

A land divided: The internal conflicts of Zionism

by [Gershom Gorenberg](#) in the [January 9, 2013](#) issue



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On December 2, the Sunday after the United Nations General Assembly voted to accept Palestine as an observer state, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu opened his cabinet's weekly meeting with defiance. Not only did he declare that "the government of Israel rejects the . . . decision," he equated it with the infamous UN resolution of 1975 that labeled Zionism as racism.

On the surface, this was a gut reaction to superficially similar circumstances: Israel again found itself nearly alone in the UN, and Netanyahu wanted to show that it would not be moved by immutable hostility. In the same mood, he approved steps to build a Jewish neighborhood in the West Bank linking Jerusalem with the settlement of Ma'ale Adumim—a step that even Israel's closest allies vehemently oppose.

Examined thoughtfully, the content of the two UN decisions could not be more different. The "Zionism is racism" resolution negated the idea on which Israel is built: that Jews, defined as a national group, deserve political independence. The new resolution endorsed "the vision of two states . . . Palestine living side by side in peace and security with Israel." Prima facie, it reaffirmed the original 1947 UN vote to partition British-ruled Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state, the decision that led to Israel's establishment. So why did Netanyahu, a man concerned with history and ideas, oppose it?

For an answer, look back to the 1947 partition vote. Partition was proposed as the least bad arrangement for two national communities, Jewish and Palestinian Arab, both legitimately claiming the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean. Arab leaders in Palestine and in neighboring countries rejected the partition plan. The mainstream of the Zionist movement, led by David Ben-Gurion, lobbied for it in the General Assembly. After partition passed, battles broke out between Arabs and Jews in Palestine, followed by war between Arab countries and newly independent Israel.

Ben-Gurion and his pragmatic colleagues believed Jews had a right to the Land of Israel, as Jews traditionally refer to the country between the river and the sea. But they settled for a piece of it. Other Zionists, especially on the radical right, regarded this as a betrayal of the Jewish homeland.

After independence, the first parliamentary motion of no-confidence against Ben-Gurion was submitted by Menachem Begin, leader of the hard-right opposition. His complaint: rather than conquer the West Bank, Ben-Gurion had signed an armistice agreement leaving it under Jordan's rule.

At the Knesset (legislature) podium, Ben-Gurion answered that Israel could indeed seize the West Bank. "But then what?" he demanded. "We'll create one state. But that state will want to be democratic, we'll hold elections—and we [the Jews] will be in the minority. . . . When we faced the question of the whole land without a Jewish state, or a Jewish state without the whole land—we chose a Jewish state without the whole land."

With these words, Israel's founding father mapped its deepest ideological divide: between those who see Zionism's goal as a democratic Israel with a Jewish majority, and those who insist that Zionism requires Jewish rule of the entire homeland.

The issue remained theoretical until the Six Day War of 1967 brought Israel's unplanned conquest of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and other territory. For a decade after the war, political paralysis reigned in Israel. Successive governments were unable to decide whether to give up at least part of the newly conquered land, but they slipped into the dangerous pattern of establishing Jewish settlements in areas they hoped to keep. In 1977, Begin and his Likud Party took power. Now policy was clearer: Begin, predictably, wanted to keep the whole land under Israeli rule without annexing the West Bank or giving its Palestinian residents the vote.

The 1967 war also created a tension in U.S. policy. On one hand, the Johnson administration's postwar goal was an Israeli-Arab peace based on the pre-1967 lines. On the other hand, the administration was intensely relieved that Israel had survived the war without a need for American troops. As former national security adviser McGeorge Bundy wrote in a secret memorandum to President Johnson, keeping Israel armed well enough to defend itself was "an interest of ours as well of the Israelis." The most effective way to pressure Israel—withholding weaponry—created the risk of America getting dragged into a future Arab-Israeli war. Washington might want to influence Israeli policy, but it couldn't lean too hard. The Bundy conundrum is a legacy passed on to every administration since, and it still applies.

By the 1990s, the question of partition fully reemerged in the Israeli and international arena, renamed as the two-state solution. Israeli advocates of partition present it as a way of achieving peace but also as a way of preserving Israel as a democracy with a Jewish majority. When Ehud Olmert, a lifelong follower of Begin, came out for a two-state solution in 2003, he quoted Ben-Gurion's 1949 Knesset speech.

For Israeli politicians who explicitly oppose a two-state deal or who say it is unachievable, the inescapable question is how Israel can continue ruling over disenfranchised Palestinians without undermining its own democracy. For those who support a two-state agreement, the first question is whether the Palestinian side is ready to give up its claim to the whole of historic Palestine. Prime Minister Ehud Barak argued after the Camp David summit of 2000 that Yasser Arafat was not prepared to do that. Olmert negotiated with Mahmoud Abbas, Arafat's heir as Palestinian Authority president, and has insisted that an agreement was possible.

Abbas arranged for the vote on Palestinian statehood to take place on November 29, the anniversary of the original 1947 partition vote. It's true that Abbas's General Assembly speech was harsh rather than conciliatory, and that turning to the United Nations broke the framework of direct negotiations with Israel. Nonetheless, the resolution was as much a belated Palestinian admission of the error of rejecting partition 65 years ago as it was a Palestinian victory.

Yet Netanyahu treated the resolution as a repeat of the UN's 1975 rejection of Zionism, a response that makes intellectual sense only if one takes the contested position that Jewish rule of the whole land is essential to Zionism. And indeed, his cabinet issued a response stressing that nothing in the UN resolution could detract

“from of the State of Israel’s, or the Jewish people’s, rights whatsoever in the Land of Israel.”

For Netanyahu is a loyal heir to Begin’s political tradition. Early in his term, under American pressure, Netanyahu said he would accept a Palestinian state alongside Israel. But in his actions he has aimed at preserving the status quo of Israeli rule. His decision after the General Assembly vote to move ahead on construction in the E-1 area between Jerusalem and Ma’ale Adumim was intended as an unequivocal rejection of partition: building settlements in the E-1 area would create a wall of Israeli settlements cutting nearly across the West Bank, and it is designed to prevent establishment of a viable Palestinian state.

So when Israel forms a new government after its January 22 election, it will face the same question that has accompanied it from its birth: Is dividing the land an affront to Zionism or is it the way to preserve a Jewish and democratic state? The issue is still partition.