jabotinsky, the early leader of Revisionist Zionism, Olmert said of the significance of having a Jewish majority:

> The phrase [the state of Jews] is certainly clear: It means a Jewish majority. Zionism started with that aim in mind and continues on that basis until it's realized or obliterated … Having a Jewish majority in the state of Israel isn't achievable with continuing control over the Palestinian residents of Judea and Samaria [the West Bank] and Gaza Strip. We hold on to the historic right of the people of Israel to all of the Land of Israel. Every hill in Samaria and every valley in Judea [the West Bank] is part of our historical homeland. We never forget that, not even for a moment. Nevertheless, the choice between allowing every Jew to live anywhere on any part of the land of Israel, or the existence of the state of Israel as a Jewish state, requires ceding parts of the Land of Israel. This doesn't mean ceding the idea

of Zionism but rather a manifestation of the goals of Zionism aimed at establishing a democratic Jewish state in the Land of Israel. Consequently, if we are to ensure we have a national Jewish home, we can't continue controlling the territories where the majority of the population are Palestinian. We have to develop, as soon as possible, a clear borderline that reflects the demographic reality that has emerged on the ground. Israel shall retain control over the security zones and settlement blocks that signify a higher security interest for the Jewish people, the first of which is a united Jerusalem under the sovereignty of Israel. There can't be any existence of a Jewish state without Jerusalem as its capital in the heart of Israel.

## Basic components of Israel's "post-Oslo" posture – Ariel Sharon's legacy

Israel's post-Oslo policy was based on the following considerations: demarcate the permanent borders of Israel unilaterally (not through bilateral agreements), keep a numerical Jewish majority within the borders of this state, and establish an accommodating authority on the Palestinian side to provide security and deliver basic economic and social functions and services. This would enable Israel to de-facto annex all of the land along the Green Line and the Jordan Valley, in addition to annexing large areas to establish contiguity between the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea. Furthermore, Israel would thicken settlements that were not to be evacuated by stepping up construction and encouraging Jews to settle there. This vision implied ceding control over densely populated Palestinian areas to a PNA and entailed the removal of Israeli settlements from these areas. Consequently, eight to nine segregated Palestinian enclaves would be established. Each would be surrounded by Israeli settlements and military structures. As such, Israel would not object if these enclaves were called a "Palestinian state". Practically, this post-Oslo policy necessitated the following measures:

1. A unilateral withdrawal plan, formulated in light of Ehud Barak's experiences at Camp David: It was actually Sharon who drafted and presented this plan as a new vision for dealing with the conflict in general and the occupation in particular. He presented it during the Herzliya conference on December 18, 2003, when it was referred to as the "unilateral disengagement plan". Sharon rejected withdrawal to the June 4, 1967 borders but highlighted at the same time the "demographic danger". Sharon sought to establish a system of segregation in historic Palestine by agreeing to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and 42% of the West Bank in return for annexing Palestinian areas where Jewish settlements and other strategic sites had been established (For more details, see Ghanem, 2006).

   A number of factors contributed to Sharon's success in freezing Washington's Road Map and making his plan "the only game in town". They included: Israel's strong and special relationship with the US in a single-polar world led by Washington; a weak Arab world with its regional conflicts and divisive attempts to woo American support; an absence of meaningful opposition to Sharon's plan in Israel, apart from the extremist right wing and the Likud party; and the unequivocal support of the Israeli left wing.

   The "disengagement document" appeared in the form of a letter from Sharon to US President George W Bush on April 14, 2004. In a preface to the letter, Sharon insisted: "Israel is committed to the peace process and aspires to a negotiated settlement, on the basis of two states for two peoples: The state of Israel for the Jewish people and a Palestinian state for the Palestinian people". Sharon justified the unilateral disengagement on the ground that "Israel has arrived at the conclusion that today there is no Palestinian partner to

proceed with in a reciprocal peace process". Sharon stressed that the unilateral disengagement plan was not contingent upon Palestinian cooperation and that it would take Israel to a "better security situation". Sharon further elaborated that Israel would withdraw from the Gaza Strip and parts of the northern West Bank, and that

> in any future settlement there would be no Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip. It is clear that there would be areas, in Judea and Samaria, considered as part of the state of Israel, including civil settlements and security zones, in addition to other areas where Israel has interests.

The Israeli leader added that the disengagement plan "would counter allegations concerning Israel's responsibility for the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip". He ended his letter claiming that "the disengagement plan" would not violate the signed agreements between Israel and Palestinians, and that "when there are indications on the Palestinian side of their readiness and ability to take practical action to combat terrorism and conduct reforms according to the Road Map, then Israel can return to the track of dialogue and negotiation".

Sharon explained that Israel would withdraw from the Gaza Strip, including the existing settlements, except the borderline between the Gaza Strip and Egypt, and added that after accomplishing the Gaza Strip withdrawal "there would be no basis for allegations that the Gaza Strip was an occupied area". As for the redeployment in the occupied Palestinian West Bank, Sharon stated: "Israel would evacuate an area in the northern West Bank [the settlements of Ganim, Kadim, Humish and Sanour] as well as all permanent military structures in that area".

In mid-September 2005, Sharon addressed the annual meeting of the UN's General Assembly to explain the unilateral steps taken by the Israeli government. He told the UN:

> Early this week, the last Israeli soldier left the Gaza Strip and military rule in this area ended. As such, Israel has proved its willingness to undertake painful concessions so as to find a solution to the conflict with the Palestinians.

He added:

> Now it's time for the Palestinians to prove their wish for peace, because ending Israeli rule in this area and ending Israel's responsibility over the Gaza Strip allow the Palestinians to develop their economy and build a society that seeks peace.
>
> (Quotations translated from Arabic: Nofal and Shalhat, 2006)

During preparations for the 17th Knesset elections, held on March 28, 2006, Kadima's candidate for Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, declared his party's intention to press ahead with the unilateral disengagement and unilateral demarcation of Israel's permanent borders, without serious negotiations with the Palestinians (*The Israeli View* – Madar – Edition: 128. 7.3.2006). This marked a new stage in managing the conflict with the Palestinians, neutralizing what is viewed in Israel as a Palestinian "demographic danger" without paying the price demanded by the Palestinians or related international resolutions.

2. Partial self-determination for the Palestinians: One of the most important components of Israel's post-Oslo posture was evading responsibility for the daily needs of the occupied Palestinian population and seeking, instead, to have a PNA shoulder that burden. Israel encouraged the establishment of a PNA from the start of the Oslo negotiations. Israel dictated the form, content and tools to be used by this authority, including by introducing legislative and institutional changes requiring the PNA to uphold Israeli interests and

allowing Israel to delegate responsibilities to it (Ghanem, 2001).

During the second (Al-Aqsa) Intifada, Israel took several measures against the PNA. In 2002, Israel waged a full-scale military offensive, Operation Defensive Shield, against the territory ruled by the PNA. The Israeli army systematically destroyed the Palestinian infrastructure, crushed the Palestinian security forces, and cut off the president in Ramallah from communicating with the rest of the territories under the PNA's rule, obstructing social services and seriously constricting Palestinian diplomatic relations, especially with Europe and North America. Despite all these measures, Israel did not go as far as destroying the PNA. It was intentionally spared so it would still be possible for Israel to claim that there was a Palestinian body responsible for addressing the Palestinian people's basic needs and providing services to them, and to avoid shifting this burden under international law on Israel. The PNA's continuing existence also gave Israel a convenient scapegoat for the conflict, and a tangible enemy to be held accountable for actions against Israel, and for Palestinian domestic problems.

After the death of Arafat, Israel continued with the same policy. It obstructed President Abbas's negotiation efforts, but backed down on taking steps that could have ended the PNA. When Abbas used his constitutional powers in January 2006 to call for legislative elections, Sharon announced that he would prevent the holding of such elections in PNA territory if Hamas or the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) participated. He referred to the latter as the "murderers" of Rehavam Zeevi, a former Israeli army general, far-right politician and the tourism minister under Sharon who was assassinated in 2001. He further decreed that the Palestinian residents of Jerusalem would not be allowed to vote in these elections, Arguing that Jerusalem was "the capital of Israel where there is no place for the Palestinian Authority and its organizations", he demanded that Jerusalem's Palestinians who wanted to vote do so instead in Ramallah. Sharon advised Abbas to focus on eradicating terrorism, and work on collecting the weapons of Hamas and other militant groups, before thinking about legislative elections.

As Palestinian Election Day, January 25, 2006, neared, Sharon's government climbed down, ostensibly in response to a call by the US president. Israel and the Palestinians held meetings to discuss arrangements for the elections to ensure calm and order. Israel promised to abstain from military incursions, arrests and assassinations and to ease restrictions on the roads to polling station. In the late 2005, Israeli leaders publicly declared their intention to boycott any Hamas-led government. Nevertheless, it was clear that Israeli threats would not go as far as dismantling the PNA, and that the Authority would be maintained only in so far as it was convenient for Israel to do so, even if this meant having to acknowledge the Palestinian entity as a state.

3. Continued settlement: Sharon's government followed the footsteps of previous Israeli governments in handling the peace process with the Palestinians by declaring that it would refrain from building any new settlements in the occupied territories. This policy was mentioned in the basic platform adopted by Sharon's government and also mentioned in several official statements (Muhareb, 2005; Nufal and Shalhat, 2006). However, these statements always included a caveat: that Israel would take into consideration the "natural" growth of the settler population. This phrase was used as a pretext to annex more land, enlarge settlements and construct settlement roads. The size of land and number of housing units added to the settlements wildly exceeded any "natural" growth of the settler population. In some settlements thousands of housing units were built, even while dozens of

existing flats remained vacant.

It is worth mentioning that Israel, particularly under Sharon, had repeatedly declared that it was committed to the Road Map peace plan proposed by Bush. The Road Map specified the complete cessation of settlement expansion in return for Palestinian cessation of all forms of violence and military operations against Israeli targets.

Although international law treats all forms of settlement in the occupied territories as prohibited, Israel, by contrast, considers only settlement "outposts" as illegal. These "outposts" are new colonies some distance from existing settlements. Ironically, Sharon had been one of the major supporters of establishing these settlement outposts from the 1980s onwards, and especially in the 1990s when he was on the opposition benches and then later assumed a ministerial portfolio in a Likud-led government. In the mid-1990s, Sharon encouraged settlers to occupy the West Bank hills to establish facts on the ground before any agreement with the Palestinian leadership could be reached.

An official report, the Sasson Report, published in March 2005, concluded that Israeli government ministries and state agencies were complicit in the funding of the illegal settlements and outposts. The 300-page report, written by a former senior state prosecutor, Talia Sasson, documented a steady flow of services and maintenance funds to these outposts, even in the absence of government construction approval. Among those helping to establish these outposts were the defense ministry, the Israeli army, the so-called Civil Administration, the police, and the ministries of infrastructure, education, industry and trade, and finance. Officials in these ministries and departments, including government ministers, had conspired in ignoring violations of law as settlers took over land owned by Palestinians or land considered "state-owned land" by the occupation authority. By late 2005, the settlers had established 120 illegal settlement outposts with the aim of making them newly independent settlements or new settlement neighborhoods associated with nearby settlements.

4. Building of the separation wall: In March 2006, two weeks before the Israeli general election he would win, Ehud Olmert, the leader of Kadima, declared his intention to make the separation wall a permanent border for Israel. The original idea for the separation wall had come from the leaders of the Labor party (mainly Yitzhak Rabin and Chaim Ramon, after a suicide attack at Beit Lid in January 1995). They proposed total separation between the two people that would include sealed borders demarcated close to the Green Line, with amendments based on Israeli security considerations. The Likud government of Ariel Sharon substantially developed Ramon's idea of "security amendments" in ways that made establishing a Palestinian state with geographical contiguity almost impossible to realize. The proposed path of the separation wall annexed large areas of Palestinian land and made the settlement blocs and infrastructure fragment the territories where the Palestinian state was supposed to be established according to the proposed US Road Map.

The Palestinians approached the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in the Hague to issue its verdict on the separation barrier's legality. It issued a ruling against the wall in July 2004. The Israeli media had already embarked on a campaign to mobilize international support for Israel's position, to minimize the damaging effects of the ruling (Ghanem, 2006; Mansour, 2006). The ICJ required Israel to stop building the wall immediately, dismantle those parts already built and to compensate the Palestinians. The ruling included the following:

The Court considers that the construction of the wall and its associated regime create a

'fait accompli' on the ground that could well become permanent, in which case, and notwithstanding the formal characterization of the wall by Israel, it would be tantamount to *de facto* annexation.

The ICJ concluded that Israel's building of the separation wall was not justified by security reasons. It considered,

the construction of the wall and its associated regime cannot be justified by military exigencies or by the requirements of national security or public order – Breach by Israel of various of its obligations under the applicable provisions of international humanitarian law and human rights instruments.

(Quotations translated from Arabic: Nofal and Shalhat, 2006)

It is important here to note that the slow pace of the separation wall's construction (sections are still not complete) has not been due to budget constraints or pressure exerted by the international community, least of all because of the ICJ's ruling. Rather, it reflects pressure exerted by extremist right-wing groups and elements in Likud that were worried that the separation wall might be considered Israel's de facto border. In their minds, this would undermine efforts to take over the entire Land of Israel, in all the territory of historic Palestine.

5. Practical annexation of the Jordan Valley: Israel adopted a policy of tight restrictions on the movement of Palestinians in the eastern part of the West Bank. Btselem, the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, concluded that this policy had practically annexed this area to Israel. Generally, the Israeli army prohibits the entry of Palestinians to the Jordan Valley, and restricts access only to those officially registered as residents of the area. Btselem warned that isolating the Jordan Valley from the rest of the West Bank dangerously violated the human rights of many Palestinian residents. The isolation of the Jordan Valley has been done without a formal government decision and without informing the public (see Noufal and Shalhat, 2006).

Following the occupation of the West Bank, all Israeli governments have treated the Jordan Valley as Israel's eastern border and worked towards annexing it to Israel. In order to consolidate an Israeli presence, Israel has established 26 settlements in the Jordan Valley since the early 1970s, with some 7,500 settlers living there. In the meantime, Israel has gradually claimed most of the Jordan Valley as state-owned land, annexed to the jurisdiction of the Israeli regional councils Aravot HaYarden and Megilot. The "Oslo" agreements, classified most of this area, except an enclave that includes Jericho and its environs, as Area C, under full Israeli control. During the 2006 election campaign, Ehud Olmert, the acting Prime Minister, said repeatedly that the Jordan Valley would remain under the Israeli control in any future settlement. That position has been echoed more recently by Netanyahu.

Israel has erected seven permanent roadblocks along the area from the western Jordan Valley to the northern part of the Dead Sea. Four besiege the Jericho enclave, and have been used, since 2002, by the Israeli army to place significant restrictions on the movement of Palestinians. A spokesman for the Israeli army responded to Btselem's report (Nofal and Shalhat, 2006: 63) in 2006 by stating that access through these roadblocks was restricted to the residents of the Jordan Valley, based on the address indicated on their identity card. Other West Bank Palestinians were denied entry unless they had a special permit issued by

the Civil Administration or were considered a "humanitarian case". These restrictions do not apply to West Bank Palestinians entering the city of Jericho. "Palestinians caught in the Jordan Valley without having permits will be handed to the police", an army spokesman said.

Israel's actions in the Jordan Valley, and statements by high-ranking officials, indicate that the motive behind the policy is not a security-military one but rather political. Israel has been annexing this area to Israel, as with other large Palestinian areas on the western side of the separation wall, in flagrant violation of the Palestinian right to self-determination. Control of the Jordan Valley also enables Israel to control the movement of Palestinians and goods between the West Bank and Jordan.

6. Improving relations with neighboring Arab countries: Changes of Israeli policy towards the PNA in late 2004 and early 2005, especially following the death of Yasser Arafat and the election of President Mahmoud Abbas, have affected Israeli-Arab relations, particularly Israel's relations with Egypt and Jordan. After Abbas assumed office and Sharon resumed implementing the Road Map, relations improved and became active in political and mutual security matters. As the implementation of the "disengagement" plan neared, communications intensified between Israel and Egypt, and the US administration stepped up communications between the three parties. The US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, succeeded in mobilizing Egypt's efforts to support the evacuation of Israeli settlers and the Israeli army from the Gaza Strip.

Egypt contributed to reaching an understanding concerning the settlers' homes, in which Israel committed itself to demolish the houses and move the rubble to the Egyptian desert. It is worth mentioning that economic relations between Israel and Egypt continued, with the two sides exchanging goods and cooperating in tourism.

In 2005, normal relations between Jordan and Israel were restored, especially after the Jordanian ambassador returned to Tel Aviv. Trade and tourism continued, and even strengthened because Jordan served as a springboard for Israeli goods eastwards, to the Gulf countries and Iraq (including shipping military supplies to American forces). Security cooperation between the two sides was maintained on the basis of signed agreements and a shared interest in combating "extremism and terrorism". Both continued their security cooperation on "international terrorism", especially after hotels in Amman were targeted by suicide-bombers dispatched by Al-Qa'ida leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

## After Sharon – developing Israeli visions of conflict resolution

This section provides an overview of various Israeli conflict resolution perspectives that have developed over the past two decades. Three pivotal viewpoints are highlighted: (1) an interim or phased solution, such as the Oslo Agreement model and subsequent interim treaties; (2) a unilateral solution without an agreement, as evident in Ariel Sharon's Disengagement Plan from Gaza and the northern West Bank; and (3) a permanent solution designed to reach a one-phase solution, such as the Camp David 2000 model.

### Interim solution

Such a solution is based on the assumption that a conflict cannot be resolved or that

circumstances are not conducive to reach a resolution, because, for example, the historical narratives of both parties are incompatible. It also assumes agreed solutions cannot be reached on final-status issues. According to this viewpoint, for instance, the refugee problem and the growth of the settlements have impeded any resolution of the conflict, and so conflict management is needed instead (Eiland, 2010: 7–8). Proponents of interim solutions indicate that a lack of conflict resolution does not entail the suspension of negotiations. On the contrary, the continued *status quo* is detrimental to Israel's security and political interests and interim solutions should be sought. From an Israeli perspective, interim solutions may either be partial withdrawals from Palestinian territory or the establishment of a temporary Palestinian state within temporary borders, an option presented by the Road Map (ibid). Giora Eiland, a former chairman of Israel's National Security Council, has said interim solutions generate four advantages for Israel:

1. They minimize political damage, especially in international relations, resulting from the continued *status quo*.
2. In the case of establishing a Palestinian state within temporary borders, they reduce the area of Israel's occupation, placing most Palestinians (95% of them) under Palestinian rule and diminishing friction over checkpoints.
3. They enable a resolution of all practical issues, such as borders, while setting aside a resolution of substantive issues, including the refugee problem and Jerusalem.
4. They reduce tension between both sides. If successful, the interim solution can be converted into a permanent solution (Eiland, Blom and Eran, 2009).

