

## **The Conceptual Dimension of Netanyahu's Peace Policy**

*Dr. Yoav J. Tenenbaum\**

The position of Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, concerning the establishment of a Palestinian State has been, at a conceptual level, rather consistent. Since assuming the office of Prime Minister for the second time some months ago (he served as Prime Minister between 1996 and 1999), his stance on this matter has evolved in a coherent manner.

To begin with, Netanyahu said that, in the context of a peace agreement with the Palestinian Authority, he would be in favour of the creation of an entity in which the Palestinians would enjoy the fullest possible degree of liberty and political authority commensurate with Israel's vital security interests.

Following his first official meeting with US President Barack Obama, Netanyahu was asked by reporters whether he would agree to the establishment of a Palestinian state. He retorted by saying that it was not important how one defined a Palestinian entity that would emerge as a result of a peace accord so long as there was agreement on its contents.

In his speech at Bar Ilan University in Israel, in which, for the first time, Netanyahu endorsed, in principle, the idea a Palestinian state, the Israeli Prime Minister did not argue his case in a top-bottom manner. Netanyahu did not say he was in favour of a two-state solution and went on to explain what he meant by that. He did not state, first and foremost, that he would accept a Palestinian state living side by side with Israel. Rather, he argued his case in a bottom-up way.

He started by describing the kind of Palestinian entity that would be acceptable to Israel in the framework of a peace agreement. That entity would have to be, according to Netanyahu, fully demilitarized, with iron-clad international supervision. He made it clear, albeit in a rather implicit manner, that the frontiers would have to be supervised to prevent smuggling of prohibited weaponry, and the freedom of its airspace would have to be partially curtailed to avert any possible aerial attack of Israeli targets.

Netanyahu then went on to say that, if the aforementioned conditions were met, he would agree to the establishment of a Palestinian state.

In other words, the kind of Palestinian entity Netanyahu would accept was identical to the kind of entity he was ready to accept even prior to his Bar Ilan speech. Now, however, he went a step further, saying that he would agree that such an entity be a state. Netanyahu was prepared to endorse the idea of a

Palestinian state as long as the main characteristics he thought essential for an autonomous entity were to be applied to such a state.

Netanyahu agreed to the creation of a Palestinian state primarily due the pressures exerted by the Obama Administration. To be sure, other countries with which Israel had close relations, such as Germany, Britain, France and Italy made it clear to Israel, both in private and in public, that the endorsement of a Palestinian state, as an integral component of a peace agreement, was essential.

However, the *manner* by which Netanyahu presented his consent to the creation of a Palestinian state was related to his domestic audience. The bottom-up approach adopted by him during his Bar Ilan speech could be understood as an attempt by Netanyahu to assuage his domestic constituency. By describing first the main characteristics of a Palestinian entity, by emphasizing the security elements essential to Israel to begin with, and then moving on to state that he would be ready to accept a Palestinian state, Netanyahu may have wished to convey the impression that the change entailed in his position was of a gradual, incremental nature, rather than a radical departure from his previous stance.

Netanyahu did not wish to portray himself as the De Gaulle of a Palestinian state. He had no intention for his Bar Ilan speech to become the Balfour Declaration for the Palestinian people.

His speech was designed to fend off external pressures while maintaining the support of his domestic audience. He had to maintain a delicate equilibrium by adopting the idea of a Palestinian state while doing so in a manner that did not cause a political earthquake in Israel. His whole speech, to be sure, was aimed at eliciting the support of the international community while maintaining the backing of his domestic base.

Although many on the right of the Israeli political spectrum objected to the speech and some in the international community were not fully satisfied with it, Netanyahu managed, so far, to remove this issue from the international agenda as a bone of contention without causing any ruptures within his domestic base.

The bottom-up analytical approach of Netanyahu in presenting his endorsement of a Palestinian state stands in contrasts to the way the parties to the left of the Likud argue their case in favour of a Palestinian state.

Kadima, Labour and Meretz, the three main Zionist political parties to the left of the Likud, advance their position on this matter in a top-bottom dialectical manner. They start by the headline, so to speak, by saying that they favour a two-state solution or the establishment of a Palestinian state next to Israel. They hardly move into specifics, at least not in public. Netanyahu, as we have seen, moved from the main features of a Palestinian entity to the headline, to the endorsement of a Palestinian state.

Indeed, these parties argue their case in an instrumental vein as well. The creation of a Palestinian state, they contend, is an interest of Israel. Israel would

not be making any favours by agreeing to such a state. It would be operating in its own self interest.

Netanyahu's argument in this regard is not instrumental. He wishes to convey the impression that such a Palestinian state would entail some notable sacrifices. It is a concession done under duress, rather than a unilateral decision reached from purely self-interest.

Notwithstanding all this, it should be stressed that none of the Zionist parties to the left of Netanyahu would accept a Palestinian state that would not be demilitarized, the frontiers of which would not be supervised and the aerial space of which would be fully under the control of a Palestinian state.

In this regard, Netanyahu expresses explicitly what these parties say implicitly.

In contrast to his first tenure as Prime Minister, Netanyahu has been adopting a consensual rather than a confrontational approach to policy-making. Indeed, he has even said so explicitly on more than one occasion. Both in shaping his domestic and his foreign policy Netanyahu has been endeavouring to be inclusive rather than exclusive. Following his Bar Ilan speech, he stated that he has embraced a policy towards the peace process which encompasses a large consensus within Israel.

Netanyahu has been, so far, more of a problem solver than an opportunity creator. This has led him to adopt a somewhat defensive posture aimed at avoiding political and diplomatic convulsions. His main objective seems to be stability. Paradoxically, his adoption of the idea of a Palestinian state was undertaken as part of this same defensive posture.

*\*Diplomacy Program. Tel Aviv University. Israel*