

Foreign Policy in the 1999 Israeli Elections

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In 1996, Binyamin Netanyahu was elected Prime Minister of Israel by the narrowest of margins, following a series of deadly terrorist attacks that had a profound impact on Israeli public opinion. The election results reflected a rejection of the Labor government's policies, and of Shimon Peres, in particular, rather than an endorsement of Netanyahu and his policies.

Although the new government's first priority focused on combating terrorism, this could never be the only measure of success or failure, and in order to be reelected, Netanyahu would have to deliver on his promise to balance security and "peace." A pragmatic policy demonstrating some progress in the negotiations with the Palestinians and perhaps also Syria, along with a strong stance in the face of terrorism and violence, would provide Netanyahu with the continued support of the floating voters.

In 1992, Yitzhak Rabin led the Labor party to a narrow victory over Yitzhak Shamir and the Likud on a platform of "peace with strength," and in 1996, those voters who had swung to Rabin four year earlier were disenchanted and voted for Netanyahu. These floating voters were not motivated by a right-wing nationalist ideology, and to keep the margin of victory, Netanyahu would have to maintain their support.

However, in 1999, Netanyahu failed, for a number of reasons, to hold these floating voters, and both he and the Likud lost badly. The relatively lower levels of terrorism, for which Netanyahu took credit, and the emphasis on "reciprocity" and "lowering expectations" in negotiations with the Palestinians, were insufficient for re-election.

With few accomplishments during his three years as prime minister, Netanyahu's reelection strategy was based on an attempt to return to the themes of 1996. He tried to create a strong link between Barak and Peres, but failed. Although Barak identified himself as Rabin's political heir, he had always distanced himself from the negotiations with the Palestinians, and never showed a great deal of enthusiasm for the framework created in Oslo. During the campaign, Barak emphasized his military career and, like Rabin, presented an image of security and strength as the basis for peace in the region. His campaign commercials stressed his military achievements, fighting terrorism and insuring Israeli security. Barak's statements on key issues, such as a Palestinian state or withdrawal from the Golan Heights, were limited and ambiguous, and he did not present a comprehensive plan or maps containing possible boundaries. Peres and Beilin were largely hidden during the campaign, and under these conditions, Netanyahu's efforts to recycle successful themes of the 1996 campaign against Peres were stillborn.

Indeed, throughout the campaign, Barak acted to preempt Netanyahu on the issues that were used effectively in 1996. Barak emphasized his IDF record in contributing to Israeli security and fighting terrorism. Early in the campaign, polls showed that Netanyahu and

Barak were rated virtually the same in terms of fighting terrorism, and this trend continued until the end. (In January 1999, polls showed that 42 percent of the voters rated Netanyahu as best in “protecting Israel’s security,” versus 39 percent for Barak),^[1] and in the last week, when asked “Who do you think would handle terror better?,” 39 percent of the respondents rated Netanyahu highest, and 38 percent named Barak.^[2]

In analyzing the 1999 elections, it would be a mistake to argue that the Middle East “peace process” and foreign policy issues, in general, were of primary importance. When asked to rate issues in the order of importance, 39 percent of the respondents ranked domestic issues (economy/social welfare) first, only 32 percent gave priority to “security/foreign affairs” issues, while 27 percent rated them equally.^[3] As the authors of the other chapters in this volume demonstrate, the main issues resulted from domestic (or “tribal”) concerns, such as religious-secular relations, ethnicity, and Netanyahu’s personality and one-man governing “style,” rather than his external policies.

However, policies relating to the negotiations with the Palestinians, including Jerusalem and terrorism, as well as relations with the United States and other foreign policy issues, were always in the background and played a significant role in the 1999 election campaign. The Netanyahu government split following the Wye River Memorandum that was signed in October 1998, and this led directly to the decision to hold elections one year earlier than had been scheduled. Thus, any analysis of the election campaign and its results must hinge on the events that led to the Wye summit, the agreements that were negotiated there, and their impact in Israel.

1996-1999: The Legacy of Reciprocity and Lowered Expectations

The Middle East peace process and, in particular, the negotiations with the Palestinians over the implementation of the 1993 “Oslo agreement” (Declaration of Principles — DOP), as well as subsequent accords, continued to be the central foreign policy issues during Netanyahu’s era. The focus occasionally shifted to Lebanon (see below) and, after the elections, Netanyahu and some of his advisors claimed to have had intensive contacts with Syria. In general, however, the Palestinian talks were central, beginning with the implementation of the Hebron agreement (suspended by Peres following the suicide bombings) and followed by discussion of the “further interim redeployments” agreed to in the 1995 Cairo accord.

In this context, “reciprocity” and “lowered expectations” were the dominant themes of the Netanyahu era. Following his first meeting with Arafat, and in public statements afterwards, Netanyahu declared an end to the pattern established after the 1993 DOP, in which Israel implemented its commitments while the Palestinians delayed or ignored theirs.^[4] The process would continue, he announced, but only with changes on the part of the Palestinians[SF1]. In addition, he emphasized the need to “lower expectations” regarding possible Israeli concessions borders, Jerusalem, refugees, and other issues.

Whatever Netanyahu's intentions, events in September 1996 contributed to a climate of hostility and distrust that continued for the next three years. The events began when the Israeli government opened an ancient tunnel in the Old City of Jerusalem. This tunnel, which is parallel to the Western Wall, had long been open at one end, but the exit, which opened into the Moslem Quarter, was sealed. Both the Shamir and Rabin governments had approved the decision to unseal the exit, but had delayed implementation in order to avoid a confrontation in Jerusalem. Netanyahu, however, ordered the tunnel opened, apparently in response to pressure from supporters and donors with strong ideological agendas. The Palestinians responded violently, and in military clashes across the country, 11 IDF soldiers were killed and 55 wounded. Netanyahu and Arafat rushed to Washington for a crisis summit involving King Hussein, which seemed to lead to a reconciliation of sorts. However, the tunnel confrontation critically undermined the image of the Netanyahu government.

Nevertheless, the push continued to complete the implementation of the Hebron agreement and return to the Oslo process, largely based on pressure from the U.S. On January 15, 1997, Israel and the PA representatives met at the Erez crossing between Gaza and Israel to sign a revised Hebron agreement. The text was very similar to the earlier version negotiated in 1995, but added specificity to the Palestinian obligations. More importantly, the agreement seemed to indicate that Netanyahu and the Likud party had accepted and become part of the Oslo process. All of the other agreements had been made by the Labor party, amidst strenuous objections from the Likud.