Eiland (2012) argues that the Palestinian side rejects interim solutions, fearing they will become permanent, and prefers final ones. However, Shmuel Even believes interim solutions have their drawbacks for Israel too. On the one hand, they facilitate the agreement of both parties by leaving the major and most contentious issues to final-status negotiations. On the other, they minimize the room for political maneuver on the Palestinian side. An interim agreement requires Israeli withdrawal from specified areas, and failure or disruption of implementation reduces the expectations of both sides and escalates the security situation for Israel (Even, 2008).

Netanyahu believes that interim solutions offer Israel the best negotiation strategy. He wants to manage the conflict with Palestinians through negotiations *per se*, not as a way to reach a final solution. Netanyahu's stipulation that Palestinians recognize the Jewish State and the Jewish people's right to the land is designed to introduce new issues to the negotiations process, further complicating the conflict resolution endeavor.

## A *unilateral solution without agreement*

Unilateral withdrawal from Gaza was one of Israel's most significant recent experiences. Though it had some unfavorable repercussions, unilateral disengagement exerted important strategic outcomes for Israel. Despite arms smuggling through the Philadelphia Route and an end to border liaison arrangements, Israel managed to rid itself of direct rule over 1.3 million Palestinians. Following Palestinian infighting and Hamas' seizure of control over Gaza, Israeli military operations in Gaza dropped to the lowest level in the history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Drawing on the lessons of unilateral disengagement from Gaza, Israel, and Sharon in particular, were inclined to continue this process. The Kadima party was established as part of this vision: that is, to disengage from the Palestinians without an agreement. The outbreak of the

Lebanon war in July 2006, and the price Israel paid as a result, gave rise to questions about the benefits of unilateral withdrawal. The pullout from Lebanon in 2000 had been the first Israeli withdrawal from an occupied Arab territory without agreement. The Gaza war in December 2008 to January 2009 made unilateral withdrawal seem increasingly unpalatable as an option.

Following the withdrawal from Gaza, Israelis debated implementing a unilateral withdrawal in the West Bank, with Israel maintaining control of major settlement blocs, annexing all areas behind the Wall, as well as the Jordan Valley, and leaving Palestinians to a separate destiny. However, while circumstances looked like they might provide a reasonable opportunity to reach a negotiated agreement with acceptable outcomes, dwindling hopes of peace-making after the Annapolis conference in 2007 ensured that this did not happen. The ongoing stalemate in the peace process created a resurgence of calls in Israel for unilateral measures.

The Israeli press excitedly talked about a "Security Realignment Plan", which had been first mooted by Likud party members. For some, that might have been transformed into a political vision and proposal. It reproduced a plan devised earlier by Olmert and Sharon. Israeli newspapers discussed reviving Sharon's former realignment plan, parts of which he had implemented by disengaging from the Gaza Strip and areas in the northern West Bank. Olmert expressed his intention to carry out what he termed as a "convergence plan". Accordingly, Israel would withdraw to the environs of seven major settlement blocs, which would be annexed to Israel, while Palestinian communities would be expelled from these areas. Following the 2006 war on Lebanon, however, Olmert suspended the plan, stating it was no longer a priority. The plan included completion of the Wall's construction, withdrawal from Palestinian cities and villages, dismantlement of settlement outposts from heavily populated Palestinian areas, and the relocation of the settlers beyond the Wall (between 40,000 and 70,000) to major settlement blocs. Evacuated settlement outposts would not be transferred to the Palestinian Authority (PA), but would remain under the control of the Israeli army. Not one settler would live beyond the borders of the Wall. All settlements would be converted into blocs that were geographically contiguous with Israel and become part of Israel's territory. In a TV interview on the eve of Passover 2008, Olmert reminded the Israeli public that the unilateral option should not be overlooked in case bilateral negotiations failed to reach a resolution of the conflict (Abu Seif and Mustafa, 2011).

According to the 2010 version of the Realignment Plan, Israel would annex settlements behind the Separation Wall into major settlement blocs and withdraw from populated Palestinian areas. However, Israel would not concede its security responsibility; it would maintain control of security corridors, enabling access into the West Bank based on military necessity. This was a lesson Israel had learned from the Gaza disengagement (*Ma'ariv*, 16.9.2010).

According to Likud officials, the 2010 version of the Realignment Plan was an evolution that preserved unilateralism's core notions. Though it did not entail a complete withdrawal from the West Bank, the Plan began with measures on the ground, including a withdrawal from Palestinian residential areas, continuing control of settlement blocs, and tight security control over the West Bank's eastern and western heights and strategic sites. It also provided for continuing control of artesian wells and the Jordan Valley area. This policy sought to progressively annex Area C, ultimately submitting it to Israeli sovereignty. The idea of annexing this area, which comprises more than 60% of the West Bank, was similar to a unilateral solution without an agreement. It has gained a political momentum within Likud, as well as among right-wing settler groups.[1]

### *Permanent solution – agreement*

Israeli supporters of a permanent solution argue that it is a formula that can be ultimately agreed by Palestinians and Israelis. Proponents further state that Israel is out of time. The continued *status quo* or interim solutions will minimize Israel's future political maneuvering and debilitate Israeli conditions for negotiation. Israel should use its superior position to define the end of the conflict and resolve it once and for all (Eiland, 2010). The Israelis are not alone in the negotiations process; the Palestinian side in general, and President Mahmoud Abbas in particular, have consistently demanded negotiations over a final solution, rather than interim solutions (Libby, 2010: 70).

Ephraim Libby observes that Abbas has preferred to seek a permanent solution, especially faced with a succession of Israeli right-wing governments that oppose a Palestinian state. Libby believes that the PA demanded an Israeli settlement freeze not only to align itself with the US position, but because the PA wanted negotiations without changing the *status quo* – it has implemented its own commitments under the Road Map, in contrast to Israel's failure to freeze settlement activity. Libby further argues that, should Netanyahu continue insisting on interim solutions, the Palestinians will put into effect their plan to win recognition of statehood in the international community (ibid, 71). In this regard, the world has refused Israel's economic peace as an alternative to political peace because it implies interim, not permanent, peacemaking. By contrast, the international community has welcomed internal Palestinian state-building policies (Feldman, 2010: 21).

Despite the clear setback that there is little backing in Israel for a permanent solution and that support for temporary solutions is on the rise, the notion of a permanent solution has gained ground among groups across Israel's political spectrum. From an Israeli perspective, an interim solution further postpones outstanding issues, circumvents Palestinian demands, and poses the least amount of damage. And at the same time, it fails to contribute to delineating the nature or outlines of a permanent solution, which would require an agreement accepted by Palestinians on all pending issues. Only at that point would Palestinians waive their historic claims and concede that the conflict is over.

Proponents of the permanent solution formula argue that termination of the conflict means Israel will be relieved of all burdens that ensue after its proclamation. Israel will be able to establish normal relations with neighbors in the region and gain stability following decades of conflict. In addition, Israel will be better positioned to deal with major strategic risks in the future, which could threaten its existence. From a strategic perspective, only an agreed permanent solution would give Israel international guarantees that render untenable any chances of derogating its status and legitimacy (Abu Seif and Mustafa, 2011).

## Netanuahu's conditions for reconciliation with the Palestinians[2]

Netanyahu's insistence on recognition by Palestinians of Israel as a Jewish state reflects a demand that the Palestinians agree to reconciliation in return for an Israeli political settlement. In recent years, Netanyahu has conditioned reaching a solution with the Palestinians on such recognition. The matter is not entirely new in Israeli debates, though in the past it was limited to academic literature. Reconciliation was considered in the context of psychological predicaments, contradictory and conflicting historical narratives, mental and value obstacles, and different concepts of justice that have impeded reconciliation between the two people. The literature noted

that these factors were obstacles to reconciliation, but not to a settlement (Bar-Siman-Tov, 1994). What is new in this debate is that Netanyahu has managed to force the issue of recognition into the political arena.

With the agreement of the Palestinian side, all former Israeli governments have adopted the issue of borders as their bottom line in the negotiation process. Netanyahu, however, has conditioned negotiations on different principles, prioritizing security arrangements and recognition of Israel as a Jewish State. The demand to recognize the Jewishness of the State of Israel was not simply a reordering of Israel's negotiation priorities but as an addition to the core issues, it considers a prerequisite to resolve the conflict (Tal-Landman, 2010a, 2010b). Netanyahu understood that a symbolic recognition, loaded with historical implications of the Jewish people's right to the land, would serve as compensation for the right wing's agreement to partition. He reiterated the recognition claim in his addresses at the Bar Ilan University in June 2009 and the Foreign Relations Council in New York in July 2010, as well as in his Annual Congratulatory Address to the Jewish people on the Jewish New Year that same year, his address to the US Congress in 2011, and his address to the United Nations in September 2011.

In his Bar-Ilan speech, Netanyahu accepted in principle the establishment of a Palestinian state in parts of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip under one condition: Palestinians should accept Israel as "Jewish State". This is a difficult demand for any Palestinian leader to accept because it would deny the right of return for millions of Palestinian refugees and condone discrimination towards Palestinian citizens of Israel, which make up a fifth of the population (Zanotti, 2010: 6–7).

Netanyahu's new condition was, in effect, a profound innovation. It drew a link for the first time between recognition and successful negotiations on all the core issues of the conflict. In a statement preceding his meeting with Abbas in Sharm Al-Sheikh, Netanyahu reiterated his conviction that recognition was the "most significant obstacle to peace remaining". At the same meeting, he stated: "If we can get over the issue of mutual recognition, I hope that next year we will be able to congratulate one another on achieving an agreement for peace". Oftentimes, Netanyahu described the Palestinian refusal of recognition as the "root of the conflict" (Abu Seif and Mustafa, 2011). This allowed Netanyahu to decouple the conflict and Israel's occupation. In a meeting with Christians United for Israel, organized in Jerusalem in March 2012, Netanyahu said: "Our enemies don't hate us for what we do; they hate us for what we are".[3] Ahead of launching the 2010 negotiations in Washington DC, which coincided with the Jewish New Year, Netanyahu asserted:

> We insist that settlement between us and the Palestinians should rest on two fundamentals – security and recognition … Security because any peace will not hold on without real security arrangements on the ground. The second is, of course, recognition of Israel as a national state of the Jewish people. They demand that we recognize a Palestinian state, and it is natural that we demand that the other party recognize the Jewish State, a state of the people of Israel.[4]

The recognition discourse admits that the core of the conflict dates back to 1948 rather than 1967. Netanyahu argues that the "de-legitimation" of Israel, which he says has intensified over recent years, is grounded in the failure to recognize Israel as a Jewish state. In a December 2010 interview, after efforts to resume negotiations failed due to the Israeli government's refusal to extend the settlement freeze, Netanyahu said:

> Even if we reach peace, our legitimacy will continue to be at stake, because its roots do not

date back to the 1967 events. Its roots [of de-legitimation] date back to the 1948 events – the attack on the existence of the Jewish State…. There is an attempt to prevent the Jews from having a State of their own….

<div align="right">(<em>Haaretz</em>, 20.12.2010)</div>

In his speech in the US Congress, in May 2011, he said:

Why has peace not been achieved? Because so far, the Palestinians have been unwilling to accept a Palestinian state if it meant accepting a Jewish state alongside it. You see, our conflict has never been about the establishment of a Palestinian state; it's always been about the existence of the Jewish state.

<div align="right">(<em>Haaretz</em>, 25.5.2011)</div>

In his speech to the UN in September 2011, Netanyahu returned to this argument:

Our conflict has been raging for – was raging for – nearly half a century before there was a single Israeli settlement in the West Bank. So if what President Abbas is saying [in the UN] was true, then the – I guess that the settlements he's talking about are Tel Aviv, Haifa, Jaffa, Be'er Sheva. Maybe that's what he meant the other day when he said that Israel has been occupying Palestinian land for 63 years. He didn't say from 1967; he said from 1948. I hope somebody will bother to ask him this question because it illustrates a simple truth: The core of the conflict is not the settlements. The settlements are a result of the conflict…. The settlements have to be – it's an issue that has to be addressed and resolved in the course of negotiations. But the core of the conflict has always been, and unfortunately remains, the refusal of the Palestinians to recognize a Jewish state in any border. I think it's time that the Palestinian leadership recognizes what every serious international leader has recognized, from Lord Balfour and Lloyd George in 1917, to President Truman in 1948, to President Obama just two days ago right here: Israel is the Jewish state.

<div align="right">(<em>Haaretz</em>, 24.9.2011)</div>

Earlier, that same year, Netanyahu declared in a speech to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC):

… if we hope to advance peace with the Palestinians, then it's time that we admitted another truth. This conflict has raged for nearly a century because the Palestinians refuse to end it. They refuse to accept the Jewish state … our conflict has never been about the establishment of a Palestinian state. It has always been about the existence of the Jewish state. This is what this conflict is about.[5]

These statements are in line with a plethora of speeches, in which Netanyahu has asserted that the essence of the conflict is recognition, not occupation. Accordingly, the core of the conflict is seen to have been generated from a failure by the Palestinians to recognize the Jewish state since 1948, not Israel's occupation that has been going on since 1967.

Netanyahu has repeatedly insisted on recognition, furthering attempts to make this strategy operative. On three occasions in March 2011, he highlighted this position in addresses to the Knesset before leaving for Washington DC to appear before the AIPAC and the US Congress. Netanyahu insisted that "the problem does not lie with 1967, but with 1948. The problem does not generate from the establishment of a Palestinian state, but from the lack of recognition of a

Jewish State".[6] The recognition discourse attempts to overlook Israel's status as an occupying power. To this end, Netanyahu said a Jewish presence in the West Bank was not an occupation, but a return by the Jewish people to the land of their forefathers: "The land is a historic right of the Jews". Accordingly, Netanyahu has claimed that Israel is not an occupying power, but that its right to occupied territory is both historical and religious and that he is willing to make painful concessions on such land in exchange for Palestinian recognition of Israel as a "Jewish state". This has become a core Israeli demand for any progress in peace talks with the PLO.

Netanyahu is not alone in making such demands. In 2012, Moshe Ya'alon, then his deputy and the Minister of Strategic Affairs, expressed a similar view:

> As long as the other side is not ready to recognize our right to exist as the nation-state of the Jewish people, I am not ready to forgo a millimeter. I am not even willing to talk about territory. After land-for-peace became land-for-terror and land-for-rockets, I am no longer willing to bury my head in the sand. In the reality of the Middle East what is needed is stability above all. Stability is achieved not by means of imaginary agreements on the White House lawn but by means of defense, by means of a thick stick and a carrot … We can live like this for another 100 years, too.

Regarding the demographic threat, should the current situation continue, he stated:

> The demographic argument is a lie. As for political legitimacy, I prefer to operate against a threatening entity from within the present lines. And morally, as long as the Palestinians do not recognize the right of existence of a Jewish state, they are the aggressor.

Following these clarifications, he agreed to present his vision regarding a solution with the Palestinians: "The Palestinians will have autonomy and have their own parliament. I can tolerate that state of affairs. Any other state of affairs will be irresponsible in security terms"[7].

Netanyahu's predecessors also placed "recognition" on the negotiations agenda. The issue emerged in the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, as well as in the Declaration of Principles signed in Oslo. In these agreements, however, Israel was satisfied with a formula of recognition as acknowledged in international relations – that is, recognition as a political entity and of its sovereignty within recognized borders. The demand for recognition of the Jewish state first appeared in Israel's response to the Road Map during Sharon's term. Sharon not only demanded Palestinian recognition of Israel's right to exist, but of the national rights of the Jewish people and national nature of the State of Israel. The demand was reiterated at the 2007 Annapolis conference, where Olmert and Livni demanded that recognition be incorporated into the announcement of the launch of negotiations. Netanyahu, however, introduced a major shift in terms of recognition. Israeli researcher Shiri Tal-Landman has stated that Netanyahu is the only leader to stipulate an agreement on recognition. Netanyahu further vested recognition with a clearer and more binding essence – recognition of the Jewishness of the State and of Israel as the state of the Jewish people. Moreover, Netanyahu insisted on recognition as the top priority in the negotiations agenda, taking precedence over other substantive issues, including Jerusalem, refugees, borders, settlements and security arrangements (Tal-Landman, 2010a, 2010b).

Netanyahu well understood what the demand for recognition meant and what ramifications it would have on other substantive issues. A Palestinian recognition of a Jewish state implies a Palestinian concession of the right to return, pre-empting negotiations on that core issue. It also extracts a Palestinian recognition of Israel's historical narrative, as well as Jewish rights to Jerusalem and the West Bank, including sovereignty over the settlements in the West Bank. This was why the Palestinian side constantly rejected demands for such recognition.

## Basic components of Netanyahu's position on the peace settlement

Netanyahu believes that interim solutions are best for a negotiation strategy with the Palestinians. He wants to manage the conflict with the Palestinians through negotiations per se, not to reach a final solution. Netanyahu's stipulation that Palestinians recognize the Jewish state and the Jewish people's right to the land seeks to introduce new factors to the negotiation process. Given that the Palestinian side refuses talks about recognition, Netanyahu's condition further complicates the conflict resolution initiative.

On various occasions, Netanyahu has introduced innovations to his earlier, traditional positions regarding the shape of, and approach to, the settlement process. In 2011, he delivered four key addresses that helped to clarify his views. There was an address to the Knesset on May 16, 2011; an address to the US Congress eight days later; a speech to AIPAC on June 28, 2011; and an address to the United Nations General Assembly on September 23, 2011. In these speeches, Netanyahu made fundamental additions, clarifications and observations about a negotiated settlement that he seemed to regard as more powerful and binding than his famous address at Bar Ilan University in June 2009. According to Oded Eran, these emerged out of two contradictory pressures Netanyahu was under, from the international community and from his government coalition partners (Eran, 2011).

