

Securing the Peace in Israel

Israel must be as united as possible to prepare and implement a peace that generally resolves the problem created when the British with the Balfour Declaration of 1917 sold the same real estate to two different parties.

by Conrad Black



The third Israeli general election in a year has produced a clearer advantage for the principal party, but has been ambiguous in the more important issue of which party will lead the government.

The ostensible leader of the opposition, General Benjamin (Benny) Gantz, head of the Blue and White Party—an amalgam of centrist and moderate left parties and groups, roughly continuing in the path of Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, and Ehud Barak of the old Mapai (Labor) Party—has aligned the support of a majority of the Knesset (parliament). But that support is dependent on the adherence of the Arab Joint List,

the third-largest party, which Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu dismisses in incendiary terms as a terrorist front.

Israel is a complete slate system: the parties nominate up to 120 people (the total number of members of the Knesset) in their order of seniority or merit within each party. There are no constituencies or districts. In theory, every member of the Knesset could live in the same neighborhood or even the same large building. Votes are cast for the party of choice.

Netanyahu's Likud (formerly led by Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Shamir, and with a schism, Ariel Sharon) had just under 30 percent of the vote and so 36 MKs; Gantz and his followers 27 percent and 33 MKs, and the Arab Joint List (three parties combined), got 12.7 percent of the votes and 15 MKs, the orthodox religious Shas received 8 percent of the votes and nine MKs; the remaining four parties to make the threshold of 5 percent required to sit in the Knesset all received between 5 and 6 percent and have six or seven MKs. These include two smaller parties, led by the notable faction-heads Avigdor Lieberman and Naftali Bennett.

The Jews' history of being persecuted required that when they finally regained their homeland, it be governed in a way that made it almost impossible to ignore even small blocs of Jewish opinion. The status of the Arabs, naturally, has been more complicated.

Israel has been much criticized for the unequal treatment of its Arabs, but given that most of them don't believe in the existence of Israel as a Jewish state, that is not entirely surprising. Moreover, the condition of Israeli Arabs is generally freer and more prosperous than that of neighboring Arab populations, apart from—in straight terms of per capita wealth—the petro-states.

Netanyahu is currently under indictment for corrupt dealings with media owners—not an unusual circumstance in Israel where

a prime minister (Ehud Olmert) and a president (Moshe Katsav) were convicted of crimes. He claims the prosecution is political, something for which there is also some precedent in Israel. The Old Testament attribution to God of the opinion expressed to Moses that the Jews are a "stiff-necked people" (also translated as "argumentative" and "obstinate") is largely vindicated in Israel's politics. As there is no territorial aspect to parliamentary representation, parties are constantly fusing and splintering and coalitions of four or five parties are required over a constantly-shifting range of ever-evolving policy opinions and perceptions.

The composition of the Israeli population: an in-gathering of Jews from all over Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and Ethiopia makes it an unusually polyglot patchwork of groups and interests, and the nature of the system as much as that of the Jewish people assures a constantly seething political culture. Gantz apparently is able to form a government because he is less objectionable to the Arab population than the more intransigent Netanyahu. But Gantz promised in the late campaign that he would not sit in a government with Netanyahu and would not govern by relying on Arab support.

Inevitably, a government of Israel propped up by Arabs would severely divide the country.

It is obvious that Israel's political system is excessively complex, but it has been one of the most successful countries in the world and has grown from its status at independence in 1948 of a string of scrabble-hard kibbutzniks surrounded by Arab enemies in a poor and unremitting country to its present prosperity—an (off-shore) oil-producing, highly educated state with a European standard of living (93 percent of the per capita income of Canada, a vast treasure house).

In all the world, the only equivalent development story has been South Korea, with China in a special category as the first Great Power to cease to be a Great Power and then

regenerate itself to that status after centuries of decline and economic stagnation. Israel's strategic condition has also benefited from the disintegration of two of its most virulent enemies, Syria and Iraq, immense humanitarian tragedies though there have been in those countries; and from the encroachments of the Arabs' ancient foes the Iranians and Turks. This last development has caused the principal Arab powers to discard most of their official hostility to Israel—which is a natural ally in any rebuff to Iran, the chief supplier of the anti-Israeli terrorist activities of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza.

Gantz is popular as a distinguished, apparently disinterested retired general, and Netanyahu, having surpassed David Ben Gurion as the longest-serving Israeli prime minister (now 15 years) carries a good deal of baggage. Normally, the voters would conclude that it was, indeed time for a change. Ben Gurion was the chief founder of the country and the undisputed head of the then Ashkenazi majority of Israelis and was the natural leader to elect and retain.

Netanyahu has at times been far down the well in opposition and has achieved and maintained his position preeminently by a mastery of the free enterprise right and as the chief opponent of the previous land-for-peace formula, engaged in even by the fierce Begin, and certainly Rabin, Peres, Barak, and Sharon. In practice, it consisted of Israel ceding land it had won in wars the Arabs had initiated and lost, in exchange for a ceasefire which the Palestine Liberation Organization did not observe for more than a few weeks before it started all over again.

The Palestinians (the PLO and Hamas) overplayed their hand. They did not realize that the sponsorship of the Arab powers would evaporate when the Arab world was challenged by a real adversary (Iran and to some degree Turkey). The Palestinian leaders never wanted peace, because if it was achieved, they would only be the leaders of a tiny, poor, dusty little state

carved out of the old Palestine Mandate following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1918. The PLO leader would cease to be the world figure the egregious Yasser Arafat was for 35 years and would have no more prominence than the president of Lebanon or Tunisia.

The Palestinians have fumbled their main chance, and in the next few years, they will have to accept something fairly close to the Trump peace plan. Both Netanyahu and Gantz support that plan and at this critical point, Israel cannot have a government that depends for retention of office on Arab legislators who oppose the entire concept of the Jewish state.

White is; if Gantz doesn't feel he can break his promise not to serve with Netanyahu, he should refrain from government but remain as his party's leader, with Netanyahu as prime minister for one or two more years, then Netanyahu can retire and Gantz can replace him.

Israel needs a strong government to try to bring the pursuit of some sort of substantial and durable peace to a satisfactory conclusion. Alternatively, he could declare that conditions have changed and he can serve with Netanyahu after all, as associate prime minister. In coalition governments, pre-electoral promises are always subject to post-electoral review.

President Trump has effectively discarded the requirement of Israeli-Palestinian agreement and partially replaced it with an element of an imposed peace, as Richard Nixon contemplated prior to the Yom Kippur War of 1973. Israel must be as united as possible to prepare and implement a peace that generally resolves the problem created when the British with the Balfour Declaration of 1917 sold the same real estate to two different parties. For more than a century, a partition between the Jews and the Palestinian Arabs was the only solution, and Israel has grown strong enough, and the Arabs divided enough, that the time to secure the Jewish homeland is almost at hand.

This is no time for sadistic attachment to outworn tactical election promises and factional dogma. History will not wait.

First published in