# The Peace Negotiations and Israeli Domestic Politics

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The linkage theory in international politics, which assumes interactions between domestic politics and foreign policy, has a long intellectual pedigree. The Democratic Peace theory, which postulates that a regime's internal character influences its warlike tendencies, is a variant of linkage politics initially conceived by Immanuel Kant. Conventional wisdom largely considers domestic political dynamics as an independent variable, while foreign policy is the output of both domestic political dynamics and the perceptions of the international environment.

Henry Kissinger once observed that Israel never had a foreign policy, only domestic politics – an assertion that became canonical in academic literature and media commentary. Subsequently, many pundits have ascribed Israel's difficulties in reaching a peace agreement with some of its neighbours to the "fragmentation" of Israeli society and politics, which leads to a misreading of the behaviour of this important Eastern Mediterranean actor.

This article rejects that widespread assertion, showing that there is a more complex relationship between Israel's domestic politics and its foreign policy. The first section refutes the thesis of a fragmented Israel, while the second depicts the prevalent Israeli view of the failed peace process. The third section analyses the impact of the failed peace process on Israel's domestic politics, looking particularly at the decline of the Labour party. The fourth section focuses on the rise of a strong unilateralist instinct in Israel's foreign policy, an offshoot of the failed peace process.

## Is Israel a Divided Society?

The common image of a deeply divided Israeli public is totally inaccurate. An analysis of the political, social and economic dynamics within Israel indicates, in fact, that political-societal cleavages of the past have largely disappeared.

Firstly, the acerbic debates over economic policies that were commonplace until the late 1970s have since disappeared. The majority of Israelis agree that capitalism is the best way to create greater wealth. Israel's strong, vibrant economy is a result of the wise economic policies of the past two decades, stressing market values and adapting to globalisation. Currently, all economic indices forecast bright prospects, despite continuous global economic woes and security issues. A strong economy reinforces stability and eases social and political tensions.

Second, the Ashkenazi-Sephardi social rift has become much less divisive than in the past: intermarriage is on the rise; the number of Sephardi politicians at the local and national level has increased; and the past three decades have seen an influx of Sephardic Jews into the middle class, as well as into senior officer ranks in the Israeli military. Israel also holds a good track record for successfully integrating immigrants from a wide range of countries with diverse cultural backgrounds into mainstream society.

Furthermore, greater consensus exists throughout Israeli society on issues pertaining to the peace process. Significantly, the ideological debate over the future of the territories acquired in 1967 has ended. The Sinai was relinquished in 1979 and the Gaza Strip in 2005. Nobody really advocates a return to these territories. Attitudes toward the return of the Golan Heights in exchange for full peace

with Syria have been extremely consistent since 1994; roughly two-thirds of the Jewish public oppose giving up the Golan, and about the same percentage does not believe in the reality of a lasting peace deal with Damascus, or in the sincerity of Assad's declarations that he is even interested in peace.

Moreover, most Israelis subscribe to a "two-state" solution with the Palestinians – once seen as a mortal danger – though many are sceptical about the ability of Palestinian state-building. Indeed, a large majority favours relinquishing heavily Arab-populated parts of Judea and Samaria (the West Bank), and retaining the settlement blocs, Jerusalem (particularly the Temple Mount) and the Jordan Rift Valley. The territorial debate, revolving around what percentage of historical homeland should be relinquished to Arab control, is not ideological, but couched in a pragmatic assessment of Israel's security needs.

Furthermore, the expectations of the left after the Oslo agreements for peaceful coexistence with the Palestinians, which elicited much criticism in parts of Israel, have since been replaced by a sober consensus that peace is not around the corner. According to a January 2011 poll, 68% of the Jewish public believes that the Palestinians do not see a two-state solution as the end of the road, and that even if a peace agreement is signed, the Palestinians will continue the struggle for a Palestinian state throughout the Land of Israel. (A parallel survey in the territories, which was conducted by an American team, found that the majority of Palestinians indeed view the two-state formula as an interim stage and believe the conflict will only end when a Palestinian state is established from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea.) Israeli society has resigned itself to the idea that it must live by the sword for the foreseeable future; it has displayed great social resilience in the face of Palestinian terrorism and missile bombardment from Lebanon and Gaza.

The only rift within Israeli society which is still of great social, cultural and political importance is the religious-secular divide. However, this situation does not differ greatly from the afflictions of identity politics faced by other Western societies. Moreover, the clash is not between two clearly defined camps, leaving room to establish a reasonable modus vivendi. A growing number of Israelis identify themselves as traditionalists, situated in the middle of the orthodox-secular continuum.