The first time he made these observations was in a Knesset address two weeks ahead of his speech to the US Congress. He set forth the following points: the refugee problem would be resolved outside the borders of the State of Israel; settlement blocs would be under Israel's sovereignty; and the Israeli army would continue to be deployed in the Jordan Valley. Responding to criticisms from his coalition partners that he had not mentioned the annexation of the settlement blocs, Netanyahu reiterated to the US Congress that some blocs would be located east of the Palestinian-Israeli border (Abu Seif and Mustafa, 2011).

Nevertheless, the Israeli Prime Minister offered an integrated package, one that signaled the formula for a final solution he wishes to see materialize. Though his proposal reflects the shape of the desired solution, it is not a real vision. It implies three fundamental conditions: (1) the Jewish nature and status of the Israeli state; (2) the maintenance of Israeli control over the Jordan Valley area; and (3) the borders of a Palestinian state. However, an analysis of Netanyahu's positions helps reveal seven major features of the settlement with the Palestinians he envisions:

1. Palestinian recognition of Israel as a Jewish state. The criterion of a peace settlement is recognition of two states for two peoples. If the State of Palestine is for the Palestinian people, Israel should be a state of the Jewish people.
2. There is not one single refugee problem, but several. Like the Palestinians, Israel also has a refugee problem: Jews from the Arab world. An appropriate and reciprocal solution should be devised for each problem. In the aftermath of the 1948 war, the Jewish refugee problem was resolved in Israel. Similarly, the Palestinian refugee problem should be resolved in the Palestinian state, or Arab states, not in Israel.
3. The Palestinian state should be unarmed. It cannot possess weapons that would threaten the existence and security of Israel. This necessitates an Israeli military presence along the Jordan River. The border of the Palestinian state will be demarcated in line with an agreement between the Israeli and Palestinian sides. Demarcation will not be grounded on the June 4, 1967 border, but must take account of the demographic weight of the Israeli presence in the settlements. Major settlement blocs and residential areas will be annexed to

the State of Israel. Israel will dismantle some settlement outposts, those that it deems that it can afford to concede. In other words, the border cannot be confirmed ahead of negotiations; only negotiations can delineate the Palestinian state's borders. The 1967 border is not workable as a base line. For Netanyahu, that border cannot be defended militarily. This position is further invoked to justify the need to keep control of the Jordan Valley, so as to ensure Israel's power of deterrence.

4. Israel will maintain control over the Jordan Valley area. In a geographical, and perhaps moral and political sense, the Palestinian state will not have an eastern border with Jordan. Israeli scenarios start with control of this area for at least 40 years, followed by Israeli security and military control, and end with Palestinian civilian sovereignty. Explaining the Israeli proposal, Abbas has said it is nothing but a continuation of the occupation. In a March 2011 tour of the Jordan Valley, Netanyahu said: "No matter what future conditions are and within the framework of any agreement, the Israeli army must stay here, deploying along the Jordan River. This is the insurance policy of the State of Israel".[8]

   In light of the deteriorating regional situation, including the Arab Spring, the vacuum created by the US withdrawal from Iraq and increasing Iranian influence, Netanyahu assumes that Israel will be subjected to security threats from the east. Unlike the situation with the Egyptian border, Israel cannot risk turning the Jordan Valley into a corridor for arms trafficking. Justifying maintenance of the Jordan Valley area, Netanyahu explained: "If this was true before that major turmoil that rattles the Middle East and whole region, it is particularly applicable today. The Israeli army must remain deployed along the Jordan River".[9]

5. The settlements have never been the root of the problem in the Middle East, "unless Palestinians mean by settlements Tel Aviv, Haifa, Jaffa and Be'er-Sheva". According to Netanyahu, the conflict predates by scores of years the construction of the settlements. Netanyahu has said: "We uprooted thousands of people from their homes. We pulled children out of – out of their schools and their kindergartens. We bulldozed synagogues … but didn't get peace".[10] Accordingly, settlement blocs with a relatively high population density near metropolitan Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and other areas of strategic or national significance will be annexed to Israel. Nonetheless, Israel will be ready to make concessions on land. Saying that he would be generous, Netanyahu stressed that such painful concessions were necessary for the sake of peace.

6. Jerusalem will be unified under Israeli sovereignty. Though Israel is aware of Palestinian sentiments when it comes to holy places, it will not affect sovereignty in Jerusalem. At the UN General Assembly, Netanyahu said he was surprised by the Palestinian claim that Israel is "Judaizing Jerusalem". He wondered whether America was "Americanizing New York!" For Netanyahu, the greatest virtue of the June 1967 war is that it unified Jerusalem. He still narrates stories from his childhood about these moments. Accordingly, he considers partition of the city out of the question. Still, Israel will safeguard the freedom of worship for followers of all religions.

7. The conclusion of an agreement with Palestinians must come in parallel with a Palestinian declaration of a termination of the conflict, as well as an end to all Palestinian claims. A Palestinian state cannot be established alongside the State of Israel and continue to be in conflict with it or try to exert pressure on it.

In conclusion, regarding the Netanyahu government's approach towards a solution of the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict between 2009 and 2017, we differentiate between two concepts: reconciliation, which requires a deep level of openness towards the other and their narrative and needs; and a political settlement, which includes a limited political arrangement and readiness to meet the needs of the other, without a historical reconciliation. We claim that the Israeli approach contains a demand for reconciliation from the Palestinian side towards Israel, while being ready to offer the Palestinian side only a limited political and territorial compromise. An assessment of the Israeli political discourse over the past eight years indicates that Israel is implementing a compound negotiation strategy to resolve the conflict that entails settlement and reconciliation components. On the other hand, Israel wants the Palestinians to approach Israel through the reconciliation process: recognize Israel as a Jewish state, acknowledge the Israeli narrative of a lack of moral and practical responsibility for the Palestinian refugee problem, and admit that Jerusalem is a holy city for Jews only. On the other hand, the maximum terms of a settlement Israel is willing to offer the Palestinians include an unarmed, geographically fragmented Palestinian state, while at the same time Israel preserves the settlement blocs and maintains control of the Jordan Valley. This Israeli strategy is grounded in a power imbalance: Israel is capable of imposing a settlement and reconciliation on the Palestinian party, while the Palestinian side is unable to make demands of Israel.

The Palestinian struggle is not just a conflict against a colonial power, but over competing narratives, memory and identity. As suggested in the conflict resolution literature, Israel's strategy is at odds with the logic of reconciliation. A core component of reconciliation is reciprocity, but Israel is dealing with reconciliation through disproportionate power relations. Partial engagement in reconciliation consolidates power imbalances between the parties, ultimately forcing the Palestinian side to refuse to engage in this kind of unilateral reconciliation. The Palestinians are aware that even reciprocal reconciliation is unfair because it is based on the outcomes of the 1967 war and fails to seriously address the results of the 1948 war.

## Notes

1 See, for instance, the document published by the Settlement Council on the eve of the Palestinian initiatives at the United Nations: http://www.news1.co.il/Archive/003-D-59332-00.html

2 The following, until the end of this chapter, were published in Mohanad Mustafa, As'ad Ghanem. 2013. "The Israeli Negotiation Strategy under Netanyahu: Settlement without Reconciliation," *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 24(3): 265–283.

3 Hasson, N. "Waiting for the Messiah: Netanyahu Addresses Evangelical Christian Gathering in Jerusalem," *Haaretz*, 19.3. 2012. www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/waiting-for-the-messiah-netanyahu-addresses-evangelical-christian-gathering-in-jerusalem-1.419432

4 For a complete transcript of Netanyahu's address, see www.pm.gov.il\PMO\Communication\Spokesman\2010/09

5 See the Manuscript of the speech in this link: www.imra.org.il/story.php3

6 See *Haaretz*, 25.5.2011, which dedicated a major portion to cover Netanyahu's address to the US Congress.

7 Shavit A. "Interview with Moshe Yaalon," *Haaretz*, 14.6.2012. p. 34.

8 Al Ayyam, Netanyahu Makes a Tour in the Jordan Valley: Our Army will Stay here and Israel's Security Border Lies on Jordan River. 9 March 2011.

9 Ibid.

10 Netanyahu address to the UN General Assembly in New York in March 23, 2011. For the full text of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's address, see: www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/full-transcript-of-netanyahu-speech-at-un-general-assembly-1.386464.

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# 4 Israel and Hamas – from security treatment to political adaptation

Israel's approach toward the Gaza Strip in the post-Oslo era is considered among the most important recent developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Under Ariel Sharon's leadership, Israel transformed its relationship with Gaza in 2005 by withdrawing from the Strip. In doing so, Israel created a separate reality in Gaza from the West Bank, paving the way for a split between Hamas and Fatah in 2007 when the Islamic movement forcefully took over Gaza. The political program of the new Hamas government in Gaza led to developments that further entrenched the internal Palestinian schism. Moreover, this generated a new phase in Israel's treatment of Gaza, fundamentally different from previous periods.

Shmuel Sandler differentiates three historic-political phases in Gaza. In the first, between 1948 and 1967, Gaza was under Egyptian rule, and resistance operations against Israel were supported by Cairo. Israel took its own military measures against the Palestinians' armed attacks from Gaza. These confrontations peaked during the Tripartite Aggression in 1956, when the Strip was conquered by Israel for the first time. During the second phase, between 1967 and 2005, Gaza was under Israel's direct occupation. As Sandler points out, the most important development was the reestablishment of relations between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, further enhanced by the Camp David agreement, which detached the West Bank from Jordanian rule, and the Oslo Accords, premised on the political reintegration of the two territories. In the third phase, following Israel's unilateral withdrawal in 2005, Gaza gradually became a "semi-state", through Hamas's victory in the Palestinian legislative elections 2006 and its takeover of the Strip a year later. This phase is characterized by separation from, and the division between, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank (see Sandler, 2012: 1–4).

Since Israel's disengagement in August 2005, Israel has launched seven military operations targeting Palestinians in Gaza (see Table 4.1). Between April 2001 and Israel's Operation Pillar of Defense in 2012, some 7,361 rockets and shells were launched from the Gaza Strip into Israel. During that same period, there were 4,717 Palestinian fatalities and 59 Israeli deaths (Sandler, 2012: 1–4). In the following section, we examine the two most recent wars on Gaza, in 2012 and 2014, in the context of cementing the political and geographical separation of Gaza from the West Bank. We argue that the war of 2008–2009 on the Gaza Strip emerged out of Israeli military and security considerations, whereas the two recent wars were part of an Israeli strategy intended to divide the Palestinian national movement.

Hamas became a major actor in shaping Israeli-Palestinian relations when it won the second Palestinian legislative elections in 2006. This development was accentuated in June 2007 when Hamas took command of Gaza by force. True, Hamas had previously succeeded in inserting itself into the conflict with Israel by leading opposition to the Oslo Accords and the "peace process". But it was treated chiefly as a security problem at this stage for its attacks on Israeli targets. However, after Hamas's victory in the 2006 elections, Israel was faced with a serious

debate about how to deal with Hamas, which had rejected the Oslo agreements that were the basis for its participation in the elections and was not prepared to proceed in the negotiation process made possible by Oslo. The International Quartet, which oversaw the peace process, stipulated conditions requiring Hamas to recognize Israel and to work in accordance with the Oslo agreements. Now, Hamas became not only Israel's problem but also the international community's.

In addition, Hamas's rejection of the Oslo Accords constituted a threat to the cohesion of the Palestinian political order. This situation became explicit when Hamas seized control of Gaza. From the moment of its electoral victory, as it tried to govern with Fatah, Hamas adhered to a conceptual differentiation between an "authority" and a "government". It considered itself a government, rather than an authority, even though its ministers sit in a building that carries the Palestinian Authority's insignia and title. Hamas has turned this distinction into the pillar of its repudiation of Oslo.

The key question facing the Israeli political and intelligence communities was whether Hamas would moderate its positions and accept the political process instituted by the Oslo accords. Hamas made its position clear from the start, even while it tried to negotiate over a Palestinian reconciliation government before it finally seized control of Gaza in 2007. The eventual split with Fatah signified that it rejected the idea of acting as an authority, even while it insisted on the right to govern. It organized in a way designed to preserve and promote its rule. Until then, Israel's intelligence and political establishments had been thinking of Hamas solely in terms of a security threat and as an enemy organization. This earlier period had been characterized by Hamas's continuous attacks on Israeli targets in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, as well as inside Israel, both before and during the second Intifada. Security was the only prism through which Israel looked at the first example of organized political Islam in Palestine, an extension of the wider Muslim Brotherhood.

Hamas was already in effective control of the Gaza Strip when it captured Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier, in June 2006. This event led to a series of clashes between Israel and Hamas in Gaza that culminated in Israeli invasions and incursions into the Strip from the north, east and west. These skirmishes ended in unofficial truces that served merely as preludes to the next round of fighting. Certainly, some of these incidents were halted as a result of contacts between the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Israel, with Egyptian mediation. Such arrangements did not change the nature of the relations between Israel and Hamas, which remained on the level of security and confrontation. Hamas's participation in the truces had no political significance other than as a temporary move to protect the Palestinian population from the fighting. That is to say, the arrangements were made on the basis that Hamas was not responsible for the Gaza Strip, even though it totally dominated the government for 18 months between its electoral victory in January 2006 and its violent takeover of the Strip in June 2007.

Israel responded by announcing economic sanctions, restricting the entry of products and basic resources into the Gaza Strip through the six crossings that connected Gaza to Israel. The mutual exchange of goods was severely reduced, and Israel limited Gaza's relations to the outside world by restricting movement through the Beit Hanun, or Erez, crossing. There were similar moves to prevent movement at the Rafah crossing, with Israel on more than one occasion shelling the crossing to halt activity there. Israel also tightly controlled movement of Gaza's seafaring community and its fishermen. Gaza's airport was inactive and repeatedly targeted during Israel's attacks on the Gaza Strip.

After 2007, Hamas's uncontested control of the Gaza Strip led to two significant changes in

the movement's relationship with Israel. First, Hamas now directly ruled the Gaza Strip and was solely responsible for its relationship with Israel. Despite its participation in earlier Palestinian governments and involvement in Palestinian security apparatuses, Hamas's role had never been dominant. Second, in this context, Hamas could now be considered responsible for everything that took place in the Gaza Strip. It was not only in charge of Palestinians' lives and their safety, but was also accountable for its conduct toward Israel. In the past, Israel had blamed the PA for any activity in the Gaza Strip it viewed as hostile, whether from Hamas or others. Now, Hamas is indisputably a responsible party.

These developments necessitated a degree of dialogue or negotiation with Israel. As a result, a solution was found in negotiations through a mediator, better known as "indirect talks". This became the channel of communication between the parties, and has proved effective during much of Hamas's rule, including during the wars on Gaza in December 2008 to January 2009, and again in 2012, and in arriving at a deal over Gilad Shalit in 2011. Throughout these phases, Egypt was the prime mediator, negotiating between the parties in adjacent rooms. Even indirect talks provoked controversy in Israeli political circles, with the government justifying such contacts on the grounds that they were conducted out of necessity, not conviction. This situation continued until the war of 2014, when negotiations under Egyptian auspices were expanded to include the PA and representatives of other Palestinian factions. Nonetheless, Israel was well aware that it was Hamas's representatives and not the other factions that determined the course of these talks.

The resulting agreements, unsigned and guaranteed by mediators, were important not only because they prevented a deterioration but because they became reference points for determining the relationship. These understandings were at the core of early discussions of how to put an end to the Israeli attacks. More importantly, due to their ineffectiveness, it may be inferred that both parties wanted to arrive at deeper understandings serving their respective practical interests. These mediations failed to satisfy either party's aspirations (Dekel, 2014a).

In addition, it is not entirely untrue that Hamas's situation in Gaza – as the official representative of the people there – is politically convenient. Israel, for her part, began to assume that Hamas's dominance of Gaza was permanent and therefore it should devise better answers for dealing with this arrangement. It is necessary to examine briefly Israel's positions toward Hamas in the period between June 2007, when Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip, and July 2014, Israel's third major war on Gaza, with a particular focus on the outcomes of the two previous wars (2008–2009 and 2012).

Before the 2014 war, Israel committed two major attacks on Gaza, specifically targeting Hamas's rule in the Gaza Strip and its military arsenals, as well as its capacity to launch rockets into Israeli cities. Reviewing the available literature on these two wars, we find that their goals were limited. Despite the high levels of death and destruction, the wars focused on Hamas's military capabilities with the intention of deterring them from launching further rockets.[1] A prolonged discussion took place in Israel, at the political and military levels, regarding the best ways to respond to rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip. Solutions were limited to containing Palestinians' rocket abilities. Despite calls from some Israeli decision-makers to put an end to Hamas's rule, the outcome of these two wars suggested that most preferred that Hamas remain in Gaza but with reduced capabilities. Thus, if Hamas could be persuaded to cease launching rockets, there would be no objection to pursuing arrangements – indirectly – for co-existing with it in some way or another.

This position was evident in the truces following each confrontation, with the focus on finding

ways to stop the launching of rockets from Gaza. The fact that Hamas had shown itself capable of tracking down rocket launchers and had refused to be drawn into moments of deterioration initiated by Islamic Jihad testified, from Israel's perspective, to the argument that it was possible to co-exist with Hamas. Some leading figures in the Israeli intelligence community stated that Hamas had guaranteed unprecedented calm and was serious about tracking down rocket launchers. Others even claimed that Hamas was an almost ideal partner (Mustafa and Abu-Seif, 2014).

These two wars on Gaza increasingly stabilized the rules of the game with Hamas – that is, clarified the outlines of informal understandings that guaranteed Hamas would remain in charge of the Gaza Strip. In short, these understandings committed Israel not to undermine Hamas's rule (Table 4.1).

*Table 4.1* The total outcome of the conflict between Israel and the Gaza Strip following the unilateral withdrawal

|  | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2014 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Name of Israeli operation | First rain | Summer rain, and spring cloud |  | Hot rain | Operation cast lead |  |  | Pillar of defense | Protective edge operation |
| Number of launched Palestinian rockets | 179 | 946 | 930 | 1,968 | 577 | 152 | 418 | 1,717 | 4,500 |
| Israeli casualties | 4 | 5 | 2 | 8 | 9 | 3 | 11 | 9 | 70 military personnel |
| Palestinian casualties | 103 | 525 | 295 | 833 | 1,013 | 68 | 105 | 227 | 2,104 |

Source: *Haaretz*, 23.11.2012; authors' design.

