

# INSECURITY AND VULNERABILITY IN ISRAELI POLITICAL CULTURE

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Israel's current government—the fourth headed by Benjamin Netanyahu over eleven years—is often referred to as “the most right-wing in Israel’s history.” This claim, however, is not evidence-based analysis. Reacting to the uncertainty resulting from regional chaos, Israelis continue to respond to the sense of insecurity and vulnerability that has been central to the political culture since 1948. Demands in negotiations that Palestinian leaders stop naming schools after “martyrs” (terrorists to Israelis), acknowledge Israel as the homeland of the Jewish people, and end international boycott campaigns (BDS) are recent manifestations of this deep insecurity.

In part, the perception of a sharp “turn to the right” also reflects eight years of conflict with President Obama over the failure to reach a breakthrough with the Palestinians. Obama and former Secretary of State John Kerry repeatedly attacked Netanyahu over Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, identifying those actions as “the central obstacle to peace.” This view also dominates the agendas of U.S.-based groups, such as J Street and the New Israel Fund that oppose Israeli policies from the outside, which had significant influence during the Obama years. In December, just prior to leaving office, Obama departed from previous policies by pointedly refusing to veto UN Security Council Resolution 2344 which singled out Israeli settlements for condemnation, Just five days later, this theme was highlighted in Kerry’s emotional speech on the future of the Middle East.

However, this one-dimensional approach to analyzing Israeli political culture negates key factors, particularly the sense of ongoing instability and uncertainty. The combination of six decades of war and terror, the ongoing chaos and instability, Iran's shrill threats of annihilation, and discriminatory boycott campaigns reinforce the dismal lessons of Jewish history. Netanyahu's policies and rhetoric, often sharpened by his coalition partners, embody these interpretations.

For most Israelis, including for those who oppose settlement expansion, the main obstacles to peace include terror and the Palestinian rejection of Jewish historical claims and the right to sovereign equality, independent of border concerns. As voting behavior and other data consistently show, the "average Israeli" pays close attention to the widely heard chant "from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" – which, in the words of Ayelet Shaked, (a young politician and currently Minister of Justice) means "Palestinians see no place for the Jews". The problem is more than words: the rhetoric is accompanied by rocket attacks from Gaza and terror from the West Bank. On these core issues, Israel today—ostensibly led by the "most right-wing government ever"—is not very different from 20 years ago, aside from the deepening loss of faith in the potential for rapid change.

Israeli voters have also not forgotten the mass terrorism that occurred in the wake of the 1993 Oslo agreements that created the Palestinian Authority. Similarly, the hope that pragmatic leaders would follow Arafat and negotiate a compromise turned out to be a mirage. Even if an agreement becomes possible with moderates in the West Bank, Hamas could quickly take control, as was seen in Gaza in 2007—two years after Israel's complete withdrawal. Viewing the chaos and massive violence in Syria and Iraq, the presence of ISIS in Sinai (leading to rocket attacks and terror warnings in Israel),

and the strengthening of the Iran-Hezbollah regional alliance, Israelis—including those who support a two-state solution in theory—perceive withdrawal to the pre-1967 lines and a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza a dangerous fantasy.

Meanwhile, the intense national debate taking place in the Knesset and media reflects a growing understanding that the status quo since 1967, when the West Bank was taken from Jordan, is increasingly costly. For five decades, Israeli leaders from diverse parties avoided long-term decisions on the status of Judea and Samaria, as the West Bank is known in Israel, resulting in uncertainty on almost every significant issue. The interim agreements under Oslo have not been supplanted by a “permanent status” framework, adding to the difficulties.

