

Former Israeli Commanders Say Separate from Palestinians

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor
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TEL AVIV—On Dec. 29, Benjamin Netanyahu was sworn in for the sixth time as Israel's prime minister. As in each of his previous terms, the nation confronts substantial national security challenges. Although little mentioned during the run-up to the Nov. 1 election, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains among them.

That's because Israel is a rights-protecting democracy. Harsh security realities and intense nationalist and religious convictions also surround the question of the ultimate disposition of the disputed territories known here both as the West Bank (preferred by the left) and Judea and Samaria (typical of the right). The land, which forms the heart of biblical Israel, also is home to approximately 2.75 million Palestinians (not to be confused with Israel's roughly two million Arab citizens). The Jewish state, however, cannot indefinitely exercise authority over another people against their will and remain true to its free and democratic principles.

In 1996 when Netanyahu assembled his first government, the struggle over the disputed territories was front and center. A wave of Palestinian suicide-bombing attacks terrorized the country. The grisly violence against Israel's civilian population took place against the background of the 1995 assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by an extreme Israeli religious nationalist who, following the 1993 Oslo Accords, sought to save Israel from further compromises with the Palestinians.

A quarter of a century later, voters gave little heed to the conflict, yet the stakes remain high. Whereas in 2005, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon withdrew all Israeli forces and the entire Israeli civilian population from the Gaza Strip, the number of Israelis living in the West Bank has more than doubled in the intervening 18 years, jumping from around 225,000 to approximately 475,000.

Several factors contribute to Israelis' declining interest over the last two decades in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. None diminishes the conflict's long-term significance.

First, the Palestinian issue has worn down Israelis. The last four U.S. presidents – Clinton, Bush, Obama, and Trump – undertook to broker peace accords, to no avail.

Second, Israel suffers from deep cleavages. Teeming with triumphalism, the right believes that its 64-seat majority in Israel's 120-member Knesset confers a mandate to implement far-reaching changes in the legal system, education, and state funding of the ultra-Orthodox. Meanwhile, outgoing Prime Minister Yair Lapid labeled Netanyahu's new government "dangerous, extreme, irresponsible" while accomplished Tel Aviv professionals in their 50s and 60s mourn the loss of their country and speak grimly of taking "to the streets."

Third, despite the failure to make headway with the Palestinians, Israelis have since the dissipation of the Second Intifada in the mid-2000s enjoyed a robust economy. Free market reforms introduced in the early 2000s by then-Minister of the Treasury Netanyahu helped unleash the nation's entrepreneurial spirit, creating opportunities for young Israelis to commercialize high-tech prowess developed during mandatory military service, and stimulating unprecedented affluence.

Fourth, by the late-1990s, the Israeli national security establishment had concluded that the Islamic Republic of Iran's nuclear program represented the paramount danger. No one has done more to educate Israelis and the world about the Iran threat than Netanyahu. Nevertheless, Tehran stands on

the threshold of producing nuclear weapons. Furthermore, with a powerful tailwind from the [\\$400 billion deal](#) they struck in 2021 with China, Iran's ruling ayatollahs persist in sowing terror throughout the region, not least on Israel's borders by arming both Lebanon-based Hezbollah and Gaza-based Hamas and propping up Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad.

Fifth, the Trump administration-brokered Abraham Accords have yielded considerable fruit and offer [hope of greater cooperation](#) between Israel, the Gulf Arabs, and the wider Muslim world. Expanding commercial relations in the Gulf have the potential to create millions of jobs in the region and produce hundreds of billions of dollars of economic activity. Israel, moreover, has signed security cooperation agreements with Bahrain and Morocco and in 2021 conducted a joint naval exercise in the Red Sea with Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States. Speculation swirls about drawing the Saudis into the accords but, based on Riyadh's [public statements](#), that will require Israel to show tangible progress in regard to the Palestinians.