## The war in 2012: Israeli adaption to Gaza's political reality

Israel named the 2012 war on Gaza as "Pillar of Defense", while Hamas and other Palestinian resistance movements called it "Stones of Shale". The different names referenced the two parties' religious heritage. "Pillar of Defense", mentioned in the Torah, was a miracle that guided and protected the Jews as they made their exodus from Egypt. "Stones of Shale", from the Quran, refers to God sending a bird to drop stones on al-Abraha al-Arsham, the King of Abyssinia, who had arrived to destroy the Ka'aba. He and his army were destroyed.

Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu did not define clear goals for the operation. In his first speech immediately after its launch, he delivered an ideologically muddled speech that contrasted strongly with his clear pronouncements during Operation Cast Lead in late 2008,

when he was in the opposition. He said of Pillar of Defense:

> Hamas and the other terrorist groups have chosen to escalate their attack on the citizens of Israel. We will not accept a situation in which the citizens of Israel are under the threat of rockets. No country would accept this and Israel won't accept this. Today, we hit with accuracy strategic targets belonging to Hamas, and we have also hit deeply into their capabilities of launching rockets from Gaza to the center of Israel. We have also hit their capabilities aimed at the south.… They want to erase us from the surface of the earth. Therefore, they do not hesitate to shell innocent citizens. Today, we taught Hamas a lesson. If needed, we will expand the military operation.[2]

The Ministry of Defense defined more obviously concrete goals for the operation: "First of all, enhancing deterrence; second, hitting the rocket system, directing a painful blow to Hamas and terrorist organizations; and finally, reducing the number of hits on the Israeli internal front".[3]

"Pillar of Defense" received overwhelming support from the Israeli public: 85% supported its launch; 68% agreed that there were objective grounds for carrying out the operation, namely the firing of rockets at Israeli communities; while only 26% believed that the main reason for the war was Netanyahu's efforts to improve his electoral prospects. The same survey showed that 45% of the public thought aerial strikes would suffice without a ground invasion.[4]

There were vigorous political, academic and journalistic debates at the start of the war about the political and military priorities at stake. Some emphasized the military aspects, restricting the discussion to matters of deterrence, while others believed the war's political importance justified more "painful" military blows aimed at Hamas.

Amos Yadlin, a former director of military intelligence and the current head of the Centre for the Study of National Security in Tel Aviv, observed that the Gaza Strip was one front of the Palestinian problem and that Israel had to see the matter in a broader context relating to the Palestinians. According to Yadlin, Israel's current policy toward the Palestinian Authority "emptied it of legitimacy". He suggested that Israel should offer a carrot to Palestinian moderates and wield a stick against the radicals. He acknowledged that the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza was an important strategic step for Israel and that it should not return to occupying Gaza and becoming responsible for its 1.5 million Palestinians (Yadlin, 2012).

Countering Yadlin's political focus, two researchers from the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar Ilan University, Efraim Inbar and Max Singer, argued that Israel's attack on Gaza was militarily important – and not only to reassert Israel's power of deterrence and damage the Islamic resistance in Gaza. It was also important in a regional context, where Islamic movements were making political gains in general and bolstering their political authority. Israel's power of deterrence, therefore, derived from preserving its interests in the light of these new regional developments. Both researchers suggested that an escalation in military operations might reduce the room for future hostile activity against Israel in the region. They argued that the Israeli government should engage in a ground operation potentially lasting weeks, and should convince its allies, particularly the US, that a prolonged ground operation would, on the one hand, prevent the launching of rockets into residential areas, and, on the other hand, prevent future confrontations (Inbar and Singer, 2012).

In a research paper, which seemed more populist than a scientific analysis, Dr. Eitan Shamir continued with a similarly narrow military perspective. He pointed out that, despite Israel's military achievements in "Pillar of Defense", Israel had left itself with two problems. First, Hamas had not accepted that it lost the war, but rather viewed it as a victory. He argued that

Israel should have reached a situation that would have made such a declaration by Hamas impossible (though, as the writer pointed out, Hamas's claim was not objectively true). Second, the war did not prevent Hamas from restocking its arsenal of rockets, which would make the next confrontation more difficult than the current one (Shamir, 2012).

In another vein, Professor Shmuel Sandler, also from the Begin-Sadat Center, presented a regional vision. He believed Israel's goal should be to deepen Egypt's intervention in Gaza, thereby creating an intimate connection between Egypt and Gaza that would require Cairo to disarm the Gaza Strip (Sandler, 2012). Following a historical survey of the conflict between Israel and Gaza since 1948, the writer suggested that the best option for Israel would be for Egypt to regain control over Gaza based on deepening the connections between the two sides.

In the same regional context, Professor Hillel Frisch of the Begin-Sadat Center contended that Egypt's then-President, Muhammad Morsi, would be able to restore stability and order in Gaza, but only on condition that the US and Europe recognized him as the new "Pharaoh". Frisch also thought that it was in the Egyptian President's best interest to guarantee stability on this front, considering the internal conditions of Egypt, the region's wider realities, and particularly in regard to what was happening in Syria. The Arab countries were more concerned with the Syrian front than the Palestinian one, he argued (Frisch, 2012).

General Giora Eland, head of Israel's National Security Council during Ariel Sharon's rule, merged a military and political analysis. He claimed that there were common interests between Israel and Hamas which could be realized. Both were interested in a truce, scaling down Israel's problem with Gaza to one of security only: "Israel's problem with Gaza is the launching of rockets targeting the south of Israel". He contended that, if Israel granted Hamas a political achievement, Israel would be able to realize its security aims in the war (Ashkenazi, 2012). Eland wanted Israel to make political compromises in return for security gains, asking for a mutual ceasefire and the prevention of arms entering the Gaza Strip, with those guarantees overseen by Egypt and possibly also Turkey. The most important concession from Israel would be to relieve the blockade of Gaza, placing European forces in its harbor to prevent arms smuggling. Eland also suggested that Israel recognize Hamas as a national government, administering matters in Gaza. He pointed out that there was a political advantage for Israel in recognizing Gaza as a state, given that Israel could not stop the rockets by either military means or a ground operation. Israel's security interests should instead be realized through political compromise, such as by recognizing Hamas's rule. Eland dealt with the issue exclusively from a security perspective, whereas Israel has related to Gaza both as a security matter and a political one.

In a context in which Israel faced demands to start negotiations with Hamas, Israeli literary figure A. B. Yehoshua published an article titled "Conversing with Hamas". Yehoshua claimed that Israel should describe Hamas as an enemy.

> The time has come to stop describing Hamas as a terrorist organization and rather define it as the enemy. The use of the term terrorism, particularly favored by the Prime Minister [Netanyahu], disrupts the opportunity to arrive at a long-term agreement with this hard enemy. Today, Hamas controls the ground, it has an army and governmental institutions as well as a broadcasting stations. It has also received recognition from various countries in the world. An organization that possesses a country is not a terrorist organization but an enemy.
>
> (Yehoshua, 2012)

Yehoshua clarified: "Is this only a matter of terminology? No. A dialogue is possible with an enemy and we may arrive at agreements whereas with a terrorist organization there is no point to dialogue as we may not arrive at agreements". Yehoshua pointed out that Hamas is not a movement of "suicide soldiers only", but a political movement. Based on this distinction, Yehoshua suggested that Israel should work to arrive at an agreement with Hamas through negotiations. He also contended that agreements between the two parties should be based on the following points: Hamas agrees to active international monitoring that leads to disarming the Gaza Strip; the crossing between Gaza and Egypt should be opened, and the crossing to Israel should be opened to allow for the entry of Palestinian workers; the crossing between Gaza and the West Bank should be gradually opened based on the Oslo Accords to renovate Palestinian unity before starting negotiations with Israel; the PA cannot negotiate with Israel without Hamas's involvement.

Kobi Richter, head of the combat division in Israel's air force, also suggested that Israel should change its approach to Hamas.

> I agree with the principal policy of not negotiating with terrorists, but there are two ways of distinguishing between the issues [i.e., negotiations and terrorism]. The first, flawed distinction defines the other as a terrorist and therefore refuses to engage in negotiations. The second, preferable distinction is to position the other outside the circle of terrorism by means of suggesting various ways for negotiations, and to continue negotiating with parties that are not terrorists. Israel has to take the initiative politically and abandon the claim that dialogue with terrorism is surrendering to extortion.
>
> (Richter, 2012)

Similarly, Professor Ibraham Sela from the Truman Institute for International Relations at Hebrew University, argued that Israel's policy toward Hamas was no longer relevant, particularly since the room for military activity toward the Palestinians had been sharply reduced in the wake of recent changes in the Arab states. According to Sela, there was a gulf between Israel's military capabilities and the political skills of its leadership. Israeli leaders had neither benefited from the country's military achievements nor gained greater political space for their activities (Sela, 2012). Sela considered talk of Israeli deterrence in relation to "terrorist organizations" to be delusional, and only relevant in states of conflict between nations. Even there, a kind of ambiguity surrounded such terms. Sela concluded:

> Confronting threats from semi-national organizations such as Hamas, it is not sufficient to rely on military force or imposing sieges because such steps do not provide proper answers for the special situation in the Gaza Strip or its people. Certainly, Israel's militarily advantage is not related to the question of whether it is possible to rip Gaza's military capabilities from the root.

General Doron Almog, who served as the Israeli army southern commander, restricted his view to the post-war phase and the problem of arms smuggling. He believed this was the issue that should be preoccupying the political leadership. Almog argued that the 14 km-long border fence between Gaza and Egypt was a source of power for Hamas. Conquering the southern section of the Gaza Strip and creating a 5 km-wide buffer zone along the length of the border fence (Philadelphia corridor) presented a tactical solution, but what was needed was a strategic solution, particularly in light of recent developments in Israel and the region. Almog suggested a strategic coalition, comprising the US, Israel and Egypt, to prevent arms smuggling along the

fence (Almog, 2012).

Almog's suggestion sounded far removed from the new realities he himself mentioned. When Hosni Mubarak was Egypt's president, he did not seek a strategic alliance with Israel to prevent arms smuggling to the Gaza Strip. So why did Almog expect that Egypt, following the revolution there and the rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood under Morsi, would enter such a coalition? It seemed that Almog's view had been fueled by the general excitement in Israel at Egypt's role in achieving a ceasefire. Nonetheless, it was long stretch to move from this to a strategic alliance with Israel to prevent arms trafficking. Egypt pushed for a ceasefire based on its own national interests and the transformations it was undergoing. Also, it intervened out of moral duty to stop the bombardment of Gaza, because Egypt after the revolution could no longer accept the continued attacks on Palestinians.

Israelis were divided on the outcome of the war: 45% claimed that there was no clear winner; 40% believed Israel was the victor; and 11% regarded Hamas as emerging victorious. Regarding the strategic reality following the war, 38% believed nothing had changed, 36% said Israel's strategic situation had improved and 21% thought it had deteriorated.[5]

The war on Gaza contributed to important political changes. Most importantly, Israel was forced to adapt to the new political realities in Gaza. Israel had not dealt previously with the Strip from a security perspective alone. It had considered political concerns, such as its interests in deepening the rift in the Palestinian national movement. Slogans of destroying "Hamas's rule" in Gaza, for example, clashed with an Israeli vision of entrenching divisions and weakening the Palestinian national movement. When Netanyahu was in the opposition, during the 2008–2009 war, he demanded that the government subvert Hamas's rule, feverishly calling it "Iran's long arm" on Israel's southern borders. When Netanyahu became Prime Minister and launched Pillar of Defense, by contrast, he defined what he termed "moderate goals", with the aim of reviving Israel's power of deterrence against the Gaza Strip and stopping the rockets from falling on residential areas in Israel. In response, Shaul Mofaz, a former military chief of staff, demanded the military operation should intensify. In both wars, Israel did not attempt to prevent rocket fire by military means. Even when it had engaged in a ground operation in the previous war, Israel was aware that it failed to stop the rockets. Rather, the war was intended to pressure the regional powers to realize Israel's goals through diplomacy. In neither war had Israel achieved by itself its political aims, while Hamas had made clear political gains.

From an Israeli perspective, Hamas emerged from the 2012 war with increased political legitimacy both among the Palestinian public and regionally – and to an extent in the international arena too. Hamas had also reduced the military threat from Israel. Moreover, its political legitimacy substantially increased in Gaza. There were even voices in Israel demanding negotiations with Hamas concerning concessions toward Gaza, in parallel to negotiations with the PA regarding the West Bank.

## The war of 2014

The 2014 war was Israel's most violent since the first Lebanon war of 1982. The Palestinian resistance launched approximately 4,500 rockets and shells into Israel, while Israel attacked Gaza 4,800 times and shot 50,000 artillery shells into the Strip, in comparison to 8,000 in the 2008–2009 war. Some 2,104 Palestinians were killed, compared to 1,391 in the earlier confrontation. Among those were 518 children, compared to 344 in Operation Cast Lead. On the Israeli side, 64 soldiers and officers were killed in comparison to 10 in 2008–2009, and seven

civilians in comparison to three.[6] On the eve of war, senior Israeli government ministers were promoting several different theories of how the conflict with the Palestinians should be resolved.

We can identify four major political visions that emerged during this period, indicating the political floundering in Netanyahu's cabinet. That explained his inability, aside from his ideological and personal objections, to engage in political negotiations with the Palestinians. Also, these conflicting visions of a solution exposed the disagreements between the coalition's political parties, as we shall examine shortly. First, Netanyahu's vision, one that had determined government policy over the previous five years, can be summarized as a demand that the Palestinians recognize the Jewish character of Israel, and the establishment of a truncated Palestinian political entity that might be called a state. Second, Naftali Bennett, head of the "Jewish Home" party, favored a plan that involved annexing Area C in the West Bank, alongside "economic peace" for the rest of the territory – that is, improving the Palestinians' economic situation. Third, Tzipi Livni, head of the Tnuah party, shared the vision espoused by the earlier Olmert government. Fourth, Yair Lapid, head of the Yesh Atid party, outlined a new vision at the Herzeliya convention in January 2014 that he had not included in his election campaign or during the previous government.

These visions led to clashes between the various party factions, exacerbated by ideological rifts within the ruling Likud party itself. The Minister of Defense, Moshe Yaalon, suggested managing the conflict rather than searching for solutions, despite growing western pressure for an endgame. This process, he argued, would cause less damage to Israel than arriving at a final agreement with the Palestinians. There was also support in the Likud for ideas similar to Bennett's annexation of Area C. The Israeli Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, meanwhile, did not view the PA and its president, Mahmoud Abbas, as partners for a solution, believing attempts to resolve the conflict should be postponed for future generations.

The kidnapping by Hamas activists of three Jewish youths near Hebron in the West Bank in early June 2014 caused several developments in Israeli-Palestinian relations, not least the prolongation of negotiations because Israel refused to release the last group of Palestinian prisoners. This was mainly due to pressure on Netanyahu from Bennett and from within the Likud. At the same time, the speedy composition of a Palestinian government of national unity took Israel by surprise leading to a decision, supported by all parties, including Tzipi Livni's, to boycott the PA. Even when Livni met the Palestinian president in London during the boycott, she presented their meeting as in a personal capacity rather than representing Israel. Netanyahu took clear advantage of the three youths' abduction to delegitimize Palestinian efforts at reconciliation.

The kidnapping of the three youths initiated a new phase of Israeli policy designed to undermine the PA, rather than Hamas, as a way to stabilize the status quo and ease international pressure on Israel over its rejectionist position regarding the new Palestinian unity government. The day after the kidnapping, Netanyahu exclaimed that a "terrorist organization … stands behind the abduction". For the first time since his Bar-Ilan speech, he stated that any compromise with the Palestinians would have a negative impact on Israel. In this statement, he not only blamed Mahmoud Abbas and the PA for the kidnapping, but he also held them accountable for any action against Israel from either the West Bank or Gaza. Netanyahu was very explicit on the matter:

> The claim that the Palestinian Authority is not responsible for the kidnapping because it happened in an area controlled by Israel is a shameful claim. When the suicide bombing happened in the center of Israel, it was the Palestinian Authority which was responsible

because the bombers came from territories under its jurisdiction. This is a similar case, the kidnappers came from the Territories, therefore, it is the Palestinian Authority that is responsible.

Netanyahu treated the incident as a casus belli. He called a security and military meeting at the Ministry of Defense in Tel Aviv attended by Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon, the Joint Chief of Staff Benny Gantz, the head of military intelligence Aviv Kochavi, as well as the heads of the Shin Bet and Mossad.[7] Indeed, the two-month war effectively started after Israel accused Hamas of being behind the youths' kidnapping, despite Hamas's denials. It seemed clear that Israel would take advantage of the kidnappings in more ways than one, ultimately exploiting them to persuade the international community that the PA was disrupting American efforts under Secretary of State John Kerry to bridge the gap between the two parties and arrive at a historic settlement 20 years after the Oslo agreements. In short, the war provided a pretext for Israel to break with Abbas, accusing him of undermining the peace process and failing to be a partner for Israel.

The central motive for the war was to wreak vengeance on Hamas, making it pay for the kidnappings with a series of painful blows. The plan started with the arrests of those who had been released during the Shalit deal, as well as leading Hamas representatives in the PA parliament. With the early strikes on the Gaza Strip, it soon became obvious that this war had a different rhythm from the two earlier wars. The first (2008–2009) started with a series of violent raids that tore Gaza apart and killed several Palestinians in one day, reaching a peak with the assassination of high-profile Hamas figures. The second (2012) started with a devastating blow to Hamas's establishment with the assassination of military leader Qassam Ahmad Ja'bare. The 2014 war, however, started much more gradually, giving Hamas time to prepare, both militarily and psychologically. Israel intended to carry out its punishment over a few days, as became clear when it proposed a ceasefire after less than two weeks. Hamas, however, rejected the offer, and as the war proceeded, Israel's surprise grew at Hamas's resilience.

Hamas had three shocks in store. First, Israel did not expect the rockets from Gaza to reach Haifa. This development in the Palestinians' launching capabilities provoked a shift in Israel's position from seeking "vengeance" to considering Hamas' destruction. Second, Israel did not expect drones to take off from Gaza and enter Israeli airspace. Although the drones were shot down, it remained unclear whether Hamas possessed more. But the third factor – a network of tunnels between the Gaza Strip and Israel – proved the most significant change in the dynamics of the war. Israel was aware of the tunnels' existence, particularly after one was discovered at Khan Yunis, close to Israeli communities near Gaza, but Israel did not predict their number and sophistication or the extent of the confrontations they would facilitate later. We contend that these surprises led Israel to reconsider the future of waging war with Gaza and its relations with Hamas (Oren, 2014).