However, a number of key figures in the Likud and in the government coalition denounced the pact. Science Minister Binyamin Ze'ev Begin charged that 80 percent of Hebron was being handed over to Palestinian control and despite the claim of reciprocity, the old pattern of one-sided implementation was continuing. Begin also warned that this was the "first step" in the creation of a Palestinian state. "If we give in on Hebron, who can guarantee that we will not capitulate elsewhere and reward Arafat for terror and violations of the agreement?" Infrastructure Minister Ariel Sharon also criticized Netanyahu, warning that he would lead a campaign to bring changes in "a deal that endangers the lives of Israelis." In addition, ministers from the NRP and other parties in the coalition were strongly critical, and both Natan Sharansky and Yuli Edelstein (Yisrael B'aliya) were not supportive.^[6]

In the face of this criticism, Netanyahu sought to regain support on the right by approving building on Har Homa, one of the last undeveloped areas in the greater Jerusalem region. The Har Homa decision softened the censure regarding Netanyahu's decision to implement the Hebron agreement and thereby become part of the Oslo process. However, for critics in the U.S. and Europe, and on the left in Israel, this decision served as clear evidence of Netanyahu's insincerity with regard to the peace process (even though the majority of the land of Har Homa was owned by Jews).^[6]

The focus on Hebron and Har Homa faded in time, as the further redeployments (FRD) that had been specified in the 1995 Interim (Cairo) Agreement emerged as the central

issue in Israeli foreign policy. Ultimately, differences over these redeployments also brought down the Netanyahu government and led to early elections.

The discussions on the FRD proceeded slowly and were halted after a series of fatal terrorist attacks in March (in Tel Aviv), July, and September 1997 (in Jerusalem). Netanyahu stopped the talks, declaring “I want to make it clear that we are not prepared to continue this way.” He blamed Arafat and the PA for failing to take the necessary action against the terrorist infrastructure in the areas under their control. “When the head of the PA embraces and kisses Hamas instead of fighting it, the message is that Hamas can strike at Israel with impunity.”¹²¹

After a period of relative calm, the discussions resumed, and in December 1997, almost one year after the Hebron agreement, and after a great deal of pressure (from the U.S. and internally, from officials such as Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai), Netanyahu agreed, in principle, to implement the second FRD. This decision again emphasized reciprocity, and was dependent on Palestinian fulfillment of commitments contained in the annex to the Hebron accord, including extradition of Palestinian terror suspects, decommissioning of illegal weapons, and formalizing the amendments to the PLO Charter which nullified the clauses that called for the destruction of Israel.

The extent of each FRD was not specified in the Cairo Agreement, and the Netanyahu government sought to limit the second one to under 10 percent of the remaining territory under Israeli control, while the U.S. insisted on “two digits” or a number “in the teens.” A weakened Netanyahu opted to appoint Ariel Sharon as foreign minister (ten months after the resignation of David Levy). Sharon, who was a rival (Netanyahu had resisted appointing him to the cabinet after the 1996 elections), was suddenly and implausibly seen by the U.S. as more flexible than Netanyahu, and by the Israeli right as more reliable.

The impasse continued for many months, and during this period the Palestinians threatened to abandon the Oslo process and issue a unilateral declaration of independence (UDI). In October 1998, the U.S. pressed all the parties to attend a summit meeting at Wye Plantation, and this meeting resulted in an accord and timetable for implementation. Netanyahu won narrow cabinet approval for the Wye accord, with eight ministers approving, four against, and five abstaining. When the agreement was presented to the Knesset for approval, seven cabinet members, including Likud ministers Limor Livnat, Silvan Shalom, Moshe Katsav, Yehoshua Matza and Tzahi Hanegbi, were absent. The two National Religious Party ministers, Shaul Yahalom and Yitzhak Levy, voted against the accord, as did all the other NRP MKs. The government was in disarray and, rather than facing defeat in the Knesset, decided to promote early elections, which were approved by the Knesset on December 23, 1998.

The campaign began with the Wye agreement in the immediate background, linked to the questions of the future of the Oslo process, the potential for reaching a permanent status agreement, the impact of a Palestinian state, and uncertainty over how policy on all of these issues would impact on Israeli security, relations with the U.S., and also with

the rest of the world. In terms of foreign policy, these were the central issues in the election campaign. This time, in contrast to 1996, Netanyahu had a record to defend and was open to attack from both left and right. Begin and his National Union party, as well as the NRP, attacked Netanyahu for willingness to continue the Oslo process, which they charged would lead Israel to disaster.

From the other side of the political spectrum, Barak and the Labor party (renamed “One Israel”) charged that Netanyahu had damaged Israeli security by bringing the peace process to an impasse and by endangering Israel’s long-standing partnership with the U.S.

The new Center party, led by former Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai, who was dismissed by Netanyahu at the beginning of the campaign, also criticized the government’s policies on the peace process. In repeated public appearances, Mordechai blamed Netanyahu for allowing policy to be controlled by “two or three extremist MKs.” Mordechai also accused Netanyahu of weakening ties with Egypt, Jordan, and, in particular, the United States.^[8] These general critiques were repeated in the discussions of specific issues during the campaign.

In the televised debate between Netanyahu and Mordechai on April 13, 1999 (the only debate between candidates during the campaign), these issues were discussed briefly. Netanyahu, who appeared unprepared for the confrontation, used the debate to emphasize his policies of reciprocity and claimed credit for reducing terrorism. Mordechai also claimed credit for these achievements, while blaming Netanyahu for the Western Wall tunnel crisis, and for creating a situation in which Israel was forced to make major concessions at the Wye summit, asking “Who gave the Palestinians 13 percent? Not me, you did.” (Mordechai also claimed that after eight months as defense minister, he submitted his resignation due to dissatisfaction over Netanyahu’s handling of these issues.) Netanyahu responded by citing Mordechai’s public praise of the government’s policies.

Regarding settlements, there was also little substantive difference in positions. Netanyahu restated an earlier pledge not to build new settlements, but allow expansion of existing ones, while Mordechai called for limited construction in areas that remained under full Israeli control.^[9] However, as many analysts and commentators noted, it was difficult to discern the policy differences between the two candidates on these issues.

The Question of a Palestinian State

Netanyahu’s resistance to further redeployments, the demand for fundamental changes in Palestinian policies and rhetoric (“reciprocity”), and the threat of a unilateral Palestinian declaration of independence were closely interrelated. As the process reached an impasse, the threat of a UDI became a major focus of Israeli foreign policy, and also a central issue in the election campaign.