The trouble is that as a result of the multifarious developments that have deflected their attention from the conflict, many Israelis have effectively embraced Netanyahu's unofficial approach, at least since he reclaimed the prime ministership in 2009: Muddle through, buy time, kick the can down the road. Where consistent with Israeli security, Netanyahu has over the years adopted measures to strengthen the Palestinian economy. At the same time, he has given Israelis who favor annexation of parts or all of Judea and Samaria reason to believe he is on their side while taking no formal actions that preclude the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank.

But circumstances don't stand still. The number of Israelis living in Judea and Samaria grows while violence there [rises](#). The pro-Western Kingdom of Jordan, which is vital to U.S. and Israeli regional interests, [displays](#) mounting hostility to Israel over lack of progress on the Palestinian question. The sclerotic and kleptocratic Palestinian Authority has made Hamas, which has ruled the Gaza Strip since 2007, a popular alternative in the West Bank. At the same time, younger Palestinians living in

Judea and Samaria, despairing of attaining a state of their own, increasingly aspire to full citizenship in Israel, which would change Israel from a Jewish state to a bi-national state.

In the face of mounting volatility, “[Commanders for Israel’s Security](#)” maintains that Israel’s informal policy of having no policy in Judea and Samaria must end. Security imperatives for the preservation of Israel as a Jewish, free, and democratic state, the organization argues, require prompt action to reduce Israeli responsibility for governing West Bank Palestinians.

A non-partisan organization founded in 2014, CIS’ more than 400 members include retired senior officials of Israel’s defense establishment – the military (IDF), the national intelligence agency (Mossad), internal security (Shin Bet), and the Israel Police – as well as of Israel’s diplomatic corps. The retired officials “are united in the conviction that a two-state agreement with the Palestinians, as part of a regional security framework, is essential for Israel’s security as well as for its future as the democratic home of the Jewish People.” But CIS recognizes that “current conditions are not conducive” to attaining a two-state agreement.

Over the short-term, therefore, CIS recommends “civilian separation” of Israel from West Bank Palestinians with the IDF maintaining responsibility for security in the territories. This pragmatic approach, the former commanders believe, can preserve the conditions that eventually would allow for the emergence of a Palestinian state. At the same time, many of the steps to [ease the conflict](#) they propose for immediate action are consistent with annexation of, say, Israel’s major West Bank settlement blocs, home to a substantial majority of the Israelis in Judea and Samaria. Accordingly, the CIS aspiration “to forge a broad national consensus” fits with key overlapping goals of Israel’s substantial bloc of center left and center right voters.

Published in November 2021, CIS’ “[Initiative 2025: Immediate Term Actions to Promote Israel’s Security](#)” elaborates a mix of security and developmental measures to advance civilian separation.

For example, CIS urges Israel to finish building the security barrier begun in 2002 in response to the Second Intifada, of which approximately 390 of the planned 462 miles have been completed. The CIS plan also calls for constructing more dedicated roads for Palestinian traffic. These undertakings would increase contiguity among the 186 Palestinian-controlled districts that form areas A and B under the Oslo Accords, reduce friction with Israeli forces and civilians, strengthen PA governance, and boost PA prosperity.

In addition, the CIS plan recommends an increase in the number of permits for West Bank Palestinians to work in Israel. It also advises Israel to ease restrictions on Palestinian goods, both within the West Bank and for export; spur Palestinian trade by removing financial restrictions and red tape; and assist in constructing Palestinian industrial zones and improving Palestinian agriculture.

These and similar Israeli initiatives do not mean severing relations with the Palestinians. On the contrary, CIS Director Itamar Yaar told me, the achievement of civilian separation will depend on extensive cooperation between the two peoples living between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

Relying on ultra-nationalist and ultra-Orthodox parties, Netanyahu's coalition government leaves Israel's longest-serving prime minister limited room to maneuver on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Yet civilian separation from the West Bank Palestinians fits well with his conservative Zionism which, like CIS, seeks to preserve Israel as a free, democratic and Jewish state. Securing his legacy – and Israel's long-term national security – will demand an adroitness from Netanyahu that will test the limits of his vaunted political skills.

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