

Netanyahu's hard line on settlements costs Israel dear on Iran

Israel's legitimate fears over Iranian nuclear weapons may be given short shrift because of Netanyahu's policy on the Palestinian question



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As the crisis in relations between the United States and Israel plunges to new depths, senior Obama administration officials last week allegedly described Israeli leader Binyamin Netanyahu as a [“chickenshit prime minister”](#) and a [“coward”](#). John Kerry, the US secretary of state, has since described such remarks as “disgraceful and damaging”. But the damage has been done.

The implication is that Netanyahu's obsession with political survival has dictated his surrender to the whims of Israel's settlement lobby. Netanyahu will not reach an accommodation with the Palestinians and refuses to halt settlement building in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, so it is argued, because he is too afraid of his rightwing coalition rivals. However, this is a misleading reading of the situation: Netanyahu is deliberately building settlements in defiance of international opinion because he believes in it.

Netanyahu is simply a more sophisticated rejectionist than [Yitzhak Shamir](#), the former Israeli leader who refused to concede one inch of the West Bank. Shamir's fierce opposition to any territorial compromise in the West Bank and Gaza was based upon his strong ideological belief that the [land of Israel](#) in its entirety belonged to the Jewish people, and advocated the establishment of Jewish settlements throughout the West Bank. Netanyahu is a protege of Shamir and a great admirer of the late Israeli prime minister for his steadfastness in the face of international pressure.

Yet unlike Netanyahu, Shamir actually came up with a [diplomatic initiative in the spring of 1989](#). The Shamir plan called for Palestinian elections that would result in local representation to negotiate a transitional period of self-rule. Although few in the Arab world took the initiative seriously, Shamir was finally welcomed to European capitals in order to encourage a new policy of Israeli flexibility on the Palestinian question. However, within a few months Ariel Sharon and other rebels in the Likud party had killed off the initiative. Shamir also attended the [Madrid peace conference in October](#)

[1991](#), but only following concerted US pressure. Like Netanyahu, Shamir became embroiled in a major dispute with Washington over settlements.

After his election defeat to Labour's Yitzhak Rabin in June 1992, Shamir gave an interview to the Maariv newspaper in which he admitted that he would have expanded the settlements had he remained in power. "Moderation" was relevant to tactics but not to the overall objective, which was to prevent any concessions over the land of Israel. Shamir's initiative in 1989 and his attendance at the Madrid conference were little more than tactical concessions to deflect pressure.

History is repeating itself. Shamir's template works for Netanyahu, and he is a moderate as far as tactics are concerned. He agreed to a limited settlement freeze in 2009. Under pressure from the Clinton administration, he signed the [Wye River Memorandum](#) in October 1998, which included a pledge for an Israeli withdrawal from 13% of the West Bank as a step towards a final status agreement with the Palestinians. Yet Netanyahu eventually suspended the implementation of the agreement, citing the Palestinian failure to carry out its obligations. Although Netanyahu has expressed agreement, in principle, to a two-state solution, there is little evidence to suggest that he means it.

Even if one accepts that the settlement blocs adjoining the [green line](#) will remain part of Israel under a peace agreement, Israel's approval of the unilateral expansion of settlements in these areas severely undermines any chances of a two-state deal. Netanyahu may be justified in castigating Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian Authority president, for his incitement of opinion against Israel and his rejectionism. Nevertheless, as David Horowitz, the editor of the Times of Israel, points out, why would world leaders heed [Netanyahu's criticisms of Palestinian unilateralism](#) in pursuit of statehood when his own government is "unilaterally remaking the facts on the ground"? Particularly regrettable is Netanyahu's encouragement of the Jewish purchase of homes in Arab areas of East Jerusalem, which has been a contributing factor to the growing tensions and violence in the area.

Netanyahu's mistake is that his policy on the Palestinian question is undermining his credibility in another area which is no less important for him and the Israeli people: the Iranian nuclear programme. Were Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon, this would pose an alarming threat not just to Israel but to the entire region and beyond. The tragedy is that Israel's legitimate concerns and fears over Iran may be given short shrift because of Netanyahu's self-defeating policy over settlements.

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