According to the 1993 Oslo agreement, the permanent status negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians were to be concluded within five years after the Gaza-Jericho agreement. The deadline for permanent status was May 4, 1999. This date was less than two weeks before the Israeli elections, and the Palestinian threat to issue a UDI hovered over the campaign from the beginning. If the Palestinians were to proceed with a UDI, this would become a major issue in the Israeli elections and might increase support for Netanyahu.

The Palestinians emphasized this issue, in large part, in order to obtain the maximum payoff from the EU and the U.S. for not proceeding with a UDI. In early January, 1991, PA Planning Minister Nabil Shaath declared that Israel's expansion of settlements and suspension of the Wye agreement had left the Palestinian Authority with no alternative but to proceed with the declaration of an independent Palestinian state. "There has been no change in the policy of the Palestinian Authority on this matter, the declaration is on track, and what makes it even more so is the total lack of implementation of the Wye agreement and the total lack of progress on permanent status."^[10]

Netanyahu's spokesman blamed the Palestinians for "breaking the Wye agreement" by unilaterally planning to declare the establishment of a state.^[11] The prime minister declared that in response to a UDI, he would consider annexation of some or all of Judea and Samaria. "Israel reserves the right to extend Israeli law to the territories under its control if Arafat and the Palestinians violate the agreements they have signed."^[12] Netanyahu also declared that "We will continue to adhere to our firm and clear policy which does not allow for the creation of a Palestinian state in the heart of the Land of Israel, and we will not allow Jerusalem to be redivided."^[13]

For Barak and the One Israel party, the Palestinian statements regarding a UDI posed a difficult dilemma. A maximalist declaration, as discussed by many PA leaders, could persuade floating voters to support Netanyahu, and might have led many potential Barak supporters to waiver. If the Palestinian borders were defined as "the borders of June 4, 1967, including all of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and the part of Jerusalem that was on the Jordanian side of the armistice line,"^[14] this would harm Barak. On the other hand, a postponement of the decision could be interpreted as a blatant Palestinian effort to assist Barak's campaign. Likud MK Uzi Landau, who contested the Likud leadership for a brief period, predicted that the Palestinians would defer declaring statehood in order to help Barak and the left in the election. "It is a fact that if they delayed it, it would be in the interest of helping the Labor party."^[15] In response, Barak charged that Netanyahu was responsible for the worldwide support that the Palestinians were receiving for efforts to declare a state. The government's policies were blamed for "creating a Palestinian state at Wye," and for inviting "Clinton to Gaza to inaugurate that state."^[16]

On this issue, as on others, the shadow of Shimon Peres (in second position on the One Israel Knesset list) did not contribute to Barak's strategy. During the first weeks of the campaign (January 11), Peres became the first Israeli to address the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), meeting in Ramallah. In "a show of support for Palestinian

statehood,” Peres, joined by major international figures who had been invited by the Peres Center for Peace, declared that “it is our deep hope not only that the Palestinian people will gain independence, but it is our common interest to see a Palestinian state take place as a result of an agreement — a state that lives democratically and flourishes economically.” Ahmed Qurei (Abu Alla), Speaker of the PLC, called for “an independent state with Jerusalem as its capital.”^[17]

Similarly, the Likud and the Netanyahu government did not speak with a single voice on this issue. In its campaign platform, Likud pledged to continue implementation of the Wye accords subject to “reciprocity,” to strengthen the Jewish settlements in Judea and Samaria, and to prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state.^[18]

However, newly appointed Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon indicated that he was prepared to accept a Palestinian state. At the same time, he repeated Netanyahu’s warning that in response to a UDI, Israel would annex all the territories under its control. (“There is no question of our trying to recover Gaza, Nablus, or Jenin,...but all the rest that is in our hands today will remain so.”)^[19]

For Netanyahu, it was far easier to campaign against Arafat than against Barak. During the campaign, Netanyahu warned the Palestinians that “If you violate the agreements, and you unilaterally declare a state with Jerusalem as its capital...you should know that we will respond aggressively...We are not willing to give in. You act unilaterally, we act unilaterally, and this will not be good for the Palestinians and it will not be good for peace.”^[20] To add credibility, at least in terms of the election race, the government leaked information on military contingency plans (Field of Thorns) in response to violence associated with a Palestinian move in this direction.^[21] In response, Arafat declared, “The Palestinians are ready to take up arms against Israel to defend their legitimate rights at any time, first and foremost their right to declare an independent state,” allowing Netanyahu to declare “Israel will respond in the strongest possible way, causing the Palestinian Authority to only lose and to gain nothing by such a move.”^[22]

However, for the U.S. and Europe, the threats of violence increased the importance of postponing a UDI until after the Israeli elections. U.S. officials acknowledged that “Both Arafat and we want to get by May 4 and May 17. We think he understands the need to delay.”^[23] Similarly, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak told Arafat not to proceed with a UDI in order to avoid helping Netanyahu.^[24]

Netanyahu charged that Arafat’s tactics were aimed primarily at influencing the Israeli elections, and as a result, the threat of a UDI was not real.^[25] Instead, Netanyahu noted that Arafat’s real objective was to extract a range of pledges from the U.S. and Europe, in exchange for postponing the declaration until after the Israeli elections.^[26]

Netanyahu also ran against European policy with respect to the Palestinians, and invoked the Holocaust. After the Berlin Declaration, in which the European Union formally expressed its support for a Palestinian state, Netanyahu declared, it is “regretful that Europe, where a third of the Jewish people perished, would see fit to

attempt to impose a solution that endangers the state of Israel and its interests.”^[27] (One Israel also saw the EU’s declaration as a liability. MK Shlomo Ben-Ami said the EU resolution of support for a Palestinian state was unnecessary and harmful. However, he also noted that it reflects “the collapse of Israel’s international relations under the Netanyahu government. Netanyahu is endangering Israel’s strategic security.”)^[28] Similarly, the Netanyahu government condemned European support for the resolution passed by the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva calling for Palestinian self-determination on the basis of the UN partition resolution of 1947 (Res. 181) and for the “right of return” for refugees (Res. 194). The failure to mention UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 drew particular anger.^[29]

Industry and Trade Minister Natan Sharansky also warned the Americans and Europeans against giving in to Arafat’s blackmail and extortion. While visiting Ukraine, Netanyahu also appealed to the hawkish Russian and FSU voters in Israel, warning that “The Palestinian Authority and its leaders dare not unilaterally declare a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. . . . Israel will respond in the harshest way possible.”^[30]