The possibility of destroying Hamas loomed over the initial ground battles. Some Israeli experts urged sending the army into Gaza City to get rid of the Hamas leadership, but it was never resolved what to do after Hamas was destroyed. Paving the way for President Abu Mazen to take back control of Gaza was usually proposed chiefly in terms that anything would be better than Hamas and its launching of rockets on civilian targets. Most of the ruling Likud party, including members of the cabinet, preferred ending Hamas's rule in the Gaza Strip. The former Minister of Defense, Likud member Moshe Arens, expressed this position, warning against engaging in an exhausting war with Hamas but demanding that Israel determine the outcome of the war and disarm the Palestinian organizations. A failure to disarm Hamas would only lead to

another, later war, Arens explained. "No one can disarm Hamas, not the United Nations nor Egypt or the Palestinian Authority. A ceasefire will only set the stage for the next round of war" (Arens, 2014a). In another article, Arens argued that, due to the ceasefire, Israel had lost the opportunity to destroy Hamas (Arens, 2014b).

Discussions focused on President Abbas's role. Some believed that, with Gaza in his hands, the Strip would no longer pose a strategic threat to Israel. This forcefully brought up considerations regarding the "no partner" mantra of Netanyahu and his then-Foreign Minister, Lieberman. They had only recently claimed that Abbas was not viewed by Israel as a partner. Abbas and Hamas had been described as two sides of the same coin. However, others suggested Hamas's destruction would not necessarily place Gaza under Abbas's authority. One proposal was to put Gaza under the authority of international representatives from the United Nations. Lieberman himself had suggested that the UN take control of Gaza (Kobowitz, 2014).

The discussion in Israel subsequently changed from destroying Hamas to "clipping its wings" – "the dragon's wings should be clipped as long as we are not be able to cut off its head". This camp grew louder as the battles on the ground intensified, and as pressure mounted on Israel to make sure it achieved its initial goal before ending the war: stopping the rockets from Gaza. The demands were not reduced but rephrased. Following several arguments, differences and delays in the cabinet, Netanyahu adopted the idea of disarming Hamas. This meant that the war would not end before Israel achieved this basic demand, which enjoyed a consensus among both the left and right in Israel. Disarmament of the Gaza Strip could be achieved either by destroying the infrastructure of Hamas's military wing or through a ceasefire agreement that entailed waiving some essential humanitarian issues, such as the creation of an airport and a sea port.

In a public survey that included 600 interviews, conducted in August 2014 by the Israeli Center for Democracy in Jerusalem, 93% of Israeli Jews said the operation had been right and justified. Until that point, most had expressed disappointment in the outcome. Some 60% were content with the political leadership's performance. When asked about the best way ahead for dealing with the challenge of Hamas, 26% supported the military option; 7% backed diplomacy; and 65% contended that a combination of both approaches, military and political, would be best. Most (nearly 70%) did not believe the war would bring calm to Israel over the next three years. Regarding Egypt as a fair mediator between Israel and Hamas, 60% trusted Egypt under Sisi's leadership (Yaar and Herman, 2014).

Despite pressures from the right, Netanyahu did not set the subversion of Hamas's rule as a goal in the war both because of the heavy price such a goal would have entailed and because of his strategic attitude toward negotiating with the PA. We believe that Netanyahu had an overriding aim: to maintain the Palestinian rift for his own ideological and political ends. In an article titled "Deterrence does not work", Avner Golob, a researcher in the Research Center for National Security in Tel Aviv, claimed that it was impossible to deter Hamas, which he argued was a terrorist organization. To the contrary, Golob thought that the more the situation deteriorated for Hamas the more chances it would be presented with, because it had nothing to lose. Golob wrote:

> The failure of deterrence, which has not prevented confrontations with Hamas, derives from the assessment that this ruling organization expresses responsibility toward its citizens and prefers to preserve its political and military achievements without provoking Israeli reactions. This is a failure of assessing the idea of deterring a military establishment like Hamas.

Following the success of the Cairo talks on August 26, 2014 in achieving a ceasefire between the parties, the mutual assaults ended, the area for fishing was expanded to six miles off Gaza's coast, permission for construction materials to enter the Strip was granted, and the crossings between Israel and Gaza were to be opened, promising the lifting of the siege. Other issues were postponed for another month when the parties would resume negotiations. A look at the agreement showed that the parties had temporarily returned to the understandings following the war in 2012, particularly regarding a seaport and airport. Israel's motivation for the agreement was buying the longest period of calm possible, even if it meant making humanitarian compromises – as long as they did not risk becoming part of wider efforts to advance the prospects of a Palestinian state.

In other words, Israel returned to the idea of coexisting with Hamas, but based on new, long-term understandings. Such a settlement was in the context of a relative compromise with the Palestinians. Nonetheless, it was a compromise regarding the Gaza Strip and not the West Bank. What did Israel gain from this?

*First*, Israel succeeded in dealing with Gaza as a separate issue from the West Bank. That is, Israel faced two distinct problems in form and content: one in the West Bank and the other in the Gaza Strip, where it had to confer with various parties. *Second*, throughout the attacks, Israel focused its rhetoric solely on Hamas and the other military factions in Gaza, and it was explicit that the Palestinian factions' arms were central to the conflict and its solution. Although Israel had not realized its demand of disarmament, it had brought the issue of arms into discussions conducted outside the negotiations, including in international forums. From now on, the issue of arms would remain a fundamental element of future negotiations and consideration in foreign interventions regarding the Gaza Strip. *Third*, Israel's pursuit of long-term calm opened the door to continuing negotiations with Hamas on Gaza's future, especially given that no timeframe was announced for arriving at a final settlement.

On the Israeli political scene, two approaches occurred regarding the talks in Cairo. One, represented by Finance Minister Lapid, proposed talking to Hamas through the PA, which required recognizing the Palestinian unity government. Lapid contended that the reconciliation would guarantee for Israel the return of the PA to the Gaza Strip. The other approach, represented by Netanyahu himself, treated the Cairo talks as indirect, by way of Egyptian mediation. He wanted any solution to ensure the Gaza Strip remained under Hamas's control so that Israel could reject any serious settlement regarding the siege and the crossings so long as Gaza was subject to the control of a "terrorist" organization. Israel could thereby continue to justify its opposition to the Palestinian National Government.

During a press conference, after the failure of ceasefire talks, Netanyahu pointed to a regional political horizon Israel hoped to take advantage of. He spoke of the difficult historic changes taking place in the Middle East. In his view, the world was beginning to understand Israel's need for security in any compromise with the Palestinians in the West Bank. Referring to changes in the Arab world, Netanyahu listed countries supporting Hamas such as Qatar, Turkey and Iran.[8] He also talked about how he saw a positive role for Abbas so long as the Palestinian government distanced itself from "terrorism". It became clear that the political horizon he was talking about related to the Arab world's role in resolving the Palestinian issue. Minister of Defense Yaalon said as much during an interview with Channel One. "There are four axes in the Middle East: The axis of the extremist Sunnis (Turkey, Qatar, and the Islamic Brotherhood), the Shi'ite axis

(Iran, Hizbollah, and Syria), the axis of al-Qaida, and the moderate Sunnis." In truth, these categorizations were not new. Yaalon had presented them at the convention of the Research Center for National Security in 2013.

Israeli observers disagreed on what had been achieved during the war. Dekel listed a series of military "achievements":

> the destruction of the terrorist infrastructure, particularly the system of producing and storing rockets, public stations and the homes of activists and the leadership, as well as the killing of 600 activists. There remains only one third of the rocket arsenal. The dangerous tunnels have been destroyed. Iron Dome has proved to be successful. The internal front remains intact. The economy is stable. Strategic relations with Egypt and its new president, al-Sisi, have improved. Also, the war was well-received by the Arab countries.
>
> (Dekel, 2014a)

Nonetheless, Dekel did not overlook the negative results of the war. For instance, "Hamas was not destroyed but may have become stronger. Hamas has not lost the desire or the motive for launching rockets. Hamas has not been deterred. Israel's image has suffered following the killing of civilians. Residents from around the Gaza Strip have fled. The resistance led by Hamas is alive and kicking" (Dekel, 2014b). Netanyahu, by contrast, contended that Hamas had suffered a harsh blow and had not achieved any of its demands (Ravid, 2014).

The well-known Israeli political analyst Amos Harel claimed: "Hamas's agreement to conditions far from its initial demands does not point to an Israeli victory any more than it does to Hamas's unwillingness to continue fighting". Harel realized that, while Israel did not appear to have won the war but rather achieved a "malicious tie", it did not mean that Israel had not achieved its goals. In 2006, the Second Lebanon War was badly managed both politically and militarily, but Israeli succeeded in achieving calm in the north with Lebanon and Hezb-Allah (Harel, 2014). Regarding the tie, Yuval Diskin, former head of the Shin Bet, criticized Netanyahu, calling the Israeli leadership weak and describing the government coalition as paralyzed politically and diplomatically. Diskin believed that Israel, in its confrontation with Hamas, needed to move from a tactical tie to a "definitive strategic blow" and this would only happen through a serious political initiative (Verter, 2014).

## Summary

Following the end of the 2014 war on Gaza, Netanyahu moved within several circles of pressure, attempting to manage them politically. The circle immediately surrounding him, the Likud, rejected Netanyahu's strategy for managing the conflict because the party continues to be opposed to the idea of establishing a Palestinian state. On the other hand, the option of regional cooperation came to the fore, with Netanyahu considering it as a political horizon that needed to be taken advantage of. The international circle regards the conflict as intolerable, and believes the solution must be achieved through direct negotiations with Abbas and the PA. Netanyahu's vision has become increasingly clear: he wants to preserve the division among the Palestinians and leave Gaza under the control of a weak Hamas.

From Netanyahu's perspective, a permanent division in Gaza is based on the principle of "The Palestinian Authority at the ends (i.e., controlling the crossings) and Hamas in the middle (ruling Gaza)". This would guarantee the status quo with the least political and security fallout for Israel.

When Netanyahu announced that he had no problem with the PA returning to Gaza, he referred to its return in terms of controlling security at the crossings – as a way to keep Hamas weak inside Gaza. It has become clear that Netanyahu is weak in tailoring dynamic tactical events to his strategic vision. The war on Gaza started with the abduction of the three youths, with Netanyahu keen to take advantage of this event to return to his positions before the Bar Ilan speech. However, he found himself dragged into a war. He quickly started looking for the least costly ways out, both internally and diplomatically.

Most of the political leadership support unilateral policies. Bennett, leader of the Jewish Home party, wants to unilaterally include Area C under Israeli sovereignty. Lapid, leader of Yesh Atid party, wants to draw borders independently. Lieberman, leader of the Yisrael Beiteinu party, wants a regional initiative that circumvents Abbas and the PA. Netanyahu, alone in the government, has preferred to further manage the conflict along with the PA by opposing Palestinian reconciliation. He has attempted to insert a new variable: making the PA directly responsible for Gaza without Palestinian unity. Hence, the repeated demand that "the Palestinian President must choose between Hamas and Israel".

In this context, we should recall that at the beginning of the war Netanyahu was convinced that it would be short and did not mention the Palestinian President. After the war, when he was asked about a political horizon, he turned to Yaalon and mockingly asked: "What about Abu Mazen [Abbas]?" Israel believes it has determined the issue of the division between the West Bank and Gaza, and therefore rejects internal Palestinian negotiations to revive cooperation between Hamas and Fatah, the West Bank and Gaza. In conclusion, the Israeli government and Netanyahu himself are adapting the political reality in Gaza, with Hamas as the ruling body there.

## Notes

1 For further details, see Madar's strategic report edited by Honaida Ghanem for the years 2010 and 2012 regarding these military operations.
2 www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDNs4HXd6R0
3 www.youtube.com/watch?v=DGWl-8reXo4
4 See the results of the survey that included sample of 450 participants on the following link: http://megafon-news.co.il/asys/archives/99951
5 www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4313707,00.html
6 *Haaretz*, 29.8.2014. "Fifty days of Fighting"; also, see Harel A., and Cohen, G. "Shelling Gaza: The Army Used Inaccurate Artillery Shelling Four Times as much as Cast Bullets," *Haaretz*, 15.8.2014, p. 6.
7 Ibid.
8 Netanyahu's press conference, 20.8.2014.

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# 5 The Kerry mission for peace in Israel-Palestine (2013–14) – a predictable failure

The round of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians that began in August 2013 under American auspices has received less attention than previous rounds of peace-making. Both parties, as well as the American mediator, decided to lower expectations so as not to provoke unwarranted hopes, given the realities on both sides and the failure of all previous encounters since the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. Nevertheless, the talks only took place because at least one side hoped that this time things might be different and that they might manage to conclude a historic settlement, leading to peace between them and between Israel and the Arab world in general.

Of course, it is impossible to ignore the background of earlier rounds of negotiations, especially those that were meant to achieve a breakthrough. They started with the Madrid Conference of 1991, followed by the Washington talks between Israel and a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation, with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) standing in the shadows behind the members of the Palestinian delegation. Then there was the historic breakthrough of Oslo and the subsequent negotiations to achieve an interim agreement that would lead to a permanent accord. After Benjamin Netanyahu was elected Prime Minister in 1996, there was the Wye River Plantation agreement in 1998 for Israel's withdrawal from Hebron, and later the Camp David summit of 2000 between Arafat and Netanyahu's successor, Ehud Barak. It was that meeting's resounding failure that led to the Second Intifada.

In 2003, US President George W. Bush published the "Road Map", followed by the intensive involvement of the International Quartet and repeated promises of a breakthrough. The process culminated in talks between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas at Annapolis, talks that were ultimately suspended after early elections were called in Israel in 2009. Since Netanyahu's return to the premiership, it is hard to speak of serious negotiations, especially in the shadow of ongoing construction in the settlements. But in August 2013, US Secretary of State John Kerry announced the renewal of talks and invited the two sides to send delegations to begin negotiations. The essential difference in this round, compared to its predecessors, was the mode of American involvement. It seemed that this time the Americans were not content to play the role they had taken since 1991 as sponsors of bilateral negotiations. They increased their involvement and even advanced their own proposals, which threatened to force a significant modification in the Israeli position.[1] Although it was hoped that this would improve the prospects of the negotiations, producing results, the Israelis piled up obstacles to implementation, chiefly by stalling progress with familiar security arguments and by raising new and unacceptable demands (e.g., that Israel be recognized as a Jewish state) that essentially dictated the final outcome of the negotiations to the Palestinians. Netanyahu is also well known for adopting a strategy of constraining himself by means of restrictive legislation. He adopted that tactic this time too, passing a referendum bill that

subjected any future agreement with the Palestinians to a national poll. The transparent aim was to make it more difficult to implement any agreement that might be reached, or at least to broadcast to the other parties that the chances of implementing any agreement would be poor, thereby lowering the motivation to negotiate. With regard to this round of talks, and especially the calm way the right received them, it is impossible not to conclude that Netanyahu and his right-wing partners had an understanding that the negotiations would never lead to an agreement.

Even should the American administration try to exert pressure on Israel, Netanyahu's strategy was to drag out the negotiations using various pretexts, until the US found itself in pre-election mode, when the Democratic Party is most fearful of a tense relationship with Israel and the pro-Israel lobby in the United States is at its most influential. And, of course, the Israeli government, especially Netanyahu and his energetic Foreign Minister of the time, Avigdor Lieberman, knew they could always simply fail to carry out any agreement, knowing that there would be no real pressure on them to comply from the US, which sets the tone for the Quartet.

The present analysis will seek to explain why Kerry led this new round of unsuccessful talks. The high expectations attached to them were not realistic and led to a new wave of disappointment. But the negotiations did point to fundamental problems that all but rule out the possibility, now or in the foreseeable future, of reaching an agreement and putting an end to the conflict between the two sides.

It was quite clear that the talks were a failure from the outset. Despite the parties' commitment to maintain media silence about what was going on in the negotiating room, on several occasions the Palestinian team leaked its assessment that there had been no progress. It even went so far as to submit its resignation to Abbas to protest the continuation of such fruitless negotiations.[2] There were other grounds for presupposing that the talks were doomed: the relaxed mood on the Israeli right, and especially among the members of the "Jewish Home" party, which was vehemently opposed to any progress in the negotiations; and the Israeli government's announcement of plans to build another 3,000 housing units in the settlements,[3] with support for this move from Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon (Likud), which appeared incompatible with any form of breakthrough.[4] Our assertion is that the Israeli side was genuinely interested in starting the talks, but not so that they would lead to a breakthrough with the Palestinians. The talks were seen as beneficial because they allowed Israel to continue expanding the settlements, prevented an explosion in the Occupied Territories, weakened Hamas, and prevented a domestic Palestinian reconciliation. One of Israel's goals was achieved early on: Abbas abandoned efforts in the international arena to pursue the establishment of a Palestinian state, and undertook not to join any UN bodies, including the International Court of Justice.

## Parameters for examining the Kerry mission of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians (2013–2014)

Despite our main claim that Israel is unwilling to engage in serious negotiations and that America clearly supports Israel, a decision to conduct talks was nonetheless announced in Washington in early August 2013. Below, we review some of the parameters essential for understanding why Israel and the US wanted to launch this round of talks with the Palestinians, when they had no intention of making progress. In fact, the negotiations were compatible with Israel's efforts to frustrate a comprehensive solution both to the Palestinian problem in general and to the occupation of the West Bank in particular.

## *The time factor*

In all negotiations one has to consider the factor of time, and the urgency felt by each side. It is clear that the side feeling time is working in its favor will seek to dictate the terms and pacing of the negotiations. We do not believe that the time factor is playing in Israel's favor (demographically, for example – one reason many Israelis support a settlement with the Palestinians). This is certainly the view of the Israeli left and center. For the right, however, which faces no serious opposition, the time factor is less critical. The right wing has settled into a routine of ruling over Palestinians who enjoy only limited rights. It believes it can maintain long-term control over the Palestinians, such as has been the case for five decades in the West Bank and Gaza (which has not been under direct Israeli control since 2007), and even longer for the Palestinians in Israel, whose civil rights have been curtailed since 1948.

The time factor works in Israel's favor in other ways, such as allowing for continued settlement activity and the exploitation of Palestinian natural resources, whereas the cost of the occupation is very low in the absence of serious resistance. Israel sees the time factor as playing to its advantage, with the Arab world spiraling downward in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Countries that were formerly a real threat have been weakened (Egypt) or are actually disintegrating (Syria), while global processes are further weakening the position of the Palestinians and giving Israel a distinct advantage. This situation may explain Israel's desire to conclude an agreement that expresses the balance of power and catches the Palestinians at their weakest moment.

