

NOREF Policy Brief

Jerusalem, Netanyahu and the two-state solution

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Executive summary

What are Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's real intentions vis-à-vis Israeli–Palestinian negotiations and the two-state solution? What does he really want? Speculation aside, a great deal can be gleaned about both Netanyahu's core beliefs and his intentions by examining his words and his actions with respect to Jerusalem. Jerusalem is universally recognised as a key permanent status issue, which, for any peace agreement, will require the reconciling of competing Israeli and Palestinian claims as well as recognition and protection of Jewish, Muslim and Christian equities. In the context of the current political stalemate, however, it has become much more than that. Today, Jerusalem is both the volcanic core of the conflict – the place where religion and nationalism meet and combine in a potentially volatile mix – and a microcosm of the conflict and the imbalance of power that characterises developments on the ground.

Taken together, Netanyahu's utterances and policies regarding Jerusalem offer a clear understanding of the underlying architecture of the overall vision he is implementing with respect to the Palestinians. In this way, they draw a clear picture of the end game Netanyahu has in mind for this conflict: a future in which there will be a cantonised, discontinuous Palestinian entity – called a state – dotted with Israeli settlements, with no international boundaries and isolated from Jerusalem. All stakeholders – Israelis, Palestinians, the international community and faith communities throughout the world – would be well advised to base their own positions and policies on an unvarnished appraisal of Netanyahu's aspirations in Jerusalem.

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Introduction

Another Jerusalem Day, Israel's official celebration of the "reunification" of the city, has come and gone – this year on May 20th. With it came the usual florid speeches from Israeli politicians celebrating a united city that exists primarily in the realm of myth; the usual protestations from the Israeli Left and the Palestinians asserting that, in reality, Jerusalem is divided as never before; the usual manifestations on the ground of the transformation of the day into a holiday of the religious and political right in Israel, including the now traditional settlers' "march of flags" through East Jerusalem, reminiscent of the inflammatory Orange Parades of Northern Ireland; and the usual apathy and alienation toward Jerusalem from the rest of the population. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*¹

But there was something more. This year, in addition, afforded an opportunity to examine the core beliefs of Prime Minister Netanyahu regarding Jerusalem, and a chance to better understand the underlying architecture of the overall policies he is implementing.

Netanyahu's Jerusalem

Netanyahu gave three public addresses on Jerusalem Day, speaking at the opening of the cabinet session, at the state ceremony on Ammunition Hill and at the *Merkaz Harav* Yeshiva (a prominent national-religious academy). All three were illuminating.

From his speeches we learned that there are no non-Jews in Netanyahu's Jerusalem, except by inference. In fact, there are no non-Jewish stakeholders with any legitimate claims or attachments to the city. There are no Christians and no Muslims, and certainly no Palestinians – except as the nameless beneficiaries of Israeli respect for religious freedom. In Netanyahu's Jerusalem, Israel's magnanimity in respecting the religious freedom of non-Jews merely reflects and enhances the exclusivity of Israel's sovereign claims.

Netanyahu's Jerusalem is likewise rich in history, but only in Jewish history. "Jerusalem", he intoned, "has a Biblical [i.e. Old Testament] past, and Jerusalem will have a Biblical future". Netanyahu recalled how, throughout history, the rule of unnamed "others" in Jerusalem has been characterised by "repression and intolerance of other religions", whereas Jerusalem united under Israel has awoken, transformed from "a God-forsaken place, impoverished and neglected, into a prosperous, vibrant, progressive metropolis – the united capital of the Jewish people". It has become a place, he said, where an unprecedented number of students study "our heritage", leaving no doubt about which heritage he meant.

Netanyahu's Jerusalem is also the place where the historically victimised Jewish people are drawing a line, and over which any compromise not only is unthinkable, but would lead to war. Any Israeli willingness to compromise on Jerusalem, Netanyahu declared, "will convince her enemies that it lacks the will to fight over anything". On the sticky question of the Temple Mount, holy to both Jews and Muslims the world over, he was adamant: "Depositing ... the Temple Mount in the hands of others will quickly lead to a deterioration into holy war". According to this approach, exclusive Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem is the key to peace and security; any compromise on the issue will lead to war. Likewise, for Netanyahu, Israeli construction in East Jerusalem is not merely urban development, but a display "of the source of our national strength, without which we are no more than a driven leaf".