By mid-March, this issue had lost salience, and Netanyahu was seeking to position himself back towards the center of the political spectrum. He again pledged that the Oslo process, including permanent status talks, would resume after the elections. Claiming that “the Palestinians have lowered their expectations since I came into office,” he said that the territorial issues would not lead to an impasse.^[31] One Israel carefully positioned itself in between, criticizing both Netanyahu and Arafat for threatening violence. “The only way to resolve the issues between the sides is by restarting the stalled peace process and rebuilding the trust between the parties that was snuffed out in the last three years.”^[32] When PA official Nabil Shaath revealed that in 1995, MK Yossi Beilin had agreed to accept a Palestinian state, there was little impact on the electorate.^[33]

In April, one month before the elections, Barak broke the pattern of ambiguity, issuing his first clear policy statement on permanent status issues. The policy included four points: a united Jerusalem under Israeli sovereignty; no return to the 1967 borders; no foreign military presence west of the Jordan River; and the annexation into Israel of most of the settlers living in concentrated areas near the old border. He also pledged to submit any peace agreement with the Palestinians to a national referendum.^[34]

This statement was strongly criticized by Meretz, and provided its leaders with the opportunity to position themselves to the left of One Israel and Barak. Yossi Sarid declared, “Every kid in the country knows there will be a Palestinian state, and it would be good if Barak, a candidate for prime minister, knew what every child knows. If we are going to a referendum for a final status deal, the upcoming elections are redundant.”^[35] In a major public rally, leaders declared that Meretz would be “the first to recognize” a Palestinian state.

When Arafat and the PA officially backed down from UDI before May 4, Netanyahu declared victory, claiming that the Palestinians “know that as long as I am prime

minister there will be no Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. He [Arafat] is waiting until after the elections, because he is hoping the government will change.” In a press conference on May 5, Netanyahu, Sharon and Arens claimed credit for the outcome. “This did not happen by itself,” Netanyahu said. “For a whole year, Arafat promised dozens of times that he would declare an independent Palestinian state today, and that he would also declare the division of Jerusalem. For a whole year we warned him against doing this....He understood that we were determined in our responses and that a government headed by me would never allow anybody to unilaterally determine the fate of the State of Israel and its permanent borders, and therefore he changed his mind.”^[36]

Barak responded, saying: “For a long time it has been clear that Arafat will not unilaterally declare statehood....Netanyahu did not stop anything; all that he has done is alienate Israel internationally....With the U.S. behind the Palestinians, we have lost all our negotiating leverage.”^[37] He charged that rather than preventing the establishment of a Palestinian state, Netanyahu was responsible for creating it. “According to Netanyahu’s own ministers, Sharon and Arens included, Netanyahu has created a de facto Palestinian state. He helped give it life at Wye, he ratified it with Clinton’s visit to Gaza that he organized, and stamped it into everyone’s minds with the letter from Clinton...and all this has done nothing but hurt Israel’s negotiating position.” At the same time, Barak declared that he, too, would never allow a unilateral declaration of Palestinian statehood. “I say here clearly: In the future, in a government under my leadership, we will not allow a unilateral declaration. The only place to discuss matters having to do with the future of the Palestinians is in negotiations.”^[38]

Despite the relatively intense debate and focus on the issue of Palestinian statehood, the related questions regarding the Wye Agreement, and the future of the negotiations, the evidence (primarily from polls) indicates that these events did not have a significant impact on voter preferences. Indeed, from the beginning of the campaign in January, public opinion polls showed that 50 percent of the public believed that Barak would “best advance the peace process,” while only 35 percent chose Netanyahu in response to this question.^[39] In May, during the last week before the elections), 44 percent chose Barak as the candidate “more appropriate to carry out the permanent agreement with the Palestinians,” compared to 34 percent for Netanyahu.^[40]

In a broader sense, the impact of the debate over this issue on the campaign itself was minimal. Although Barak lost some ground in the polls, Netanyahu failed to gain support and remained far behind Barak’s approval rating in this area. As will be seen below, this was also the case as other issues arose and declined.

VOTER PREFERENCES FROM JANUARY THROUGH MAY 1999

(in percentages)

1. First round:

Date	Netanyahu	Barak	Mordechai	Begin	Bashara
May 14, 1999	38	44	6	3	3
May 7, 1999	37	42	7	3	4
April 30, 1999	37	37	10	3	3
April 13, 1999	33	34	17	4	3
March 29, 1999	36	33	17	4	
March 24, 1999	38	36	15	n.a.	
March 17, 1999	33	31	19	n.a.	
March 10, 1999	33	31	18	4	
March 3, 1999	35	30	19	5	
February 19, 1999	37	30	20	4	
January 29, 1999	35	28	18	5	

2. Second round (Barak vs. Netanyahu)

Date	Netanyahu	Barak
May 14, 1999	41	51
May 7, 1999	42	50
April 30, 1999	42	50
April 14, 1999	42	47
March 31, 1999	43	46
March 10, 1999	41	46
March 3, 1999	44	45
February 19, 1999	47	44
January 29, 1999	46	43
January 15, 1999	43	43
January 8, 1999	40	45
January 1, 1999	40	45
December 25, 1998	42	44
October 1, 1998	42	41
August 5, 1998	44	43
May 20, 1998	43	43
May 6, 1998	40	40

Yediot Ahronot, 14 May 1999 — results of a survey carried out by Dahaf the week of May 14, 1999 of a representative sample of 1,100 Israeli adults. Survey error +/- 3 percentage points.

Jerusalem

In the 1996 election campaign, Netanyahu and the Likud made Jerusalem an important issue, charging that Peres and the Labor party were willing to make concessions and “redivide” Israel’s capital. This strategy was effective, particularly when details were published on the ongoing discussions between Labor party officials and Palestinian negotiators, including the Beilin-Abu Mazen talks.

In 1999, after three years of a Likud-led government, the situation was quite different, but Netanyahu and the Likud sought to inject the Jerusalem issue in the campaign. In mid-March, the EU issued a formal statement reiterating the long-standing European policy that does not recognize Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem. The statement linked the European policy to UN Resolution 181, adopted in November 1947, which called for a partition of the area contained in mandated Palestine, with Jerusalem becoming a “corpus separatum.” The use of this outdated resolution as the basis for policy on Jerusalem after so many years and events, including the 1948-1967 period during which Jewish Jerusalem was occupied and systematically desecrated, alienated a wide spectrum of Israelis.