For Abbas, by contrast, the time factor is felt strongly both on the national level, because the occupation is gnawing away at a potential state, and on him personally and the Palestinian Authority. It is very possible that Abbas is in a hurry, not because the negotiations will benefit the Palestinians – quite the opposite is true – but because they can help him vis-à-vis Hamas and provide him with symbolic achievements he can display to his public. One example was the release of 104 pre-Oslo prisoners, which Israel promised to release in five separate rounds, so long as the Palestinians stayed in the talks. So, despite Abbas' initial reluctance to begin the negotiations, he was more eager of the parties to conduct serious talks.

## *The identity of the sides*

When it comes to negotiations, we believe in an approach that analyses the decision-makers as well as the states involved. Netanyahu is an ideologue of the school of Vladimir Jabotinsky, and his "Iron Wall" doctrine. It is significant that his father, Ben Zion Netanyahu, was Jabotinsky's private secretary as well as a historian of Revisionist Zionism. This is how he has described his family and ideological history:

> It was the political nature of Herzl's vision of the age-old Jewish dream of returning to the land that ignited the imagination of millions of Jews and non-Jews around the world. One of the innumerable spirits moved to action by Herzl's message was my grandfather Rabbi Nathan Mileikowsky, who was converted to Zionism as a youth in the 1890s and became one of its foremost orators, spreading its message to Jewish communities. Later, in 1920, he followed his own exhortations and, sailing from Trieste to Jaffa, took his large family to settle in Palestine. I have a photograph of him as a delegate to one of the early Zionist Congresses originated by Herzl. The photo is from the congress of 1907, one of the first to be convened after Herzl's premature death. For my grandfather, then a young man of

twenty-five, this was the first congress. Not so for Chaim Weizmann, who later led the liberal General Zionists and who would become the first president of Israel, nor for the gifted author and orator Vladimir Jabotinsky, who later led the Revisionist movement in the campaign for Jewish independence under the British Mandate.

(Netanyahu, 2000: 11)

Netanyahu's wife also comes from a radical and highly influential revisionist family. In 1993, Netanyahu was elected chairman of the Likud; that same year saw the publication of his book *A Place Under the Sun* (revised version: *A Durable Peace*), based on the ideas of Jabotinsky and of his father, Ben-Zion Netanyahu. The book's main thrust was that all of the land between the River Jordan and the sea belonged to the Jews and that the Palestinians were invaders and thieves. Also evident was its author's suspicious, even hostile attitude toward the world, which he believed hated the Jews, could not be depended on, and was strongly influenced by anti-Semitism. Netanyahu's ideas, which based Israel's security on being an independent military power and rejected the possibility of peace with the Arabs, were also evident in the policies he pursued whenever he held senior government posts, and in particular in his unwillingness to make progress in negotiations with the Palestinians. As noted above, Netanyahu did everything he could to torpedo the Oslo Accords. Later, he opposed Sharon's Gaza disengagement plan, thereby paving the way for Sharon's abandonment of the Likud and establishment of the Kadima party in November 2005. So any hopes that Netanyahu might oversee significant progress with the Palestinians seemed severely misplaced.

Some may argue that Netanyahu wants to make progress on the Palestinian front but has been unable to. We believe that he simply does not want to – and perhaps also cannot in the present political constellation. Consider what Netanyahu wrote after the Oslo Accords about the prospects for peace with the Arabs in general and with the Palestinians in particular:

> Among the most important surveillance positions in the entire Israeli defense system are the 'early-warning stations' in the mountain peaks of Samaria … If a hostile country were ever to gain control of these mountains, the situation would be reversed: The Arabs would be afforded unlimited surveillance of the Israeli coastal plain….
>
> (Netanyahu, 2000: 285)

> In those parts of the world where peace is the norm [Europe], borders, territories, and strategic depth may appear unimportant. In the Middle East they are of decisive importance. Given the specifics of the West Bank, the slogan 'land for peace' is singularly inappropriate: To achieve a sustainable peace, Israel must maintain a credible deterrent long enough to effect a lasting change in Arab attitudes. It is precisely Israel's control of this strategic territory that has deterred all-out war and has made eventual peace more likely.
>
> (Netanyahu, 2000: 319)

In other words, Netanyahu believes that it is the occupation that guarantees "peace", and not the resolution of outstanding issues.

He goes on to develop this thesis with great artistry. He analyzes the Arab mindset from an Orientalist perspective, one that is based on theories of deterrence as the only way to achieve peace, and explains why, in his view, the Arabs have not destroyed Israel:

> No matter how compelling the reasons, there is no point in attacking where there is no hope

of success. This elementary understanding is no less applicable to human behavior [than to fish]. It is precisely such an understanding that has been slowly evolving in the attitudes of the radical Arab regimes toward Israel. But it cannot be said that they have reached the stage of having fully assimilated the reality of Israel's existence. Deprived of its equivalent of the glass partition [in an aquarium separating predatory fish from their prey], Israel might become the target once again of pouncing predators. This partition, Israel's defenses, is made up of several important elements: the physical and human resources available to protect the country, and the material and psychological assets deployed for the common defense. But without a doubt, central among them is the physical partition that separates Israel's cities from the vast eastern-front armies of Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. The separation consists of a wall: the dominating heights of the Golan and the mountains of Samaria and Judea, commonly known to the world as the West Bank….

(Netanyahu, 2000: 277)

All of this explains, more than anything else, why there has been no progress with the Palestinians during Netanyahu's tenure and why we should not expect him to seek a breakthrough toward peace with them. As noted, however, the political constellation is also important, and it is marked by the reduced strength of Likud, on the one hand, and the erosion and even disappearance of the relatively moderate camp in his party. It's the radical wing now in charge. Netanyahu has chosen to move closer to these elements inside and outside Likud. Ahead of the elections for the 19th Knesset, he visited isolated settlements, broadcasting a clear message of political rigidity, on the one hand, while he cooperated in the expulsion of moderate elements from the party, on the other, leading to an unequivocal conclusion: he wants to be held back and prevented from moving forward in the peace process; and, as his intimates assert, he does not want any moderate elements in his vicinity who seek such progress.

Netanyahu's government is almost of one mind on the Palestinian issue, unlike the Rabin, Barak and the Olmert governments. It is true that during the Kerry talks, the Yesh Atid Party was part of the coalition and viewed the negotiations as useful. But it wanted negotiations for negotiations' sake, believing they served Israeli interests, as it perceived them; and in any case, the party was led by a strongman, Yair Lapid, who did not permit any internal differences of opinion. Noticeably, Netanyahu was quick to rid himself of Lapid's party after the 2015 elections. The "Jewish Home" party and its leader Naftali Bennett had already made their stand clear. Only Tzipi Livni's Hatnua movement, which was split internally, believed the negotiations were essential and important. But this party had no real political power and very slight influence. It too was denied a place in Netanyahu's new coalition after the 2015 election. Lieberman, a pragmatist, made his room for maneuver on the Palestinian question unambiguously clear when he addressed the United Nations: a maximum of 40%–50% of the West Bank would become a Palestinian state.

On the Palestinian side, President Abbas has been in office since 2006 and has no formal legitimacy. Most Palestinians, not only in Hamas but also in the PLO, did not approve of his decision to return to the negotiating table. Evidently, he understood his weak position and its implications very well. Not only could he not guarantee an end to the conflict or the commitment of all Palestinians to the negotiations, but it was clear that the Israeli right wing would seek to undermine any attempt to reach an accord.

### The mediator

One of the major obstacles to negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians is the mediator. The Americans have never made any real effort to bring about a fair peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, to put it kindly. The history of US mediation is very long: in the 1967 War, Washington made no serious attempt to prevent the descent into hostilities; and during the 1973 October/Yom Kippur war, the Americans allowed Sadat to sweat it out without offering him an escape route from the course he had set himself on, leading to the outbreak of the war. Recent scholarship indicates that the Americans could have prevented that war had they wished to do so.[5] This is not the place to examine this question more deeply, but it is worth noting that some Israelis have proposed a conspiracy theory – one without foundation – that the Americans wanted a war that would badly damage Israel. In the First Lebanon War, from 1982, the American role was far from even-handed or helpful, and only at critical junctures did they attempt to calm the situation, as in Philip Habib's shuttle diplomacy. In the Second Lebanon War, in 2006, the Americans' role was not essentially different, with Washington standing back to "give room" to Israel to carry out its military attacks.

In the 2013–2014 Kerry talks, the Americans employed the model of structured mediation, based on step-by-step progress, unlike the previous American approach, based on direct negotiations. The Americans laid down rigid rules, including absolute secrecy around the negotiations. Secrecy was deemed necessary to guarantee the success of the talks, because it prevented opposition and resistance on both sides. But it also prevented any assessment of whether progress had been made or of who was standing in the way of such progress. The Israelis complained that the Palestinians had been leaking details of the talks, in violation of the agreements, and that this might cause the talks to fail.[6] In practice, some Palestinians who knew what was going on, such as Saeb Erekat, hinted that nothing serious was taking place at the negotiating table and suspected that the talks were intended solely to chalk up points for the Israelis and Americans, and not for the benefit of the Palestinians.

On the other hand, to give the impression of seriousness the Americans borrowed from the Crisis Mediation method, in which the mediator plays an active role and keeps a close eye on what is happening and what steps are being taken by the two parties. But this was undermined by the decision to bring in familiar US mediators. Martin Indyk, for example, sat in on the talks, although he provided no help to the two sides, A disciple of Dennis Ross, whose own role in earlier negotiations had been much distrusted by the Palestinians, Indyk was seen as far from neutral. An American Jew who once worked for the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), which is known for its hawkish stance on the Arab-Israeli conflict, he has twice served as US ambassador to Israel (there is a tradition that the American ambassador is Jewish or holds positions very close to Israel's), and was also the director of the Saban Center, a think-tank funded by Haim Saban, an Israeli Jew who resides in the US. Although Indyk appeared more moderate than Ross, there was no indication that he would adopt any stance that was not acceptable to whatever Israeli government was in power.[7] Some in the Israeli prime minister's office in Jerusalem expressed their satisfaction when he was nominated to serve as a mediator. They noted: "Indyk is committed to and loves Israel".[8]

The Palestinians did their best not to cast aspersions on Indyk's neutrality, given that he was Obama's choice and they feared this would harm their own interests. But more than once there was grumbling and on occasion even complaints about his bias against them (Figure 5.1).[9]

The mediation model employed by the United States in the Kerry talks was closer to the Structured Mediation and Crisis Mediation models, chiefly because all messages passed through

the mediator (Folberg and Taylor, 1984: 56).
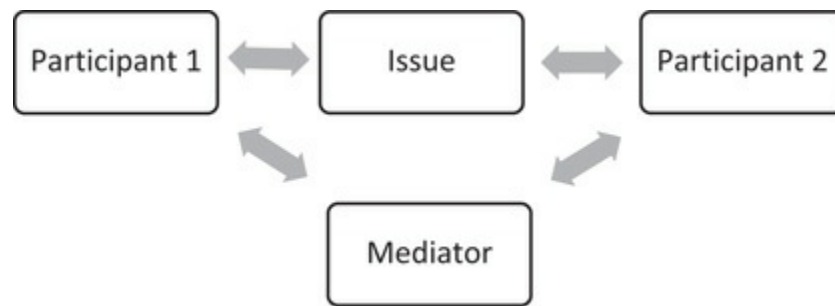


*Figure 5.1* US state secretary Kerry mediation model.

The Oslo Accords emerged out of secret negotiations in the early 1990s, of which the Americans knew nothing – and for good reason. Had they been in on the talks, they might have undermined them. Fruitless parallel negotiations had been taking place under Washington's aegis since 1991. When the pre-Oslo talks became public knowledge, the Americans made no great effort to promote them. Dennis Ross, who was appointed by Clinton after long service in the administration of the first President Bush and during whose term the talks began in Washington, did not conceal his unfavorable opinion of Arafat. He believed that the negotiations would not succeed until conditions had, in his words, "ripened". He was very critical of then US Secretary of State James Baker, who, in his mind, was not conducting an intelligent policy, while he at the same time heaped praise on Yitzhak Shamir, Israel's intransigent Prime Minister of the time. Ross was also critical of the negotiations that succeeded the Oslo talks and said, for example, that the Palestinians' approach in these talks was too rigid to his taste. If they were not willing to compromise, he argued, what were the Palestinians talking about in Oslo? In other words, he believed that the Palestinians should compromise even further than they did in Oslo, but did not demand anything similar from the Israelis (Ross and Makovsky, 2009).

In the negotiations with Syria, from late 1999 to early 2000, the Americans' role was far from positive either. It suffices to recall Israeli general Uri Sagi's description of how Clinton and Albright reacted when Syrian foreign minister Farouk a-Shara criticized them and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak for misleading him. (The Syrians thought they had reached an agreement with Israel and had already reserved a hotel for the technical delegations to draft the final accord.) What is more, the testimony of senior American officials, especially Robert Malley, involved in the Camp David negotiations in August 2000 between Israel and Palestinians strips away the American pretense of fairness. Even Dennis Ross, who was a senior administration official at the time, later acknowledged that the gaps between the Israeli and Palestinians could have been bridged. Why did the American superpower not endeavor to bring the negotiations to a successful conclusion, in keeping with its declared policy? The answer, as he himself admits, is that the Americans were too closely coordinated with Israel, initially with regard to the PLO and later regarding negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. It is vital to address these issues, if one wants to understand the problematic nature of the Americans' performance as mediators and their contribution to the failure of these talks.

A mediator is crucial to the success of all negotiations, and must adhere to elementary principles of ethics to win the trust of both side and achieve results (Folberg and Taylor, 1984). In his book, Ross observes of the art of negotiations that a mediator must be sensitive to each side's fears and residues (Ross, 2007: 237–242). He does not discuss ethical principles and the

importance of fairness in mediation, but does note the need to develop relations of trust with the main decision-maker (ibid, 223–227). It is possible that had he applied his own ideas in the case of the Palestinians, instead of demonstrating his alienation from them, the negotiations might have ended differently. A mediator must stand in the middle, at an appropriate distance from each side, and be as fair as possible. In business negotiations, for example, the appearance or even the hint of some relationship between the mediator and one of the parties leads to disqualification. In this instance, the mediator was the patron of one side, supported it unambiguously in almost all circumstances, and provided it with a military, economic, political and diplomatic shield.

The United States neutralized the other sponsors of the negotiations in the Quartet – Russia, the European countries and the United Nations. What is more, the US seized control of the negotiations and forced the other sponsors to acknowledge its exclusive role. As we see it, this was the greatest obstacle of all and guaranteed the failure of the negotiations. The Russians, for example, have begun to lose patience with American hegemony, although not yet in the Palestinian arena, and have moved to be more independent in other spheres, such as Iran and Syria. This development will influence future negotiations.

The "Kerry mission" talks were not between the two parties (bilateral). Instead, the Americans employed an aggressive and intensive approach based in part on the Morgenthau Doctrine – that is, seeking a resolution to a conflict that reflects the balance of power between the two sides. In this case, the US openly supported the stronger, Israeli side. Because it was clear to the Americans that the negotiations would not succeed unless they applied heavy pressure on Israel to moderate its stance and behavior on the ground, and because the Americans had no intention of doing this, they focused on the process itself, as already noted, and not on the results. They pressed the Palestinians to make concessions to the Israelis by means of open and hard-liner economic pressure, a threat to suspend the training and arming of the Palestinian police, and so on. But they did not pressure the Israelis to any significant degree.

Consequently, we believe that in these talks, the US in fact negotiated with the Israelis. Whatever it achieved, such as the release of several dozen prisoners, was presented to the Palestinians as a take-it-or-leave-it proposition. The Oslo Agreements were based on direct, across-the-table negotiations between the two sides.[10] In that model, the two sides entered the room together and whatever agreement they reached was what there was.

Such direct negotiations under American auspices have not produced encouraging results. The two sides have not managed to reach a final accord; the constructive ambiguity intended to help bridge the gaps and avoid disagreements has become its own source of problems and crises, such as with regard to the freezing of settlement activity.[11] This does not mean that neither side has benefited from the Oslo agreement. Israel achieved a removal of the economic boycott, the paving of the way to a treaty with Jordan, the normalization of relations with several Arab countries, including most of the Gulf emirates, and it gained precious time in which it could and did expand existing settlements, establish new ones, and tighten its grip on East Jerusalem.

In the Kerry talks, as in the past, the Palestinians were expected to make yet more concessions to Israel. In contrast, the Americans wanted to "compensate" the Israelis for any concessions they made – and this obviously had to come at the Palestinians' expense. This dynamic emerged from the Palestinians' innate weakness. There are thousands of Palestinians prisoners in Israeli jails, and Palestinian society is collapsing under the weight of the checkpoints and movement restrictions, which are suffocating the Palestinian economy. What is more, the Palestinians made a poor decision in agreeing to the 1994 Paris Protocol on Economic Relations, which makes

Israel responsible for collecting taxes on their behalf. This has placed the Palestinians in a position of permanent dependency on Israel's good favors – and Israel has invariably conditioned its assistance on expansion of the settlements. Thus, Israel has regularly exploited its position to build new settlement outposts or increased construction in existing settlements. Israel can ease restrictions on travel but then erect new obstacles later on; or it can release prisoners and then arrest others. It is a vicious circle in which the Palestinians find themselves with no means of escape. The Americans have always supported Israel's "generosity" and thereby perpetuate the Palestinians' inferiority in the negotiations. The Kerry talks illustrated precisely this problem. They included an implicit Palestinian agreement to construction in the settlements, including East Jerusalem, while Israel agreed to release 104 prisoners, in five batches, some of whom were nearing the end of their sentences anyway. In other words, Israel turned the release of these few prisoners into a source of great pressure on Abbas, who could not turn his back on the prisoners, whom the Palestinian public considers to be heroes and freedom fighters.

## The extreme asymmetry between the two sides

The Palestinians were isolated, with even the Arab countries exerting pressure on them for reasons related to their goal of isolating and possibly attacking Iran, their ambition for regional hegemony, or their desire to establish normal relations with Israel. The Israelis, for their part, had the backing of the powerful pro-Israel lobby in the US. Another manifestation of the asymmetry was the American threat to block any of their other diplomatic options, such as by exerting a "veto" in the UN Security Council. In addition, Israel was able to continue establishing facts on the ground, by means of construction in the settlements, exploiting settler violence against Palestinians, and using the heavy hand of the Israeli army on the civilian population. The Palestinians had no countervailing powers. Here, it is also important to note the tactical aspects of Israel's superiority, such as its high-quality intelligence sources, providing information not only on Palestinian decision-makers and negotiators but on their American counterparts too. By contrast, the Palestinians entered negotiations with a total absence of any intelligence information. These aspects had a significant impact on the negotiations.