Netanyahu's Jerusalem is the place where Israel will secure its vital interests not only through iron-willed strength in the face of its enemies, at home and abroad, but also by means of persuasion and Netanyahu's irresistible *hasbara* (Israel's political public relations). On Jerusalem Day this year, Netanyahu stated clearly: "When address the UN, or sit in the Oval Office, it is my duty to speak [not only in the name of Israeli citizens and the Jewish people] but also in the name of a nation 4000 years old ... one which cited in every celebration and every tragedy one wish: to rebuild Jerusalem ... I will continue to build Jerusalem. I will continue to stand firm before the nations of the world, and continue to tell them that Jerusalem will ever remain the undivided capital of the State of Israel

¹ The more things change, the more they stay the same.

and the united capital of the Jewish people ... This is a sacred vow that I will never abandon. Never.” In sum, continued settlement activity in East Jerusalem is geared to assure that the two-state solution will never take place in Jerusalem.

Laying out a strategic vision: Jerusalem and two states

Decision-makers often ask this, frequently in exasperation: “What does Netanyahu really want?” In a recent interview, Dennis Ross, a senior adviser to Presidents Clinton and Obama, offered an answer. He pointed to a recent address in which Netanyahu asserted: “a peace agreement with the Palestinians is necessary first and foremost to prevent a bi-national state.” Ross concluded: “this suggests that he [Netanyahu] is not just mouthing the words of wanting to pursue peace. There is no doubt that the Prime Minister of Israel is sending a signal.”

However, analysis of Netanyahu’s statements and actions on Jerusalem points to a very different answer, regarding his vision not only of the political future of Jerusalem, but of the very nature of negotiations with the Palestinians and the two-state solution.

Netanyahu has been characterised as a master of the rhetorical flourish, but weak in the implementation of his policies. The Netanyahu Jerusalem Day addresses offer ample evidence to the contrary. They disclose the underpinnings of two highly effective Jerusalem policies currently in play. They explain the motivations underlying the current unprecedented surge in settlement activities in East Jerusalem. They also contextualise the radical transformation of the public domain in and around the Old City, where – by means of archaeology, national parks and settlement enclaves – a renewed pseudo-Biblical realm is being carved out by exclusionary settler organisations, to which many of the governmental authorities are being entrusted.

Netanyahu has also often been portrayed, not without reason, as a masterful political tactician, but one who lacks strategic vision. Netanyahu’s Jerusalem Day addresses, however, provide a rare, un-distilled insight into his strategy. For Netanyahu, exclusive Israeli and Jewish rule over

all of Jerusalem is an article of faith, impervious to the empirical realities of the city, to the rival claims of other stakeholders, or to the views of the international community. Netanyahu will secure Israel’s interests in Jerusalem by means of captivating the nations of the world with his powers of persuasion, or by overwhelming the Palestinians with Israel’s superior strength. In Netanyahu’s Jerusalem, there is no room for eye-level engagement with another national collective and other faith communities claiming comparable attachments to and equities in Jerusalem. Netanyahu could not be clearer: the equities of non-Jews in Jerusalem are not inherent entitlements, but, at most, claims of tolerated minorities who themselves are vestigial remnants of hostile civilizations past. In the words of Aaron David Miller, “Jerusalem, history told us, wasn’t for sharing. It was to be possessed in the name of God, or at least in the name of the tribe.”

The Netanyahu addresses thus explain not only what has been happening in Jerusalem, but also where we are probably heading with respect to the city and with respect to Israeli–Palestinian relations overall. For Netanyahu, there is one entitled, empowered national collective to the west of the Jordan River: the Israelis (acting on behalf of Jews everywhere, and throughout history). The necessity of dealing with the Palestinians derives from happenstance: the regrettable fact that millions of Palestinians reside in the realm of Israeli entitlement. The necessity of reconciling Israeli national interests with the fact that the Palestinians are present is the only reason for negotiations – not the necessity of engaging a Palestinian collective whose rights to self-determination are no different from that of the Jewish people, and whose attachments to historic Palestine have the same legitimacy as those of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel. Understood in this context, Netanyahu’s warning of the necessity of preventing a bi-national state indeed sends a message, but one that is diametrically opposed to the message heard by Dennis Ross.