These events provided Netanyahu and Sharon with the opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to Jerusalem in the face of external pressure, and to place themselves in the forefront of the battle to prevent the redivision of the city. In a public message to German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, Sharon reiterated “in the most sincere yet firm manner Israel’s determination — a determination shared by all shades of opinion in Israel — not to allow Jerusalem to become, once again, a divided and separated city.”^[41] In public appearances before foreign representatives, Netanyahu and Sharon stressed this theme. In one such briefing, Sharon pointedly welcomed the ambassadors to “Jerusalem, the capital of the Jewish people for the last 3,000 years and the capital of Israel for the last 50 years.” He also recounted his own history in the battle for Jerusalem in 1948, noting “It is very hard to imagine that after all those years we again have to struggle for Jerusalem.” Agreeing to place Jerusalem on the negotiating table at Oslo was a “major mistake” of the Labor government, but he pledged that if the Likud led the next government, “the negotiations about Jerusalem will be very short.”^[42]

In late March, American policy regarding recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital (a sore point in bilateral relations) was debated in Washington in the context of congressional action designed to press the Clinton Administration to change its position on this issue. In this framework, Netanyahu reasserted his claim to be the most reliable defender of Israeli interests in Jerusalem.^[43] A few days later, the government ordered two offices in Jerusalem linked to the PA to be closed. Netanyahu claimed that this move was in response to “increased illegal PA political activities in Jerusalem.”^[44] However, Netanyahu was careful to avoid confrontation, which would have revived memories of the tunnel crisis of 1996, and he readily accepted a court decision postponing the closure decision regarding the offices. Claiming victory, he declared “The activities in the offices themselves have been stopped and will be moved outside of Jerusalem to Palestinian territory. Our goal is to stop the activity there and that is what we have done.”^[45]

In late April, following a series of highly publicized meetings on Israeli Independence Day between Palestinian officials and foreign representatives at Orient House in Jerusalem, the status of this building became an issue again. In the past, efforts by the PA to use this building to establish an official presence in Jerusalem had led to friction with Israel, and the potential for a major confrontation existed whenever activities at Orient House became salient.

Indeed, given the timing and situation, these meetings seemed designed to provoke an angry response from the Likud government (and failure to act would have been politically costly). Netanyahu responded immediately, declaring “The time has come for Orient House to be shut, or at least for the Palestinian offices there to be shut.”^[46] Internal Security Minister Avigdor Kahalani was given the responsibility of issuing closure orders against PA offices in Orient House “which are operating illegally.”^[47] (Kahalani, however, was careful to avoid a violent confrontation.) In parallel, Netanyahu charged that, “The Labor party’s policy is not a secret. It is a fact that when Barak was foreign minister [in the former Labor government], he did not lift a finger to close Orient House.” In another appearance, Netanyahu escalated the rhetoric. “If [Barak] were elected, he would divide and divide....[Labor MK Yossi] Beilin agreed with Abu Mazen that 95 percent of the territory of Judea and Samaria would be transferred to a Palestinian state whose capital would in fact be Jerusalem, and which would also include part of the Negev....It has been proven time and time again that Beilin says aloud what Barak and his friends think in their hearts.”^[48] (In an unauthorized Russian version of Barak’s biography, arranged and distributed by Likud, Barak is quoted as being in favor of accepting a Palestinian presence in Jerusalem.)^[49]

As noted above, the Palestinian declarations regarding Jerusalem played an important part in the campaign. When Netanyahu took credit for preventing the creation of a Palestinian state, he appealed to floating voters, reminding them of the Palestinian demand to make Jerusalem the capital of a Palestinian state. “For a whole year, Arafat promised dozens of times that he would declare an independent Palestinian state today, and that he would also declare the division of Jerusalem. For a whole year we warned him against doing this.”^[50]

The responses of Ehud Barak and One Israel were engaged but relatively low key. Campaign ads featured Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert, a staunch member of Likud (but a rival of Netanyahu) declaring his faith that “Barak will not divide Jerusalem.” Many analysts, as well as Labor officials, noted that the activities in eastern Jerusalem and in Orient House were far from new, and the major reason for taking action seemed to be linked to the election campaign. Labor MK Binyamin Ben-Eliezer stated that “The prime minister wants now, three weeks before the election, to introduce some order into something over which he has not been able to establish control for the past three years.” Meretz leader Yossi Sarid accused the government of “showing more and more worrisome signs of political adventurism as window-dressing, which only deepens the rift between the Netanyahu government and the Palestinians.”^[51]

The Jerusalem issue, like the UDI and the question of a Palestinian state, did not emerge as decisive issues in the campaign. As the results demonstrated, Netanyahu's emphasis on these issues failed to stem the defection of voters who had supported him and the Likud in 1996. The situation had changed during the previous three years, and other issues unrelated to foreign or security policy emerged as the central factors in the outcome.

The Role of the Clinton Administration

In both the 1992 and 1996 Israeli elections, the United States government pursued policies that reflected a strong effort to influence the outcome. In 1992, after a series of public clashes related to the Madrid peace conference, the Bush administration helped to defeat the Likud government under Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir.^[52] In 1996, President Clinton and officials of his administration, including U.S. Ambassador to Israel Martin Indyk, campaigned quite openly and unsuccessfully for Shimon Peres.^[53] This partisan role was responsible in large part for the disharmony that characterized relations between Washington and Jerusalem from the beginning of the Netanyahu government.

Throughout this period, relations continued to deteriorate, and Netanyahu's surrender to American pressure at the Wye Plantation summit meeting in October 1996 failed to change the atmosphere. (Netanyahu agreed to attend this summit, in part, due to the imminent confrontation between the U.S. and Iraq. The Clinton Administration argued that the reluctance of the Arab states to provide military and diplomatic support for this confrontation was, in large part, a reflection of dissatisfaction with Israeli policies in the peace process. By accepting the conditions of the Wye agreement, Netanyahu also sought to avoid being blamed by the U.S. for inaction over Iraq.)

In the wake of the decision to back the wrong horse during the previous campaign, and the criticism for attempting to interfere in Israel's internal affairs, the role of the U.S. government in the 1999 elections was relatively limited. Indeed, as soon as elections were called, Clinton administration officials lowered their profile significantly. For all intents and purposes, the efforts to implement the terms of the Wye agreement were frozen, pending the outcome of the elections. The American Ambassador in Tel Aviv, Edward Walker, carefully avoided repeating the mistakes of his predecessors.

Nevertheless, the U.S. government could not disappear entirely from the Middle East and did not suspend its new relations with the Palestinians during this period. After the suicide bombings that led to the defeat of Labor and Peres, and to Netanyahu's election in 1996, Washington sought to prevent actions that would have a similar impact. As noted above, the U.S. was centrally involved in the efforts to dissuade Arafat and the Palestinians from a unilateral declaration of independence on May 4, 1999.