In conclusion, the talks initiated by Secretary of State Kerry followed the "off-the-table" model, in which the US adopts Israeli dictates and presents them to the Palestinians. Thus, the Palestinians were left with a dilemma: bow to the Israeli demands, using the Americans as a fig leaf, or risk being blamed for the failure of the talks, with all this implies. The two sides did not discuss reaching an agreement or even a document of principles, only a framework that would guide future negotiations aimed at reaching an agreement. The two parties, with the intensive mediation of Kerry, understood that no agreement was possible. The sharp disagreements, developments in the issues under discussion, various aspects of the conflict, and the realities on both sides did not permit any serious progress toward a settlement. This led them to jettison any hopes they had at the start of the talks, and caused the Americans to lower their expectations.

There is always the danger of prolonging negotiations that are going nowhere. Israel's right-wing government preferred to undercut the prospects for success by raising new and unreasonable demands. But at the same time, the situation always played to Israel's advantage as the stronger side, able to dictate facts on the ground and take advantage of the time pressures. The Palestinian side, on the other hand, found its red lines being chipped away at, merely by virtue of taking part in negotiations of this nature. It is difficult to imagine a situation in which the sides could conclude a serious and feasible agreement after so many years of failure,

especially in the circumstances surrounding the Kerry talks. It is difficult enough to reach an agreement with experienced interlocutors who know all the details of the previous negotiations and the ins-and-outs of the main issues on the agenda. It is even more difficult to make progress toward a deal if it is a framework agreement being submitted for the approval of the Israeli government, the Knesset, the Palestinian National Council and the PLO executive committee. This is made still more difficult if either or both sides commit to submitting any agreement for approval in a public referendum.

The Israeli strategy was based on trying to gain time, punctuated by the release of statements that undermined the talks whenever there was a real chance of making progress. Israel's goal was to outlast the Obama administration, in the hope that the next administration would abandon the idea of talks, or at least negotiations on terms the Palestinians could accept, and thereby further postpone any chance of a resolution of the conflict. It is most likely, then, that the near future holds out no prospects for an agreement that could lead to an overall solution, and certainly for the implementation of such agreement. The experience of Oslo teaches us that an agreement is one thing, and its implementation, especially by the strong side – Israel – is a different aspect in seeking a settlement.

## Notes

1 See, for example, the main headline in *Ha'aretz* for December 12, 2013: "Kerry arrives today to present a framework agreement". This suggested that the US was giving serious consideration to abandoning its traditional preference for bilateral negotiations in favor of increased involvement as an active party that took the initiative, and not just as a mediator.

2 In fact, there were contradictory indications about the extent to which the talks were succeeding, evidently intended to sow confusion (see *Ha'aretz*, 4.12. 2013). Israel Television *Channel 1*, 3.12.2013. But only the Palestinians were skeptical. The former governor of the Bank of Israel, Prof. Stanley Fischer, who is close to Netanyahu, said Israel did not come across as a country that truly wanted peace and that Israel's aspiration for peace was not realized adequately (*Ha'aretz*, 4.12. 2013); (www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/.premium-1.2181800).

3 See, for example, the Housing Minister's announcement of a plan to construct 3,000 residential units in all of the settlements, at the height of negotiations; on another occasion the Housing Minister acknowledged that the Prime Minister had "rebuked" him for presenting a plan to build housing, including in the volatile E1 area. See: http://news.nana10.co.il/Article/?ArticleID=1018244.

4 The remarks were published in all the media, alongside rumors about some progress in the talks. See, for example: *Ha'aretz*, 2.12. 2013; Israel *Channel 10*, 2.12 2013.

5 A lot has been written about this topic and was published on memorial of 40 years for the Yom Kippur War. See: Kipnis (2012: 115–118, 243–248); Oren, A. "Yom Kippur," *Haaretz*, 04.10.2013.

6 Levi, A. *Ynet*, 26.01.2011: www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4019719,00.html.

7 Much has been written about Indyk's bias and lack of balance. See, for example, Salhani, C. "Is Martin Indyk the Right Man for the Job?" *Huff Post World*, January 11, 2014. (www.huffingtonpost.com/claude-salhani/is-martin-indyk-the-right-man_b_3685140.html); Falk, R. "What the appointment of Martin Indyk as US special envoy tells us," *Aljazeera*, June 30, 2013. (http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/07/2013730132025907195.html).

8 Bardenstein, E. *Maariv*, 22.7. 2013; www.huffingtonpost.com/claude-salhani/is-martin-indyk-the-right-man_b_3685140.html.

9 The Palestinian media overflowed with criticism of the Americans in general and of Indyk in particular. See, for example, Dahlan, "The Negotiations Will Lead Nowhere," (www.alzaytouna.net/permalink/56867.html); There is also direct criticism of Kerry's favoritism, quoting senior Palestinians; see, for example, http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=121284.

10 With regard to the Oslo Accords, their objectives in the eyes of those who initiated them, their basic principles, and strategy, see: Peres (1993), Hirschfeld (1998), Beilin (2001) and Grinberg (2007).

11 Palestinian observers criticize many aspects of the Oslo strategy, including its gradual nature, ambiguity, and attempt to sidestep the most volatile issues. For example, Dr. Mustafa Barghouti has argued that the failure can be traced to the omission of an explicit reference to a freeze on settlement activity and the reliance on understandings with the Israeli side and the Israelis' sincerity (at the time there was a dovish government led by Rabin). See Barghouti, "Israel Exploited Oslo in order to Make the Apartheid Permanent," *Wattan*, September 7, 2013. (www.wattan.tv/new_index_hp_details.cfm?id=a6778697a5072056&c_id=1.

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# 6 Netanyahu, Trump and the future of the peace process

In this chapter, we will address four key components related to the future of the conflict and the chances for reconciliation.

## First, Israel's real goals

The Palestinians appear to know what they want and have been flexible enough to make clear their minimum demands for an agreement. The Israeli side, on the other hand, is not sure about its goals (Ross and Makovsky, 2009). Former government minister Dan Meridor has asserted that Israel does not really know what it wants from negotiations. In his view, there is no point in Israel's starting talks before it knows where it wants to go. He believes that Netanyahu is in fact interested in a Palestinian state, but only on his terms with regard to its territory, sovereignty and presence on the Jordan River, which is also a covert Jordanian interest. Such a state would not include all of the occupied territories. Netanyahu also expects an end of the conflict, as well as recognition of Israel as a Jewish state. Such expectations doom any negotiations to failure. What are the Israelis' main demands?

- Israel stubbornly insists that the negotiations not take as their starting point a return to the 1967 lines. The Israelis refused to mention the 1967 lines in advance of the Kerry mission round of talks, with the Palestinians forced to make do with a vague American letter on the subject. It is conceivable that Israel might be willing to base the borders of the Palestinian state on the path of the separation barrier, most of which has been completed and without any Palestinian input.
- Israel has been unyielding on the issue of keeping the settlement blocs in place. In the past, this demand has been accepted in part by the Palestinians. The dispute at Annapolis, during Olmert's premiership, was over how much land would remain in Israel's hands and what areas would be swapped for it (Arieli, 2013). The Netanyahu government does not accept the principle of territorial exchange and certainly not on a one-to-one ratio.
- Israel no longer speaks about a land corridor linking the West Bank and Gaza, as originally proposed in the Oslo Accords. There is now a de facto split between the two territories, with Gaza under the rule of Hamas. Israel would like to make this rupture permanent – and de jure. It is encouraged by the existence of the split, as well as by the hostility between Hamas and Egypt. This could turn out to be an issue difficult to overcome.
- The Jerusalem issue has deteriorated over time, and all the more so since the formation of the current Israeli Government. The Palestinians cannot make any concessions to Israel with regard to the Old City's holy places. It is unlikely that an Israeli government coalition based on right-wing and religious parties will ever agree to what the Barak and Olmert

governments did not.

- The Palestinians have offered far-reaching concessions with regard to the refugees. This began with the understandings between Yossi Beilin and Mahmoud Abbas, and continued in the talks at Annapolis, a substantial part of which was leaked to Al Jazeera. But these concessions fall far short of satisfying Israel. Any agreement that does not address this issue is liable to prove impracticable.
- Israel demands a long-term presence along the Jordan River, creating effectively a buffer zone between a Palestinian state and Jordan. This would turn the Palestinian state into an enclave surrounded by Israel on every side. Naturally this demand has been strongly rejected by the Palestinians.
- Israel has raised a new demand, namely, that the Palestinians recognize Israel as the state of the Jewish people. This demand is intended, among other things, to neutralize the demographic threat that refugee issue could pose for Israel; but it would also permanently enshrine the inferior status of Palestinian citizens of Israel, while forcing the Palestinian Authority to endorse a situation in which they are citizens with limited and lesser rights.

These points make it plain that the minimum Palestinian demands are far from the maximum an Israeli government is willing to offer. We thus have strong grounds for suspecting that any future negotiations will not produce significant changes and should not be viewed with optimism. The constant complaints from the Palestinian side, including Abbas' frequent protests to the Americans, juxtaposed with the composure of the far right in Israel, suggest that our lack of optimism is more than well-founded.

## Second, the right wing in Israel after Trump's election as US president

Relations were severely strained between Benjamin Netanyahu and Obama, during the eight years of the latter's presidency. Both were elected at around the same time: Obama in late 2008, and Netanyahu in early 2009. Although they had to work with each other, Netanyahu and Obama could not bury these tensions. Obama forced Netanyahu to accept the principle of the two-state solution and disrupted many of his settlement plans in the West Bank. He also opposed Netanyahu's agenda on the Iranian nuclear question, as well as his approach to handling the Middle East crisis. These and other issues revealed the strains between Netanyahu and Obama and their discordant approaches, attitudes and thoughts on a range of issues. However, Obama never abandoned his commitment to Israel's security and military superiority. In this context, Obama renewed the US-Israeli defense aid agreement shortly before he left office, which promised Israel $38 billion over ten years, part of which would be used to fund the purchase of large numbers of F-35 fighter jets. In addition, Obama continued to provide financial and IT support to develop Israel's defense programs, including a missile interception system, Iron Dome.

The Obama administration repeatedly made clear its opposition to settlement activity. A speech by Secretary of State John Kerry voiced the Obama administration's view of the threat posed by the settlements to the two-state solution, in line with Europe's position. When Netanyahu characterized the eviction of settlers from the West Bank as "ethnic cleansing", the White House expressed great anger, stating: "We obviously strongly disagree with the characterization that those who oppose settlement activity or view it as an obstacle to peace are somehow calling for ethnic cleansing of Jews from the West Bank".[1]

The last meeting between Obama and Netanyahu was held in September 2016. In the media, the meeting was portrayed as amicable in nature. Netanyahu hoped the friendly atmosphere would ensure Obama maintained US opposition to any international initiative against Israel in the final weeks of his administration. However, in December 2016, the US abstained in the voting on UN Security Council Resolution 2,334, affirming that Israeli settlements had "no legal validity". As a result, Netanyahu launched a fierce attack on President Obama and described the US conduct as "shameful".[2] Following the UN Security Council Resolution, Netanyahu was afraid that Obama might make further decisions against Israel before he left the office. The Israeli prime minister therefore advised his right-wing coalition partners to avoid hasty decisions (for example, on a proposal to annex Ma'ale Adumim) before Trump took office. Kerry was also more critical of Israel in the dying days of the administration, particularly in relation to settlement growth. Over the last year of the administration, Kerry continued to warn Israel against the threats posed by settlement activity. The result, he said, would be a one-state reality, in which Israel would have to choose between being either Jewish or democratic. It could not be both.

Israel's right wing was confident that Trump's victory would have a positive impact on its ideological interests. It identifies the Republication Party as an extension of its own camp in Israel, and the Democratic Party as allied to the Israeli left. However, the right in Israel ignored the fact that former Republican presidents had not abandoned the general framework of US foreign policy on the question of the settlements and resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

It is worth noting that Netanyahu had not worked before with a US Republican president. During his first term as Prime Minister, beginning in 1996, Bill Clinton was President, and in his other three terms he faced off against President Obama. According to Israel's right wing, Trump's success reflects the rise of the right throughout the world and reiterates the credibility of its approach to matters of economics, politics and value systems.

Several days after President Trump's inauguration, the White House released a statement on Israel's announcement that it was to construct thousands of settler housing units in response to a ruling by the courts forcing it to dismantle a settlement outpost called 'Amona'. Marking a change of policy from the Obama period, the Trump administration stated: "While we don't believe the existence of settlements is an impediment to peace, the construction of new settlements or the expansion of existing settlements beyond their current borders may not be helpful in achieving that goal".[3] Despite its careful drafting by the White House, this statement did not indicate a new approach. It revived the policy of President George W. Bush during Ariel Sharon's term. In a letter of guarantees to Israel, Bush had stated that settlement blocs would be part of Israel in a final-status solution.

Trump expressed his appreciation for Israel in a letter he sent through the right-wing newspaper *Israel Hayom*, which is owned by Sheldon Adelson, a Jewish businessman who is one of the largest donors to the Republican Party. In his letter, Trump said:

> I love and respect Israel and its citizens. Israel and America share so many of the same values, such as freedom of speech, freedom of worship, and the importance of creating opportunities for all citizens to pursue their dreams. I know very well that Israel is the one true democracy and defender of human rights in the Middle East and a beacon of hope to countless people. I believe that my administration can play a significant role in helping the parties to achieve a just, lasting peace – which must be negotiated between the parties themselves, and not imposed on them by others. Israel and the Jewish people deserve no less.[4]

## *Optimism among Israel's right wing following Trump's election*

In a lecture she delivered in the US, Israeli Minister of Justice Ayelet Shaked of the Jewish Home Party outlined the affinities between Trump and the right wing in Israel. She stated: "One similarity is the people's return to the roots of their national identity vis-à-vis the elites who believe in globalization and cultural pluralism […] This is a normal reaction to the Islamic terrorism and mass immigration".[5] Shaked's enthusiasm for Trump was not simple optimism but rooted in evidence. In 2003, Trump donated $10,000 to the Beit El settlement in the West Bank. The donation was made in honor of Trump's lawyer David Friedman, who was later appointed US ambassador to Israel. Friedman has served as president of the American Friends of Bet El Institutions. Every year, this foundation raises $2 million for initiatives and institutions based in the settlements.[6]

Trump's political-security team is generally hawkish, even openly hostile toward Muslims, and friendly to Israel. Several of Trump's initial appointments proved short-lived, as allegations of connections to Moscow swirled around the president, claiming major scalps. But the choice of appointments illustrated the new tenor of the administration. For example, Trump's first National Security Advisor, Michael Flynn, had been dismissed earlier, in 2014, from his high-ranking intelligence post at the Pentagon for his bad temper and "insubordination". Former Secretary of State Colin Powell has called Flynn "right-wing nutty". Flynn is certainly outspoken in his hatred of Islam, having tweeted: "Fear of Muslims is RATIONAL". He "does not differentiate between radical Islamists and the faith itself". He characterizes Islam as a malignant tumor and as a political vision that is masked as a religion. Flynn's deputy, Kathleen Troia "K.T." McFarland, an analyst at pro-Israel Fox News, is on record as supporting official and institutionalized discrimination against Muslims. Other members of Trump's team also are known for their hostile attitude to Muslims and Islam. These include former Congressman Mike Pompeo, who was designated by Trump as Director of the Central Intelligence Agency. Frank Gaffney, founder of the Washington-based Centre for Security Policy and a *Washington Times* columnist, is reported to be an influential figure in the new administration. He was among those who promoted claims that Obama was a Muslim, and is believed to have played a role in initiating the ideas that led to the Muslim travel ban to the US. In the presence of Pompeo, Gaffney orchestrated the *Defeat Jihad Summit* in 2013. Gaffney is a significant figure in disseminating false anti-Muslim conspiracy theories.[7]

In addition to mutually consistent political statements and Trump administration's support for Israel, there is a deep-rooted ideological match between Netanyahu and Trump. If Netanyahu continues in office, this affinity is likely to have a remarkable influence on the future of both countries. It is not coincidental that Trump has expressed his concern about the corruption investigations of Netanyahu and the potential for these inquiries to lead to his ousting from power.[8] Rudy Giuliani, a close confidante of Trump, ridiculed the investigations against Netanyahu, saying they were distracting his attention from more important challenges, such as the fight against "Islamic terrorism". Netanyahu's ideological perceptions – especially the idea that Islam poses the biggest threat to the Western world – are in line with those of President Trump's inner circle. In particular, Steve Bannon and Steve Miller embrace the idea of a "clash of civilizations", in which Christian and Jewish civilizations are seen to be in a fundamental conflict with Islam. These figures do not distinguish between various Islamic currents or between Islam and Islamic movements.

A *New York Times* report listed many figures in sensitive positions in the Trump

administration, including at the Department of Homeland Security, who view Islam as the primary threat to the US.[9] These ideas are in harmony with Netanyahu's foreign policy, which seeks to push Islamic terrorism to the top of the international agenda and identify Iran as the stronghold of such terrorism. The White House's positions are not only consistent with Netanyahu's international policy, but also with his ideology, which he has sought to translate into policies on the international level since he took office and particularly after protests erupted throughout the Arab world. In his book *Fighting Terrorism*, Netanyahu claims that the current rise of militant Islam is a direct extension of a hatred Islam embraced since its inception and of the Arabs' aspiration to create a fascist Arab kingdom.[10] In his *A Durable Peace* (which was translated as *A Place under the Sun*), Netanyahu describes Islamic fundamentalism as a cancer that threatens Western civilization.[11] Netanyahu reiterated the term "cancer" in his address to the United Nations in 2014.[12]

Israel's ambassador to the US, Ron Dermer, is a close confidante of Netanyahu and shares his views. Dermer is also close to Republicans, particularly the radical hub of the Republican Party. After Trump's election, and over the opposition of many US Jews, Dermer honored Gaffney, who was behind the idea of banning Muslim travel to the US. American human rights organizations, who have labeled Gaffney as the number-one Islamophobic in the country, criticized Dermer for characterizing Gaffney as "brave".[13]

After Trump was elected, the Israeli right wing quickly launched an intensive propaganda campaign to annex the West Bank, and started by proposing a bill to annex the Ma'ale Adumim settlement. The Mayor of Ma'ale Adumim, along with other Israeli mayors, was invited by the Republican Party to Trump's inauguration ceremony in Washington DC.[14] The campaign concluded with the *Law on Legalizing Settlements*, enacted on the same day as Netanyahu met the British Prime Minister, Theresa May, and a week before he met Trump. Netanyahu confirmed that he had notified the White House of the Israeli government's inclination to enact the law.