Conflicts in the West Bank, a disputed territory under military rule as in pre-1967 Israel, are rooted in complex and contradictory documents from the Ottoman, British Mandate, and Jordanian periods that make ownership difficult to prove. In some areas, houses built on barren land were found to have been constructed on private property, as the case of nine residences in Amona. This case was fought in Israeli courts for ten years, finally ending in February 2017, when the nine houses were demolished under court order. In parallel, the Knesset adopted legislation similar to long-existing regulations inside Israel and in many Western democracies which compensate the land-owners when their claims are recognized retroactively. Although this law was criticized as “creeping annexation” and a “land grab,” the demolitions demonstrate a more complex reality.

These developments led a number of ministers and Members of Knesset (MKs) from different parties to advocate unilateral action in order to reduce the uncertainty and its

costs in the West Bank. Some call for applying Israeli law to strategic Area C of the West Bank, which is mainly desert with a relatively small Palestinian population, and is under Israeli administrative control. Others call for starting with “consensus settlements” (meaning they are widely accepted as an integral part of Israel, including by the center-left) near Jerusalem, such as Ma’ale Adumim, a suburb of 40,000. While the rhetoric is ideological, invoking Jewish history and rights in the area, the proposals are also presented as pragmatic—including the expectation that such changes would gain Washington’s approval and not block a wider agreement.

On the other side of the debate, the strongest argument for pushing a negotiated two-state framework in the short term is based on demographics and the fear that a single state would have a near-majority Arab population. The Zionist core of Jewish self-determination and the cultural renaissance enabled by a primarily Jewish society would be endangered. Proponents of this case, however, have failed to make a strong impact in Israel, in part due to the security fears and the visible risks of territorial withdrawal.

For Israelis who share the demographic concerns, oppose expanding settlements, and advocate taking risks for peace with the Palestinians, the options appear limited. The Labor Party that dominated Israeli politics and society for the first 30 years of the state’s existence is today divided by leadership disputes and lacks a realistic alternative to the status quo. During the Obama era, Labor leader Isaac Herzog and his predecessor, Shelly Yachimovich, attacked the Netanyahu government for alienating Washington, while their election platforms emphasized domestic and economic issues, not foreign policy. In secret, Herzog also conducted lengthy negotiations with Netanyahu to pursue a regional peace framework with Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, including a freeze on construction outside the blocs along the 1949 Armistice Line and Jerusalem. A coalition

with Labor would offset the veto power of the far right in the coalition, but the talks ended in disagreement, and Herzog remains outside.

Polls indicate that if elections were held now, the centrist party Yesh Atid, headed by former journalist Yair Lapid, would overtake Labor and perhaps Likud and Lapid could become prime minister. To gain support, Lapid has adopted much of Netanyahu's rhetoric and Likud's policies on negotiations with the Palestinians and other foreign policy issues. Lapid, like Netanyahu, has focused on the widespread Israeli alienation from and distrust of international institutions, particularly in Europe, and of the "liberal world order." He has repeatedly condemned UN bodies that single out Israel for attack, such as the Human Rights Council, BDS (boycott, divestment, and sanctions), and lawfare campaigns (efforts to demonize IDF soldiers and politicians as war criminals and calls for prosecution by the International Criminal Court). Lapid posted blanket denunciations of these organizations and their campaigns, in contrast to the left's low profile and hesitant approach. MKs on the right make headlines by pushing symbolic legislation, such as the March 2017 law banning the worst of the BDS activists from entering Israel, while the left opposes these measures and the center is divided.

These measures, which critics denounce as anti-democratic and counter-productive, reflect the dominant uncertainty and vulnerability within Israeli society. The fear that the nation that was reborn in 1948 could be erased again is widespread and crosses party and ideological affiliations. Israel remains a nation in arms, defending itself from what are seen as existential threats to its existence.

As a result, if Netanyahu is defeated or resigns in the wake of corruption investigations, and if the government that follows is headed by centrists or the Labor party, Israeli

policies with respect to Palestinians and the West Bank will continue to be framed by history and perceptions of insecurity and vulnerability. These core dimensions will only change when the Palestinian side—and the wider region—address them directly, and provide evidence that the benefits of substantial Israeli withdrawal and a two-state framework outweigh the risks.