As part of these efforts, in January 1999, Dennis Ross (the State Department's Middle East peace process coordinator) made another visit to the region. Although the focus of

his trip was to meet with Arafat and the PA, he also met with Netanyahu. (If Ross had not met with the Israeli prime minister, this would have been interpreted as a deliberate snub and as a direct American attempt to influence the campaign.) In public statements, Ross was very cautious, carefully avoiding endorsing Netanyahu's claims regarding Palestinian failures to implement commitments under the Wye accord, but also not contradicting these claims. Emphasizing efforts to lower the American profile, Ross noted that the U.S. intended to play a limited role in the final-status negotiations. Although the U.S. remained committed to the process, he stressed that the U.S. role in the final-status talks would be to "reassure, clarify, facilitate, and sometimes mediate."^[54]

However, as the campaign progressed and Barak maintained and then increased his lead, and Palestinian compliance and a UDI became major issues, Ross and other officials became less cautious and less hesitant to disagree with Netanyahu. Refuting Netanyahu's claims, he noted that the Palestinians have "worked to carry out many of their commitments — many, but not all," particularly with respect to fighting terror and confiscating weapons.^[55]

Visits by Arafat and other PA officials to Washington, while Netanyahu was persona non-grata, emphasized the rift. In February, Arafat was invited to the annual Congressional Prayer Breakfast, and also to the White House, in the context of a discussion of the UDI issue.^[56] Two weeks later, a high level PA delegation met with Secretary of State Albright in Washington. These highly publicized meetings provided a stark contrast to the cold stares exchanged between Clinton and Netanyahu.^[57]

On other occasions, the U.S. government indicated its preference for candidates other than Netanyahu. In January, for example, Clinton publicly commended former Defense Minister Mordechai for his "Middle East peace-making efforts." This public endorsement was an implicit criticism of Netanyahu and came at a crucial period at the beginning of the campaign when Mordechai was considering whether to become a candidate. Clinton's letter to Mordechai noted that "good will and political courage" are needed to implement the Wye accord. (Mordechai had secretly met Palestinian officials "in order to preserve cooperation in security and intelligence...and to keep channels open.")^[58]

In mid-March, the visibility of the tensions between the Clinton administration and Netanyahu increased significantly. Responding to Palestinian demands for concrete American gestures in return for postponement of a UDI, Ross strongly criticized Israel's settlement policies, and called for an agreed time limit for the final-status talks. In an interview prior to another meeting with Arafat, Ross stated that "We see settlement activity as very destructive to the pursuit of peace." Linking settlements to the UDI threat, he declared, "We do not see any issue of the permanent status being resolved by either unilateral declarations or by unilateral moves on the ground." Ross also restated the Clinton administration's claim that while the Palestinians had carried out "some" of their peace obligations, "at this point the Israelis have not yet carried out any of their phase-two obligations."^[59]

These proclamations brought an angry reaction from the Netanyahu government, which claimed that the Americans were again attempting to influence the results of the Israeli elections. In this campaign, as in the past, the Likud sought to gain support by claiming that outside forces, such as the U.S. government, were attempting to influence the outcome. David Bar-Illan, Netanyahu's political confidant and communications director, rejected Ross's statements on settlements, stating that "criticism of the activities in these communities only serves to prejudice the outcome of the final-status talks." Minister of Commerce and Industry Natan Sharansky criticized the American government statements, observing that Arafat's threats to declare a state are no more than "unending blackmail" without significance, because "the moment he pronounces independence the peace process is over."^[60]

Nevertheless, the repeated meetings between Palestinians and American officials during this period contrasted starkly with the lack of any contact between Netanyahu and the Clinton administration. When asked about this issue, Netanyahu responded tersely, asking "What, do I have to stand in line at the White House? We are not knocking on anyone's door and have not asked for any meetings."^[61]

At the end of March, Arafat again went to Washington to meet with President Clinton at the White House, obtaining an American commitment to press for accelerated permanent status negotiations. After the meeting, U.S. official stated that "we would like to see a resumption of permanent status negotiations. Realistically they are not going to resume until after the Israeli elections, but [the talks] should not be on an open-ended basis."^[62] At the same time, the Americans continued to reject pressures for a commitment to recognize a Palestinian state a year later, or at some point in the process. Such a commitment would clearly have triggered an angry reaction from Netanyahu, and might have damaged Barak's campaign. Clinton also sought to downplay the meeting with Arafat, and avoided speaking to reporters.

In late April, just before the May 4 deadline, the U.S. government provided a letter to the Palestinians in return for the decision to forgo the UDI. The public summary of the letter stated that "The United States calls on both parties to engage in accelerated permanent-status talks and to rededicate themselves to the goal of reaching an agreement within a year."^[63]

In the last weeks before the election, the issue of American policy with respect to Jerusalem also arose. In 1995, the U.S. Congress had passed the Embassy Relocation Act, which called for moving the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. For a number of years, President Clinton had used his powers under the act to postpone implementation, and was poised to do so again in 1999. At this stage, the Republican-controlled Congress, which was generally allied with Netanyahu against Clinton, emphasized the issue. Simultaneously, Netanyahu sought to use the Jerusalem issue against Barak in the Israeli election campaign. As a result, the Congressional action seemed to support Netanyahu, while working against Barak.^[64] At this stage, however, Congress delayed consideration of the issue until after the Israeli elections.

By carefully monitoring the political situation in Israel, and keeping a relatively low profile during the period of the campaign, in contrast to 1996, the U.S. government avoided blatant involvement in the campaign. To the degree that the Clinton administration was active, this was designed to convince the Palestinians to avoid steps or actions that would lead to instability and would aid Netanyahu in the campaign. In this sense, the involvement of the U.S. government can be said to have been indirect and consistent with its overall political objectives in the Middle East.

The Lebanon Issue

During the 1999 Israeli election campaign, the ongoing war in southern Lebanon issue became a central focus (albeit briefly), following a series of Hizbollah attacks and Israeli casualties. Three years earlier, in the midst of the 1996 campaign, Prime Minister Shimon Peres ordered a major Israeli military operation (“Grapes of Wrath”) in response to a series of Hizbollah attacks on Kiryat Shemona and the Northern Galilee. This operation did not lead to a fundamental change in the situation, did not help Peres, and may have contributed to his defeat and to Netanyahu’s victory.^[65] In 1999, despite some similar factors, this history was not repeated, and in the face of continued attacks and casualties, the Netanyahu government refrained from undertaking a major military operation. However, for a number of weeks, the question of how to resolve the “Lebanese problem” became the focus of the campaign.