Israel's right wing views the new US administration as a historical opportunity to implement its political ideology. Netanyahu, however, has taken a different position, believing that Israel must manage this new relationship carefully and coordinate with the new administration if it is to make the most of this opportunity. Netanyahu's cautious approach was evident in his first telephone conversation with Trump after the latter had taken office. While Netanyahu said Trump expressed his "unprecedented commitment to the State of Israel and war on the terror of radical Islam", he stressed that he did not want to surprise the new administration with any decisions or initiatives. In this context, a dispute between Netanyahu and the pro-settler right wing has emerged. The latter is of the view that the mere election of Trump is a historical and ideological opportunity. Accordingly, the pro-settler right wing wants to work towards achieving its goals even without coordination with the US administration, which will, either implicitly or explicitly, support the settlers. Netanyahu, on the other hand, believes that coordination with the White House is the best approach to achieve the right wing's ideological goals, namely settlement activity and termination of the two-state solution. Netanyahu views his personal relationship with Trump as an "important asset".[15]

According to a document on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict developed by Trump's advisors David Friedman and Jason Dov Greenblatt, which they presented to Trump during his election campaign, Israel's interests should be paramount. Dore Gold, former Director General of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, highlighted that the new President's perceptions of Iran were

very different from those of the Obama administration. In Gold's opinion, the Friedman-Greenblatt document indicates that Iran is breaching the signed deal. In this context, Trump's advisors stated that the agreement with Iran should be amended but not revoked.[16] But Trump's appointed CIA Director, Mike Pompeo, is known to be against the deal and demands that it should be cancelled. Further, Gold argued that the document promises safe and defensible borders for Israel in any settlement with the Palestinians, making any demands for a withdrawal to the 1967 border unrealizable.[17] During a Senate hearing before he took office as Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson stated that Kerry's speech against the settlements was troubling. He also strongly criticized UN Security Council Resolution 2,334, saying the Trump administration would restore Washington's deep commitment to Israel because the US was Israel's one true ally in the region. Tillerson made critical statements of the Palestinians and Palestinian leadership, holding them responsible for the current impasse.[18] On the eve of Trump's inauguration, his advisors expressed their reservations about a conference in Paris designed to revive peace talks on the basis of the two-state solution.[19]

Netanyahu has announced a cancellation of all restrictions on settlement activity in Jerusalem and settlement blocs, and declared he is not willing to give the Palestinians a state, but rather an entity less than a state ("a state minus"). Nevertheless, Netanyahu has demanded that ministers postpone the law to annex Ma'ale Adumim.[20]

Although Netanyahu has been cautious about political steps like annexation, he has been quick to announce the approval of thousands of settler housing units in the West Bank as well as construction of a new settlement to replace the dismantled Amona. It would have been impossible for Netanyahu to allow settlement activity on this scale under the Obama administration. The announcement was made several days after Netanyahu met Rudy Giuliani, who visited Israel in January and delivered a personal message from Trump ahead of their meeting in the White House in February.

Netanyahu expects the Trump administration to reconsider the nuclear deal with Iran, and believes he can convince the White House to revoke it. In contrast to the Obama administration, there is now a large measure of agreement concerning the Iranian danger. When Iran launched a ballistic missile in February 2017, the White House reacted in a manner that was favorable to Netanyahu: "As of today, we're officially putting Iran on notice".[21]

The Intelligence Division of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs distributed a document to Israeli embassies around the world, stating that Trump would reduce US involvement in the Middle East in general, and in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in particular. Republished by *Haaretz*, the document argues that statements made by Trump during the election campaign on Israel and the region do not articulate a clear and systematic policy:

> As part of his minimal interest in foreign affairs, Trump doesn't see the Middle East as a good investment and it's reasonable to assume he will seek to reduce American involvement in the region, alongside his commitment to maintaining the struggle against Islamic State and the momentum created in the battle for the cities of Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria, which will continue to get his administration's support.[22]

The document also states:

> The diplomatic process between Israel and the Palestinians will not be a top priority for the Trump administration and it's reasonable to assume this topic will also be influenced by the staff surrounding him and developments in the field. Trump's declarations do not necessarily point to a coherent policy on this issue. On the one hand he has expressed

support for the settlements and for moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, but in other statements he said that he wants to remain neutral and that the two sides should reach a deal themselves.[23]

At the same time, there is a widespread perception that a number of Trump aides are not only anti-Muslim but have adopted anti-Semitic positions too. This has engendered a schism between US Jews and Israel. This issue was highlighted on International Holocaust Remembrance Day, when the White House released a statement on the Holocaust in which the word "Jews" was not mentioned. It was a decision that provoked general anger in the US, and especially among Jewish-American organizations. Nonetheless, Trump did not revise his statement. In an interview with NBC, the White House Chief of Staff, Reince Priebus, said that he did not regret the choice of words because of "[e]very one's suffering in the Holocaust, including obviously all of the Jewish people". Commenting on Trump's statement, Avigdor Lieberman said the "present administration is friendly. I deal with this incident as a mistake and misunderstanding". On the other hand, Jonathan Greenblatt, CEO of the Anti-Defamation League, which fights anti-Semitism in the US, called Trump's statement "puzzling and troubling. There were Eastern European countries whose Communist legacy combined with historical anti-Semitism seemed to drive their desire to minimize Jewish suffering".[24]

## *Trump's initial reaction to Israeli right wing's expectations*

Held on February 15, 2017, Trump's meeting with Netanyahu was an indication of the rapport Trump has with Israel in general, and with Netanyahu in particular. In the meeting, he offered what Netanyahu had asked for in the past: namely, to abandon the idea of internationalizing the question of Palestine. Trump indicated that he would accept any solution agreed by the parties, suggesting he would not impose a solution on Israel. Given the extreme imbalance in their respective powers, Trump promoted a false equivalence between Israel and the Palestinians, including the illusion that the Palestinians could exert pressure on Israel to make concessions. This is what Netanyahu hoped for: to reduce the interference of the US in terms of arriving at a solution, particularly a two-state solution. Although the Obama administration did not impose a solution on Israel, it supported the two-state solution on the basis of the June 4, 1967 border. It also opposed settlement activity, seeing it as an obstacle to the two-state solution (that is, it adopted the European position), and placed pressure on Israel to prevent the construction of settler housing units, including in Jerusalem. At the meeting, Trump too indicated he did not favor settlement expansion. Netanyahu therefore announced to his coalition that he could not construct a new settlement for the settlers of Amona in light of understandings with the Trump administration.[25] However, Trump did not denounce settlement activity, nor did he mention it as a problem in the conflict or an impediment to a solution. *Israel Hayom*, a newspaper close to Netanyahu and which had ruthlessly attacked the Obama White House, stated that there was a "new spirit" under Trump in relations between the two countries.[26]

Trump quickly adopted Netanyahu's idea of a regional conference to promote a solution. However, *Haaretz* published a scoop showing that Netanyahu had attended a secret meeting in 2016 with John Kerry, Egypt's Al-Sisi and Jordan's King Abdullah II. There he had refused a regional conference that would have addressed the question of Palestine.[27] There is no question that the report was leaked by former US administration staff to expose Netanyahu's bad faith in getting Trump to agree to a regional conference at their meeting.

As mentioned earlier, there is a close ideological match between the Netanyahu and Trump teams. Hence, Netanyahu used the White House meeting to raise the Iranian nuclear file and the Syrian question. Trump firmly backed Netanyahu's position on Iran, while leaving the Syrian question open, as it also involved Russian-American relations.

## Third, Netanyahu and Trump – an ideological and personal match

Netanyahu's character matches that of Trump. Both espouse an authoritarian approach to governance and hold far-right ideological views. Below are some of Netanyahu and Trump's shared qualities, which were evident during the latter's election campaign and since he took office:

1. Netanyahu and Trump are antagonistic to the press and mass media. Both believe that the media adopts a hostile position against them and seeks to oust them by means of false, fraudulent and deceptive news and reports. Without qualification, Netanyahu and Trump have accused the media of incitement. Last year, Netanyahu lavishly attacked the media when investigations were launched against him, and abandoned diplomacy and etiquette in dealing with media representatives and journalists. A 2016 analysis of Netanyahu's Facebook page showed that Netanyahu focused his attacks on four groups: the international community (32%), the media (28%), Arabs (20%) and the left (17%).[28] Like Netanyahu, Trump has spent much of his time attacking the American press, labeling it as the enemy of the people. Trump has boycotted some media outlets and stated that the media has fabricated news and presented false information about his administration.

2. Netanyahu and Trump seek to establish authoritarian governments. Viewing the executive as the supreme power in the state, the other branches of government need to conform to the executive. Both believe that they embody the state. Their personal qualities are adequate to steer the state toward accomplishing their goals. Hence, Netanyahu repeatedly flatters himself and his government, marginalizing other ministers and ministries. Likewise, Trump thinks that his success in the economic sector is sufficient to make him successful in the administration of political and strategic affairs.

3. Netanyahu and Trump adopt hostile positions toward minorities and immigrants. The former labels Palestinians in Israel as the archetypal enemy and frequently incites against Palestinians and the Palestinian leadership. Netanyahu has also led a campaign to halt immigration by building a wall on the Egyptian border to prevent immigrants and asylum seekers from entering Israel. Likewise, Trump has expressed anti-minority positions and stated his policy to prevent immigration to the US by constructing a separation wall with Mexico. Trump has said he arrived at this idea based on Israel's experiences. Trump is also hostile to granting asylum to those who have suffered from civil wars and has issued a travel ban targeting seven Muslim-majority countries.

4. Netanyahu and Trump embrace anti-Muslim positions. Netanyahu was of the view that Obama failed to characterize terrorist operations in the West as "Islamic terror". This was seen an appeasement towards Muslim culture. Netanyahu repeatedly used this term and lectured the world about the dangers of Islam. In his speeches, Obama delineated the difference between Islam and Islamic groups such Al-Qaeda and Islamic State, and explained the risk of blurring such distinctions. As a result, some Israeli rightists accused Obama of being weak, a Muslim or anti-Semitic.

Before and after he took office, Trump frequently used the term "Islamic terror" or "radical Islam". This echoed Netanyahu's view of associating terrorism with Islam and, by extension, identifying the Palestinian-Israeli conflict with "Islamic terrorism". This strategy has been adopted by Netanyahu for many years, especially with the emergence of the Islamic State and terror attacks in Europe.

5. Netanyahu and Trump love luxurious living. Trump enjoys the high life thanks to his economic power and commercial success; Netanyahu leads a life of luxury because Jewish businessmen provide him with lavish gifts and finance his trips around the world.


## Fourth, right-wing achievements following Trump's election

Less than a month after Trump had been inaugurated as US President, Netanyahu was received like royalty in the White House. In his meeting with Trump, Netanyahu got what he was looking for, namely a break with Obama's policy on the following issues:

1. The question of Palestine: Netanyahu secured a US waiver of an existing commitment to the two-state solution. Trump embraced Netanyahu's statement that both parties had first to reach an agreement between themselves. This was meant to stymie the Palestinian Authority's efforts to internationalize the solution. The US position was consistent with Netanyahu's perception that any solution should be negotiated between the two parties, and that a solution could not be imposed on Israel. During Netanyahu's visit, Trump pledged that he would accept any solution reached by the parties. This marked an erosion of the Obama administration's commitment to the two-state solution.

2. Settlements: Trump believes the settlements are not an impediment to peace. Although he demanded that Netanyahu slow down settlement activity and new settlement construction, his administration will not be diligent in monitoring and denouncing relevant Israeli violations. The assumption that settlements are not a barrier to peace is the approach Netanyahu has adopted over the past few years in response to increasing international criticism of settlement activity in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. That view is now apparently shared by the White House.

3. A regional conference: Trump adopted Netanyahu's idea of a regional approach to resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Netanyahu consented to the importance of promoting a regional setting for Israel and Israeli relations with the Arab countries. This effort is intended to culminate in a regional conference that would reach a settlement of the question of Palestine. Trump embraced this position. But as *Haaretz* exclusive shows, Netanyahu prefers a regional solution precisely because it will not lead to a two-state solution of the kind the Palestinian leadership has demanded.

4. The Iranian nuclear file: Considering Iran a danger to Israel's security, Trump took up Netanyahu's view of the issue. Trump has called the deal signed with Iran a bad one. Although he voiced this position during his election campaign, Trump's statements since becoming President bear a different tone. Netanyahu has managed to gain Trump's approval for tightening sanctions on Iran and accept Israel's position on the Iranian nuclear project. Ultimately, Netanyahu thinks he can convince the White House to revoke the nuclear deal with Iran.

## Final assessment

Negotiations are a clear case of lose-lose for the Palestinians, who must either surrender to American/Israeli diktats or be blamed for recalcitrance and "blowing up" the talks, as they were at the Camp David summit in 2000. For Israel, by contrast, it is a case of win-win: European and international pressure is alleviated, on the one hand, while, on the other, Israel enjoys the opportunity to take unilateral steps, such as the de facto annexation of parts of Area C.

Israel, as the stronger party, with the power to dictate to the Palestinians, has been able to adopt a strategy of issuing ultimatums ever since the Oslo negotiations. This strategy carries the latent and almost certain danger of torpedoing the talks or, at the very least, ensuring a bad agreement that creates frustration on the other side. This approach, which exploits the Palestinians' weakness, has allowed Israel to adopt rigid positions.[29] We have a unique situation in which the Israeli side can only benefit from being intransigent: if the Palestinians compromise, Israel will gain from the agreement; and if they don't, the Palestinians will suffer more losses on the ground. What is more, Israel is guaranteed American support when it blames the Palestinians for any failure, as we saw in the case of Dennis Ross. This gives Israel cover as it opts for the most rigid negotiating strategy possible. A superpower plays a decisive role in diplomacy, and influence over the media is critical. The Palestinians' inferiority in both of these fields has favored Israel's constant refusal to bend an inch.

This explains the consensus in Israel in relation to proceeding with negotiations in the present conditions. Even HaBayit HaYehudi, the settlers' party, has offered no objections to starting talks. It understands very clearly what is going on.[30] On the other hand, the Palestinians are divided and weaker than ever. They are deeply concerned about what is taking place in the turbulent Arab world, understanding that the unrest there is liable to remove their issue from the table and leave them alone facing a rightwing Israeli government. It is a golden opportunity for Israel, a situation that encourages it to think about compelling the other side to submit and end the conflict on terms that are favorable to both Israel and the United States.

## Notes

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2 Paker, P. "To the end, Obama and Netanyahu clash," *The New York Times International Edition*, 26.12.2016, p. 5.

3 Cesana, S. "The White House: we don't believe the existence of settlements is an impediment to peace," *Israel Hayom*, 5.2. 2017, p. 7.

4 Bismuth, B. "Trump proclaims 'love and respect' for Israel, its people," *Israel Hayom*, 11.11.2017, p. 2.

5 Shalev, C. "The State of Israel and Trump – A Love Story," *Haaretz*, 27.1. 2017, p. 11.

6 Maltz, J. "Trump Donated $10,000 to West Bank Settlement," *Haaretz*, 18.12. 2016, p. 6.

7 Shalev, C. "The Shadow Government," *Haaretz*, 2.12.2016, p. 12. On the far-right wing in post-Trump America, see Shalev, C. "Donald Trump is the inception of [religious] salvation," *Haaretz*, 25.11.2016, p. 20.

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14 Fisher, I. "Israeli hard-liners want to go big," *New York Times international Edition*, 2.2.2017, p. 4.

15 Levinson, C., and Ravid, B. "Netanyahu: This is not the time for a surprise for Trump Administration," *Haaretz*, 24.1.2017, p.

4.

16 Shalev, C. "Promises are back to the box," *Haaretz*, 13.11.2016, p. 1.

17 Cesana, S. "Dore Gold: Trump's document guarantees defensible borders for Israel," *Israel Hayom*, 10.11.2011, p. 18.

18 Leon, E. "Kerry's speech is troubling and harmed Israel," *Israel Hayom*, 12.1.2017, p. 3.

19 Ravid, B., and Khoury, J. "Trump advisors tell French officials: We strenuously object to Paris peace conference," *Haaretz*, 15.1.2017, p. 1 and 6.

20 Ravid, B. "Netanyahu: I am willing to give Palestinians a 'state-minus'. We will not restrict construction in Jerusalem and settlement blocs," *Haaretz*, 23.1.2017, p. 1 and 4.

21 Lynn, E., and Leon, E. "National Security Advisor: Iran officially put on notice," *Israel Hayom*, 2.2.2017, p. 19.

22 Ravid, B. "Israel's Foreign Ministry expects Trump to reduce U.S. involvement in peace process," *Haaretz*, 11.11.2016, p. 8.

23 Ibid.

24 Quotes from *The New York Times*, "The White House continues to stutter about Trump's statement on the Holocaust," *Haaretz*, 31 January 2017, p. 6.

25 Ravid, B. "Netanyahu in the security cabinet meeting: It will be difficult to build a new settlement for the settlers of Amona," *Haaretz*, 20.2.2017, p. 4.

26 "A new spirit," *Israel Hayom*, 17.2. 2017, p. 1.

27 Ravid, B. "Kerry presented to the Prime Minister a regional peace initiative in a secret meeting with Al-Sisi and Abdullah a year ago. Netanyahu stated his reservation on the initiative," *Haaretz*, 19.2.2017, p. 1 and 3.

28 Michaeli, Y. "A strong stance against navigators," *Haaretz*, 30.1.2017, p. 3.

29 This is a lose-lose strategy for one side: no matter what option it chooses, the only question is how much it will lose. For the other side, the strategy guarantees a win-win situation, or, at least a favorable outcome in which there is neither profit nor loss. This creates a dead-end situation (Narlikar, 2010; Schelling, 1963).

30 The Palestinians clearly understand that Israel has no interest in successful negotiations. Speaking to Jordanian television on September 8, 2013, the Palestinian lead negotiator, Dr. Saeb Erekat, observed that Israel began the negotiations with no intention of bringing them to a successful conclusion.

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