



PERSPECTIVES

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[Netanyahu Turns Centrist and Triumphs](#)

by Prof. Efraim Inbar

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu went to Washington with a centrist message, eliciting great support for the Israeli position both by the US Congress and by the Israeli public. He parried the attempts of President Obama to extract additional concessions and signaled to the world, specifically to the Palestinians, that their expectations about the shape of a future agreement must be calibrated in accordance with the wishes of the Israeli electorate. As a result of this visit, Netanyahu has strengthened his political positioning and garnered popularity at home.

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu went to Washington to meet with President Barack H. Obama, speak at the AIPAC annual gathering and address US Congress. This visit was of great political importance.

Prior to his visit, Netanyahu addressed the Knesset, where he conveyed a centrist position. He insisted on Palestinian recognition of Israel as a Jewish national state, on solving the Palestinian refugee problem outside of Israel, on defensible borders, and on keeping Jerusalem united as Israel's capital; he also demanded the incorporation of the settlement blocs into Israel. This last element, new to Netanyahu's rhetoric, drew criticism from the Israeli far right as well as from some Likud members, as it indicates a willingness to withdraw from parts of Judea and Samaria.

After positioning himself at the heart of the Israeli consensus and securing the backing of his people, Netanyahu went to Washington, a trip that culminated with his address on the Hill. There, he further clarified his position favoring a territorial compromise with the Palestinians, saying that “some settlements will end up beyond Israel’s border.” Netanyahu received enthusiastic applause for his oratory skills and his emphasis on the common values and bonds between America and Israel. Moreover, the substantive positions espoused by the Prime Minister were well received in Washington. Even Obama felt the need to clarify in his AIPAC address that his advocacy for a settlement based on the 1967 borders must reflect demographic realities on the ground.

What transpired from this visit is that Washington, even if it disagrees with some aspects of Israeli policy, will stand firmly with Jerusalem. The US clearly favors a negotiated Israeli-Palestinian settlement and opposes Palestinian attempts to achieve statehood via the UN General Assembly while not actually ending the conflict. More so, Obama's remarks reflected Israel’s demand to be recognized as a Jewish state and its insistence on a demilitarized Palestinian state.

Netanyahu, on his part, did not refrain from publicly disagreeing with Obama on the territorial contours of a future settlement, signaling to the White House that Israel will resist American pressures and is ready for a political battle.

The courage displayed by Israel’s prime minister has earned him praise abroad and at home. Netanyahu’s coalition government remains strong and stable despite its willingness to make territorial concessions, and his mainstream message makes him much more popular than before with the Israeli public. All public opinion polls have shown a significant increase in his popularity. Furthermore, most Israelis acknowledge that the Palestinians are not a true partner for peace negotiations and believe that Netanyahu is sincerely trying to advance the goal of peace in the region.

Nowadays, Israeli society seems more united than ever on many issues, including the consensus on a market-oriented economy, the elimination of ethnic (Ashkenazi-Sephardi) inequalities, and the approach to the protracted conflict with the Arabs. This growing social cohesion and optimism about the future, concomitant with the realization that peace is not around the corner, strengthens Israel as a society ready to wage war, if necessary, in order to survive in an increasingly tough neighborhood. Netanyahu’s performance in Washington has further reinforced this reality.

Another important outcome of Netanyahu's US visit is that it has sent out a new message to the world, specifically to the Palestinians, that their expectations about the shape of a future agreement must be calibrated in accordance with the wishes of the Israeli electorate. More realism must be infused into their thinking.

Netanyahu made clear that the often used phrase in diplomatic corridors – “we all know what the settlement will look like” – requires redefinition. The overgenerous plans devised by former Israeli premiers, such as Ehud Barak and Ehud Olmert, which were rejected by the Palestinians, are not relevant anymore. Similarly, the "Clinton Parameters," which were also dismissed by the Palestinians, were never acceptable to the Israeli majority and continue to be seen as suicidal for the Jewish state. Israelis seem ready to back their current government in resisting international pressure.

The US has largely come to terms with and supports Israel's position. It remains to be seen, however, how the rest of the civilized world will digest the clear Israeli message. There are great reservoirs of support in the West for the embattled Western bastion, Israel. While the Palestinians have always had the automatic support of third-world tyrannies in international forums, they have also made important inroads in Western public opinion. Still, it is unclear if Western governments will support a PLO-Hamas alliance – the most recent development in Palestinian politics.

Netanyahu's diplomatic tour de force will hardly affect the chances for a peace agreement because Palestinian society is moving in the wrong direction. The incorporation of Hamas into a new Palestinian government is only one indication of the growing radicalization in that society. Unfortunately, the Palestinian media and education system perpetuate a culture of hate and death and have hardly prepared the people for political pragmatism and coexistence alongside a legitimate Jewish state. This unwillingness to accept the existence of a Jewish state, as Netanyahu stressed, has been the main obstacle for peace over the past 100 years.

Efraim Inbar is professor of Political Studies at Bar-Ilan University and director of the Begin-Sadat (BESA) Center for Strategic Studies. This article is a revised version of a previous publication by Bitterlemons.

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