Polls showed that on this issue, Barak had a distinct advantage, and voters were critical of the way in which the government handled the conflict in Lebanon. In February, polls revealed that 63 percent of the respondents rejected the view that “the present government is doing enough to solve the situation in Lebanon,” while only 29 percent agreed with this thesis.^[66]

During the Netanyahu era, the costs of the Israeli presence in southern Lebanon (the “security zone”) continued to grow, without progress in efforts to reach a resolution. The 1996 operation ended with an unsigned understanding involving Israel, Lebanon, the U.S. and France. Under this arrangement, Israel and Hizbollah agreed to refrain from attacking civilians or using civilian zones (villages, schools, farms, etc.) to launch attacks. Representatives of each of the parties meet periodically in Nakura, Lebanon to consider claims of violations, with no visible substantive results. In 1997, the collision of two helicopters transporting troops to Lebanon killed 73 soldiers and marked a turning point in the public debate. Protest groups, such as the Four Mothers, were formed in support of unilateral withdrawal. They organized demonstrations at the entrances to military bases, at street corners, and in front of government offices, and also sponsored and participated in public debates involving policy-makers, academics, and journalists.

In early 1999, during the first phase of the election campaign, a series of Hizbollah attacks resulted in the deaths of a number of Israeli officers, including the commander of forces in Lebanon. Israel retaliated by striking Hizbollah bases in the Balbek area (despite the presence of Syrian forces), and with very demonstrative overflights of

Beirut. This served to warn of possible escalation, but stopped short of an operation similar to those of 1993 and 1996.

At this point, the future of Lebanon became a central campaign issue. While the party platforms of Labor and Likud avoided formally spelling out a formula for resolving this issue, in a broad sense the two main parties adopted different and opposing approaches. Labor emphasized efforts to find a solution in the framework of an agreement with Syria, and the Likud preferred to disconnect Lebanon from Syria. However, as will be discussed in detail below, this debate crosses party lines. For example, while Ariel Sharon and Gidon Ezra, of the Likud favored unilateral withdrawal, Uzi Landau and many other MKs were strongly opposed. Similarly, in the Labor party, Yossi Beilin favored the unilateral withdrawal option while Efraim Sneh and Ori Orr were opposed.

As prime minister, Netanyahu undertook a number of initiatives but without results. In January 1997, Israel proposed the “Lebanon First” plan, including Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon, the deployment of the Lebanese army over areas that Israel would vacate, and the disarming of Hizbollah. The details were similar to earlier proposals prepared by the late Prime Minister Rabin, with the important difference that they were not linked to formal approval from Syria. The Syrians predictably firmly rejected this proposal, and Lebanon followed the Syrian lead. (After the Syrian response, Netanyahu noted the “Kafkaesque” situation in which “the Prime Minister of Israel announces he wants to get out of the territory of an Arab state, and the Syrian government, together with the Lebanese, are opposing this withdrawal.”)

In early 1998, following more attacks and Israeli casualties, Netanyahu launched his second initiative on Lebanon, based on UN Security Council Resolution 425 (originally adopted in 1978), which called for Israeli withdrawal to the international border, the return of Lebanese authority, and the restoration of international peace and security. For twenty years, successive Israel governments from both Labor and Likud, had rejected this formula as one-sided. The change in policy reflected war weariness and the increasing cost of the fighting. It was strongly supported by Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai, who had served as head of the Northern Command while in the IDF. However, despite the intensive diplomatic activity involving France and the U.S., the Syrian government rejected the Israeli initiative. As the result of Syrian pressure, Lebanon also rejected the proposal, claiming that the security arrangements sought by Israel were not mentioned in Resolution 425.^[67]

As noted, Ariel Sharon was appointed as foreign minister shortly before the Wye Plantation summit and the resulting decision to hold early elections.^[68] Sharon also became involved in the discussion of the Lebanese issue, proposing a unilateral staged withdrawal in which the IDF would redeploy its forces to the Israeli side of the border in stages, based on the degree to which this was accompanied by a reduction in attacks on northern Israel.^[69] Although no formal negotiated agreement would be required, responsibility for Israeli security would be in the hands of the Lebanese government. In

Sharon's plan, Israel would announce a date for the start of such a withdrawal and warn, in advance, that the IDF would react immediately and forcefully should the North come under attack. (This is consistent with Sharon overall strategic approach, which emphasizes deterrence.) However, critics argued that a partial withdrawal would leave Hizbollah with the ability to claim that it was fighting to liberate Lebanese territory, while at the same time increasing the dangers to the Israeli and SLA troops that remained in the security zone.

During the campaign, following the ambushes in which IDF officers were killed in Lebanon, Netanyahu seemed to indicate greater support for the unilateral option but opposed Sharon's proposal for a staged withdrawal. In public statements, he declared that "We have to be concerned with protecting the North and defending our allies [in southern Lebanon], which is not easy." ^[70] Following Barak's pledge to withdraw Israeli troops within a year after elections (see the detailed discussion below), Netanyahu declared that a year would be enough for him to leave Lebanon, either through a deal with Syria or unilaterally. "I estimate that we will find a way, by one of these two possibilities, to get the army out in the coming year. I will, of course, not commit to an iron date." He said he would not pay an "exaggerated price" for an agreement with Syria, and charged that Barak and the Labor party would "give away too much on the Golan." At the same time, he did not "rule out a unilateral withdrawal, on condition that there are security assurances." Netanyahu's office later clarified this statement, declaring that there has been no substantial change in his position. "The option of a unilateral withdrawal is long-standing and is only one of several possible solutions being considered by the cabinet....In any case, a unilateral withdrawal is dependent on reaching security assurances." On another occasion, he stated that "If there is willingness on the part of the Lebanese to arrive at such security arrangements, they will find the government of Israel a willing and ready partner to arrive at such security arrangements that would facilitate the withdrawal of Israel from Lebanon."

As Israeli military casualties mounted in 1999, Netanyahu criticized the 1996 Grapes of Wrath understandings and also blamed Barak (who was foreign minister at the time). As a result of these agreements, for the first time, "the government of Israel recognized the Hizbollah's right to strike at IDF soldiers and tied the hands of the IDF by not allowing it to strike in the cities and villages, at the headquarters embedded in civilian residential areas."