## The Failure of the Peace Process

Israeli society, with the exception of fringe radical leftist circles, is unanimous in its assessment that peace negotiations with Syria and the Palestinians, started in the early 1990s, have failed and that the onus of responsibility for such failure is on the other side.

Syria is usually seen as unreasonable and uncompromising territorially and intent on getting a better deal than Egypt in the 1970s. In fact, many doubt the intention of the Alawite minority regime to pursue real peace. It is argued that the current regime actually prefers the continuation of conflict (the status quo) in order to legitimise its rule and shows interest in negotiations only to shield Syria from potential US-inspired Israeli aggression. After all, Israeli Prime Ministers Yitzhak Rabin (1992-95), Ehud Barak (1999-2001) and Ehud Olmert (2006-08) all offered withdrawal from the Golan Heights yet were unable to secure a peace treaty.

Palestinian responsibility for the collapse of peace negotiations is even clearer. Rabin agreed to the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank and Gaza, believing in the exchange of territories for security (not peace). Then, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat failed to deliver as terrorism continued and even reached record levels after 2000. Moreover, the Palestinian leadership refused to accept extremely generous offers by two Israeli premiers: Ehud Barak in the summer of 2000 (Camp David) and Ehud Olmert in the fall of 2008. Similarly, Israel's total removal of its presence from Gaza in 2005 – both military and settlements – has failed to elicit good will among the Palestinians.

The lack of pragmatism in Palestinian politics prevents a historic compromise with the Zionist (Jewish) national movement. This predicament has been aggravated by an internal split between the Fatah movement, the historic carrier of Palestinian nationalism, and Hamas, a more recently established Islamist movement. Hamas, a radical Islamist organisation that tries to impose Sharia Law and is dedicated to the destruction of the Jewish state, emerged the winner in the January 2006 elections to the PA Legislative Council. In June 2007, the Hamas militia led a bloody coup and subsequently seized power in Gaza. The rift between Hamas-controlled Gaza and the Fatah-controlled West Bank seems to have acquired permanency, intensifying the centrifugal tendencies in Palestinian society and politics.

The growing Hamas influence radicalises Palestinian society and weakens its ability to reach and implement a settlement with Israel. It is the military activity of the Israeli army against Hamas activists in the West Bank that keeps Hamas from taking control there as well.

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The Hamas government in Gaza has refused to accept the conditions required by the Quartet (US, EU, Russia, UN) for recognition and support, which are: a public commitment to nonviolence, recognition of Israel and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations. Furthermore, during recent years Hamas has launched thousands of Qassam rockets into Israeli towns. Despite the economic difficulties faced after the military coup, and the destruction inflicted by Israel during the Gaza incursion (Winter 2008/9), Hamas has not changed course.

Nowadays, the Palestinians (the PA and Hamas) say "no" to negotiations with Israel. They expect Israeli concessions without negotiations, believing that the international community will put pressure on Israel. Such a strategy only reinforces the Israeli assessment that there is no real Palestinian partner.

### The Impact of the Failed Peace Process on Domestic Politics

The decline of the Labour party in Israeli politics is largely due to its association with the failed peace process. In the June 1992 elections, Labour scored 44 Knesset seats, since then, the party has seen a substantial downturn in popularity. In the elections of May 1996, May 1999, January 2003, March 2006 and February 2009, Labour received respectively 44, 34, 26, 19 and 13 Knesset seats. In January 2011, as a result of a split in the party, Labour retained only 8 Knesset seats, and its future looked particularly uncertain. A perfunctory analysis of electoral behaviour in the 21st century indicates that Labour has lost its hold over many centrist votes that shifted first to Shinui (in 2003) and afterwards to Kadima (in 2006 and 2009).

The decline of Labour has also been seen in its poor ability to form governing coalitions. From 1977, Israel was ruled by a Labour-led coalition only twice, in the 1992-96 and 1999-2001 periods, when at its helm were security-oriented, centrist leaders like Yitzhak Rabin in 1992 and Ehud Barak in 1999, both more popular than their party. Barak's ability to form a coalition government in 1999, despite the right-wing majority in the Knesset, was based on the fact that he was elected directly to be Prime Minister (within the framework of a two ballot system – one vote for a party and one vote for the Prime Minister).