As if to drive home this point, and striking a note reminiscent of his assertions regarding freedom of religion in Jerusalem, Netanyahu told the U.S. Congress last year that “We will be very generous on the size of a future Palestinian state.” In doing

so, he has made clear that the dimensions of any future Palestinian state will be a reflection of Israeli magnanimity, not recognition of Palestinian claims. This view translates into very specific policies that Netanyahu, through his support for settlement in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, is actively implementing. These policies, in turn, have clear implications in terms of both the shape of a Palestinian state and the future of Jerusalem, disclosing the truth about Netanyahu's "two-state" endgame: a cantonised, discontinuous Palestinian entity, dotted with Israeli settlements, with no international boundary and no connection to Jerusalem.

Is it any wonder that Netanyahu has stubbornly refused to put a map on the negotiating table? Such a map would clearly articulate a vision of statehood not likely to be viewed as "a state" by anyone else.

Looking ahead

Even in light of the vagaries of Israeli coalition politics, Netanyahu's government has been the most stable in recent memory, giving rise to speculation that Netanyahu indeed has the political base necessary to move forward in the negotiations. Examined in the light of Netanyahu's policies and the strategic vision behind them, manifested most starkly in his approach to Jerusalem, this speculation appears to be unfounded. In the absence of new evidence to the contrary, one would be well advised to avoid labouring under the illusion that Netanyahu is in any way committed to the pursuit of a two-state solution, except in the case where that term has been stripped of meaning.

That said, Netanyahu has demonstrated that he understands the world is not neatly divided between the convenient categories of ideological allies (and those seduced by his powers of persuasion) and enemies of Israel. Most of Israel's staunchest allies are highly critical of his policies in Jerusalem and of his approach to negotiations, while remaining supportive of Israel's genuine national interests. When these friends have engaged Israel on these issues, Netanyahu has not been impervious to their concerns. This is why Netanyahu has imposed a limited, *de facto* settlement freeze in East

Jerusalem twice since assuming office. It is why he has virtually suspended home demolitions in East Jerusalem, and has exhibited self-restraint regarding the demolition of the Mughrabi Ramp. However, all indications are that these actions have been merely tactical retreats, rather than reflecting any shift with respect to Netanyahu's beliefs regarding the exclusivity of Israeli claims to Jerusalem.

Likewise, these developments have in no way altered the thrust of his overall Jerusalem policies, and the thrust of those policies in Jerusalem has been unequivocal. The trajectory of settlement projects currently being implemented in East Jerusalem will, within one and a half years, so balkanise the geography and the demography of the city that the two-state solution will no longer be possible.

Conclusions

For the international stewards of the political processes: No credible negotiating process is likely to be possible unless and until Netanyahu articulates, in words and with maps, just what he means by the two-state solution, and its relation to the political future of Jerusalem. Negotiations cannot be sustained by episodic payment of lip-service to such a solution while facts are being created on the ground that point to an endgame that is antithetical to the very possibility of a viable Palestinian state.

For the crisis managers: Getting events in Jerusalem under control is a political imperative, both in order to maintain the viability of the two-state solution and to prevent an outbreak of violence. This cannot be done "on the cheap". Those occasions upon which Netanyahu has exhibited restraint with respect to settlements in East Jerusalem resulted from clear signals being sent to Netanyahu that there would be consequences should he continue to undermine the two-state solution with his actions in the city. Mere protestations never suffice to convince Netanyahu to rein in his policies in East Jerusalem, and, in the absence of any real insistence on accountability, they may even embolden him to pursue his problematic policies.

For the Jerusalem stakeholders, Palestinian Muslims and Christians: It is vital that Jerusalem stakeholders articulate and assert their equities in the city as rightful and empowered stakeholders. This assertion is all the more powerful, and can be effective, only if accompanied by recognition of the genuine Jewish and Israeli attachments to the city – a recognition that does not transform non-Jewish stakeholders into mere supplicants.

For Israelis and friends of Israel: Now is the time to recall Jerusalem's rich and convulsive history, and the history of those who have attempted, in the name of some higher power, to possess her.

None of those stories ended well. By pursuing his exclusionary, Biblically informed vision of Jerusalem, Netanyahu is undermining, rather than strengthening, the legitimacy of the deep Jewish attachments to the city. At a time when tectonic shifts are taking place in the exercise of global and regional power, and in a Middle East undergoing convulsive changes, it is all the more imperative for Israel to assure a stable, equitable Jerusalem, which is the sine qua non of a conflict-ending two-state agreement. Netanyahu's vision of Jerusalem is not compatible with these vital interests.