For Barak, the ongoing war in Lebanon provided another opportunity to distinguish his policies from those of Netanyahu. Barak's record on this issue was quite consistent. As chief of staff during the Rabin government, he strongly advocated negotiation with Damascus in order to remove Syria from the cycle of conflict, in a manner similar to the case of Egypt. Barak worked with Rabin in developing Israel's negotiating position with Syria, and participated in the first meetings between the Israeli and Syrian Chiefs of Staff in 1994. This approach is also consistent with the policies pursued by Israel while Barak served as foreign minister during the Peres government following the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin.

At the beginning of the campaign in December 1998 when the Lebanese issue became central, Barak declared that as prime minister, he would resume negotiations with Syria to facilitate a solution to the Lebanon problem, including the possibility of a gradual withdrawal. "We have to find a way to protect Israel's interests and reach an arrangement with the Syrians.... This is the way to solve the Lebanon problem, with a deep, fundamental solution."^[71] (Polls showed that Barak supporters tended to be more willing to accept a unilateral withdrawal. In February 1999, respondents who identified themselves as Barak supporters were divided evenly on this issue, while Netanyahu supporters opposed unilateral withdrawal by 63 percent to 24 percent. Some 77 percent of Barak supporters also endorsed a withdrawal on the basis of an agreement with Syria, in contrast to only 33 percent among Netanyahu supporters.)^[72]

Following the incidents in Lebanon in March 1999, Barak returned to this issue. In addition to attacking Netanyahu for failing to make any headway during his term in office, Barak made a commitment to withdraw the IDF from Lebanon by June 2000. He criticized Netanyahu's approach to the problem, saying that he is "running after the mosquitoes" instead of working to "dry up the swamp." As part of the plan, Barak said he would resume peace talks with Syria. In an important campaign appearance before a high school group following Hizbollah attacks in which a number of Israeli officers were killed, Barak said "Your year is the last that has a chance of seeing Lebanon from the other side of the border...my government will bring the boys home by June 2000." This was the most significant and dramatic statement on Lebanon during the campaign, and set the framework for further discussion of this issue.

Within the ranks of the Labor party, as noted, different views were expressed. Yossi Beilin was a vocal advocate of unilateral unconditional withdrawal, and in December 1998 Beilin criticized the Netanyahu government for "gambling there every day, every minute, with the lives of our soldiers," and called the government's policy a "march of folly."^[73]

The leaders of the other parties also became involved in the debate on Lebanon. Yossi Sarid, who headed the Meretz party, and Yitzhak Mordechai of the Center party strongly opposed any form of unilateral withdrawal. During the campaign, Mordechai emphasized the link between negotiations with Syria and the solution to the Lebanon problem. He claimed that an agreement on Lebanon could be reached in talks with Syria in the context of a "territorial compromise" on the Golan Heights.^[74]

In March 1999, following the escalation of Hizbollah attacks, Mordechai repeated this view. He said he would "work for an immediate cease-fire in Lebanon, and a rapid withdrawal of the IDF, with the Lebanese army taking on responsibility for keeping peace in southern Lebanon."^[75] He advocated a policy based on reaching an agreement with the Syrians, even if this required "territorial concessions" on the Golan Heights. However, Mordechai, like Barak, was careful not to specify the extent of the withdrawal that he would accept in the Golan Heights.

Former IDF Chief of Staff Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, in the second position on the Center party list, also warned against escalation. “Wiping out a village in Lebanon will not solve the problem. It could only bring temporary quiet but will not solve the problem....A unilateral withdrawal...will only bring all of those elements that want to harm us to the border fence and will endanger IDF soldiers, and will eventually cost in terms of soldiers and also citizens of Israel.” At the same time, Shahak noted that a “condition for starting talks with Syria and Lebanon is a halt to all [Hizbollah] activities in southern Lebanon.”^[76]

Thus, the debate on Lebanon provided a relatively clear contrast between the differing approaches of the two major candidates for Prime Minister. Most importantly, this debate showed the centrality of finding a solution to the Lebanese quagmire as quickly as possible.

Summary: Continuity Amid Change

In the 1999 Israeli election campaign, foreign and security policy did not provide the central focus. Netanyahu’s election strategy depended on turning issues such as Palestinian statehood, Jerusalem, and terrorism into the main factors, but he failed and other issues dominated and determined the results. The floating voters that had supported Rabin in 1992 and Netanyahu in 1996 went to Barak in 1999.

Netanyahu also failed in the attempt to rerun the 1996 campaign and to shift the focus from Barak to Shimon Peres or Yassir Arafat. In part as a result of the outcome in 1996 and Netanyahu’s victory then, the situation had changed fundamentally and Netanyahu’s record and policies were subject to criticism and attack.

Similarly, in terms of foreign and security policy, it would be inaccurate to view the 1999 election campaign and results as marking a return to the situation in May 1996, or a major shift from the Netanyahu era. Barak’s centrist policies, combining security with cautious pursuit of agreements with the Palestinians and Syria, were more than election tactics. Rather, these policies reflected strongly held positions, as well as a broad Israeli consensus that Barak articulated.

As prime minister, Barak’s success in governing and making decisions on the critical foreign policy and security issues will depend, in large part, on his ability to maintain this domestic political consensus. The broad government he formed, initially consisting of 75 members of the Knesset (including many parties that were members of Netanyahu’s coalition, and well above the 61-member minimum majority), provides a strong base for maintaining consensus, but also limits the degree of freedom. When difficult decisions are made regarding settlements, Lebanon, and negotiations with Syria, Barak will face opposing parties and ideologies within the government. Nevertheless, if he succeeds, Barak could transform Israeli politics, creating a strong centrist bloc based on the floating voters of 1992 and 1996.

Notes

* Yael Ribner and David Hain provided research assistance for this chapter.

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2. *Yediot Ahronot*, results of a survey carried out by Dahaf, the week of May 14, 1999, of a representative sample of 1,100 Israeli adults. Survey error +/- 3 percentage points.
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67. The Israeli government claimed that in October 1984, the UN Secretary General Perez de Cueller sent a letter that linked Resolution 425 to security arrangements, and even hinted at Syrian acceptance of this link. Current Secretary General Kofi Anan drafted an agreement for Israeli withdrawal, including the deployment of the Lebanese Army in areas vacated by Israel. Thus, the formal Israeli acceptance of UNSCR 425 led to progress in developing a common focus and outline for an agreement, but it did not lead to a breakthrough.

68. During the first two years of the Netanyahu government, Ariel Sharon served as Minister of Infrastructure and also played a major role in foreign policy and security decisions. His role increased in the fall of 1998 when he was appointed Foreign Minister.

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