Labour initiated the Oslo process in 1993. Yet, the "peace process" has since been discredited in Israel, with "peace" becoming a derogatory word for many, even those who supported the experiment. Similarly, attempts to trade the Golan Heights for a peace treaty with Syria – initiated by Rabin in the 1990s and by Barak in 2000 – failed to gain the support of most Israelis.

After 2000, the so-called "peace camp" in Israeli politics, led by Labour, was ascribed responsibility for the Palestinians' terror campaign. Most Israelis blamed the Oslo agreements for allowing a situation where Palestinian terrorists could enjoy sanctuary so close to Israel's main cities. The results of the 2003, 2006 and 2009 elections reflect this judgment.

While Labour party leaders continued to pay lip service to the idea of peacemaking, stressing the need for negotiations with the Palestinians, there was growing incongruity between these statements and the facts on the ground. The rise of centrist parties such as Shinui and Kadima, and their relative electoral success, clearly underscored Labour's move toward the dovish pole of the continuum. Amram Mitzna and Amir Peretz, who, respectively, succeeded in capturing leadership positions before the 2003 and 2006 elections, both displayed very leftist positions. Leaving the centre of the political map to Likud and/or new centrist parties denied Labour the largest pool of Israeli voters.

Moreover, over time Labour lost its most important political asset – identification with the establishment and the building of Israel. Two central activities in

building the Jewish state – military service and land settlements – were gradually given up by Labour and its supporters. In the past, kibbutz members, generally aligned with the Labour party, were disproportionately represented in the ranks of officers within the Israel Defence Forces (IDF). This is no longer the case. The social composition of officer graduating classes in the IDF has gradually changed, with modern-Orthodox recruits now overrepresented. While the IDF remains the most esteemed institution in Israel, the Labour party is no longer identified as its mainstay.

Similarly, the intensive settlement activity under the guidance of Labour-led governments essentially came to an end in 1977, leaving other subpopulations to fill this void. While the majority of Israelis are prepared for large territorial concessions in the West Bank within the framework of a two-state solution, they still regard settling the Land of Israel as an important Zionist value. Labour has foolishly allowed the modern-Orthodox and Conservative circles to adopt the values and symbols which were once clearly associated with the founding party of the State.

Another important Zionist symbol that has been deserted by the Labour party is Jerusalem, which was united by the IDF in the June 1967 War under the command of Rabin, the then Chief of Staff. A united Jerusalem has for years been a representation of faith within the national consensus – a vision which Rabin continued to uphold throughout the Oslo peace process. The willingness, then, of his disciple and political heir Ehud Barak to divide Jerusalem at the 2000 Camp David Summit, stunned many Israelis. The violation of this "taboo" portrayed Labour as a fringe leftist party and was harmful in electoral terms since over two-thirds of Israeli Jews oppose any partition of Jerusalem. The 2009 elections again raised the issue of a united Jerusalem following reports that the Kadima-Labour government had negotiated with the PA and agreed to transfer parts of Jerusalem to the Palestinians.

It is a political folly to underestimate the enormous appeal Jerusalem has for Jews in Israel. Labour ignored this and paid the price. Gradually, Labour's original positions on issues of war and peace, as well as on the territories, were adopted by the Likud party, while Labour shifted further to the left on the Israeli political spectrum. This section shows how attempts to deviate from the Israeli consensus on issues related to war and peace have been politically counterproductive.

## The Rise of Unilateralism

Israel seems to have moved into a pronounced unilateralist mode since 2000. What comes immediately to mind is the May 2000 withdrawal from Lebanon, the erection of the security barrier, the 2005 pull-out from Gaza and the 2009 settlement freeze.

The reasons for this transformation in Israeli thinking are complex; but essentially they are related to the failures in the peace process. Israeli unilateralism expresses, first and foremost, a deep disappointment with the Syrian rejection of Israeli peace overtures and a sober realisation that there is no Palestinian partner ready for a historic compromise with the Zionist movement, even at the cost of painful Israeli concessions.

The emergence of a corrupt and inept Palestinian society, mesmerised by the use of violence, and displaying elements of a cultish worship of death, has strengthened the Israeli impulse for separation. The unilateral quest for separation received additional expression in the solid public support for constructing a security barrier, which is meant to protect Israelis from the threats and dangers posed by a corrupt, despotic and fanatic Palestinian society.

The unilateralist impulse, an ingrained feature in Israel's political culture, also reflects a mixture of contrasting elements in the Zionist psyche. The Promethean ethos – mankind defying the gods, taking its fate into its own hands – has always appealed to Zionists. Activism is well regarded in Israel. The statement of Israel's founding father, David Ben-Gurion, that "It is not important what the Gentiles *say*, but what the Jews *do*" reflects the entrenched belief that facts created on the ground, even when in disregard of the wishes of the neighbours and the international community, have a lasting impact.

At the same time, Israel's unilateralism shows recognition for the limits of its military power. Israel lacks the capabilities of big powers to impose their demands on vanquished rivals. Very few in Israel hold onto the notion that Israel's technological, economic and military superiority could force the Arabs to sign a peace treaty. In a way, unilateralism also pragmatically recognises that Israel's neighbours cannot bring themselves to formally agree to Israel's demands, but could informally accept an Israel-designed status quo. The free movement of people and goods over the Jordan bridges after 1967 is a clear

example of a unilateral and informal arrangement that has held for many years.

Barak, in 1999, preferred to reach an agreement with Syria to allow Israel to extricate itself from its low-intensity conflict with Hezbollah in South Lebanon. When this did not materialise, he pushed for a unilateral withdrawal from South Lebanon. In the absence of a Palestinian interlocutor, Israel believes it has every right to stop waiting and define its own borders. This is why Ariel Sharon disengaged unilaterally from Gaza. The platform of the Olmert government (elected in 2006), which promised to unilaterally define Israel's borders in order to maintain a Jewish and democratic State, expressed not only a healthy ethno-nationalistic desire not to fall into the trap of bi-nationalism, but also a deep desire for separation from the neighbouring Palestinians. Under somewhat different circumstances, Benjamin Netanyahu's government decided on a 10-month unilateral settlement freeze in order to deflect American criticism, with no illusion of a Palestinian change in behaviour. This decision was supported by most Israelis because they favour reducing the Israeli presence in the West Bank, and due to the need to maintain good relations with the US.

The appeal of unilateral steps is probably also an expression of the naive aspiration for a simple solution. The slogan "Peace now" was given a try. Subsequently, "Us on one side, them on the other" was also given a try. It is psychologically difficult to digest the instruction to "grin and bear it" while in a protracted struggle over your own home. Unilateralism has been attractive in Israel, even though Palestinian terrorism does not really allow Israel to disengage from the territories. (The IDF continues its forays into Palestinian cities in its counter terror campaign, and as Qassam rockets are endlessly fired into Israel, the unenticing option of reoccupying Gaza is being considered.)

In fact, the Israeli leadership understands that pure unilateralism, as appealing as it may be to the people, is not a true policy option. The withdrawal from Gaza was not entirely unilateral as it was approved first in Washington and only afterwards by the Israeli cabinet. The Olmert government hoped to secure some international support for its unilateral plans to disengage from parts of the West Bank, which were aborted after the 2006 Lebanon fiasco. Leaving the Palestinians to their own devices may well be what they deserve, but even Israeli unilateralists have a positive view of international involvement in order to prevent a large-scale humanitarian disaster in the Palestinian territories.

The Israeli unilateralist position also defies the often voiced criticism that the nature of Israeli domestic politics creates paralysis in its foreign policy. In the last decade, the Israeli political system has produced several bold foreign policy decisions. Significantly, it has demonstrated its capacity to remove settlements in Gaza and Samaria in 2005 (and in Sinai in 1981 in the framework of the Egyptian peace treaty). Despite the widespread criticism of the unilateral withdrawals from southern Lebanon and Gaza, the unilateralist approach has appeal and may re-emerge in Israeli foreign policy.

## Conclusion

This article rejects the claim that domestic fragmentation in Israeli politics is hindering the peace process. Actually, Israeli society is less beleaguered by internal divisions than it may appear, and it has exhibited a widespread consensus on the negotiations with its Arab neighbours. Moreover, Israelis are convinced that the territorial largesse displayed by their governments remains unreciprocated by the Syrians and Palestinians, and they question the sincerity of their interlocutors. The Palestinians are seen as deeply divided, with Hamas in ascendance. The domestic political outcome of this realistic and widely accepted view has been the decreased support for parties associated with the failed peace process, particularly Labour. Furthermore, the misfortunes of the peace process have moved Israel into a pronounced unilateralist mode. As the situation in the Middle East shows no sign of improvement, Israel's willingness to make risky territorial concessions will decrease as its need for defensible borders continues to rise.