

A stylized map of Israel composed of a grid of dots. Most dots are light gray, but several are colored red, highlighting specific geographical areas within the map's outline.

The Israeli Labor Party's »Separation Plan«

Making Peace with the Palestinians by Focusing on the Israelis

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- The fundamental premises of the Israeli Labor Party's new plan, notably that the two-state solution is currently impossible, have raised many questions regarding its electoral and substantive merit.
- Labor's electoral crisis and the increasingly high priority Israeli Jews place on the preservation of their ethnic identity drove the party leadership to opt for a sharper focus than ever on separation.
- The plan's influence on Israel's policy and public debate can already be seen with respect to two issues: completing the construction of the separation barrier and dividing Jerusalem along ethnic lines. This came with the cost of growing resentment among Palestinians towards the Labor party.
- Even though Labor's new plan has high approval rates amongst Israeli public opinion, it is uncertain whether it will do better electorally. Labor so far failed to promote the proposal as viable alternative, it has many unrelated weaknesses and other parties may siphon parts of the plan. The popular plan does, however, make it easier for Israel's political kingmakers to throne Labor.

After long years in which the Labor Party did not present an alternative to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's conflict management approach and left it as the sole pertinent option, Labor's new Separation Plan rekindles a national conversation on the matter.

Labor's shift is remarkable. The last time the Party Convention endorsed a diplomatic plan was in 2002. In the elections of 2013 and 2015, Labor ran exclusively on a socio-economic ticket. Labor leaders and strategists considered the two-state solution a loser in national elections and instead featured slogans like »a third kindergarten assistant« and focused their campaign on reducing the cost of living.

The pressures within the party that led to championing a plan began long before Palestinian violence erupted in October 2015 and would likely have reached fruition without it. But the fact that the party discussed and endorsed the plan during such a violent escalation while also facing a dramatic electoral crisis in the polls was decisive for its focus on separation versus the overall cause of an Israeli-Palestinian agreement. Over 70 per cent of the public argued that the government's policy fails in dealing with terror.¹ In light of the current challenges of globalization and the constant security threats, Israel's Jews more than ever prioritize the preservation of their ethnic identity over the consolidation of egalitarian citizenship. As violence erupted, support for dividing Jerusalem along ethnic lines has thus considerably increased.²

The plan calls to first separate Israelis from Palestinians and then move toward the two-state solution. This stands in stark contrast to Labor's traditional paradigm of direct, bilateral negotiations that lead to a final status agreement. Substantively, the Separation Plan addresses four arenas:

- Regarding the West Bank, it proposes to complete the construction of the barrier, avoiding construction outside of the so-called »settlement blocs« and transferring civil powers to the Palestinian Authority (PA) over areas beyond the barrier.

- Regarding Jerusalem, it calls to exclude many Palestinian villages-turned-neighborhoods in East Jerusalem from the city's municipal boundaries.
- On Gaza, it suggests stabilizing the ceasefire and incentivizing demilitarization in return for the Strip's development.
- Regionally it calls on Israel to officially respond to the Arab Peace Initiative, which Israel has ignored since 2002, and to convene a regional security conference that would seek to eradicate radical Islam and serve as a basis for regional dialogue on an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement.

Beyond any of its details, the plan's fundamental premise that the two-state solution is currently impossible. Its emphasis on separating Israelis from Palestinians and its ethnocentric rhetoric have raised many questions regarding its electoral and substantive merit.

Away from the Two-State Solution or towards It?

Claims that Labor changed its paradigm and is no longer committed to the two-state solution are unfounded. These assertions were born when the Israeli media reported an out-of-context sound bite from the meeting of Labor's leader, Member of Knesset (MK) Isaac Herzog, in Paris with French President François Hollande: Labor's chairperson told his counterpart that »the two-state solution is irrelevant.« Such a statement, said and reported without its full context, indeed suggests that the Israeli Right was right all along. Understandably, even prominent leaders from within Labor strongly criticized it, including its secretary general and its former chairperson.

But at the Paris meeting itself, and with more vigor and clarity thereafter, Herzog explained that this statement was only a component of his overall assessment: namely that achieving successful final status negotiations at this point was impossible. It is not a vision that should be abandoned but it cannot currently be realized in full. While the conditions to fully implement it are not in place now, Israel can and should strive toward (re-)creating them. Indeed, Labor's new plan maintains that the two-state solution is the only possible solution to the con-

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cNliO2QbsUw>

2. While in late 2014 some 56 per cent opposed and 38 per cent supported the division of Jerusalem along demographic lines, by late 2015 some 69 per cent expressed support and only 24 per cent insisted on maintaining Israeli sovereignty in the Arab parts of the city. Zipi Israeli, Public Opinion and National Security, Strategic Survey for Israel 2015–2016, The Institute for National Security Studies, p. 119.

flict and that the party is fully committed to it. No Labor leaders deny this in public or in private. Not publishing its plan more than a month after endorsing it has been a major cause for confusion and, as discussed below, this has limited the Israeli public's awareness of its very existence. The plan further specifies that a final status agreement should be based on various versions of the two-state solution: the Clinton parameters of December 2000, the understandings and plans formulated since in negotiations, among others by Labor's ally MK Tzipi Livni, and the broad outline presented by MK Hillik Bar.

What Labor changed is the strategy for getting to the two-state solution. Its new plan is a shift from a sole focus on final status negotiations to taking gradual steps toward a two-state *reality*, primarily by promoting the separation of Israelis and Palestinians. In the terminology of conflict studies, Labor's new alternative to Netanyahu's conflict management is no longer conflict resolution but rather conflict transformation. The plan calls for Israel to take actions that make it easier to believe that its continued military control of the West Bank is a result of genuine security needs rather than its desire to realize historical claims via the settlement enterprise.

The Devil Is in the Details

Reading the plan with a policy lens (as opposed to an electoral one), as most external observers have done, gives the sense of a half-baked, amateurish plan whose implementation may in fact lead to further radicalization and violence. The plan is weak on detail. At one-and-a-half pages long, these are at best contours for a policy rather than a full fledged policy plan. Yet, not all detail is minutiae; some can indeed be decisive.

Some of the plan's central components appear counter-productive to achieving their declared goal. Consolidating Israeli control over the so-called settlement blocs, supposedly in order to preserve the two-state solution, is highly controversial as Palestinians and many internationally consider some areas within the Israeli definition of the blocs (above all E-1 near the settlement Ma'ale Adumim) to be decisive for the feasibility of the very same solution. Additionally, the plan's call for completing Israel's barrier along a torturous route — one that many Israeli security officials say is ghastly due to its excessively long and, at times, topographically inferior trajectory.

Similarly, unilaterally excluding large sections of Arab East Jerusalem and stripping its inhabitants of their residency rights without coordinating with any Palestinian interlocutor, be it behind a new wall or not, would create a void in which Hamas and various criminal elements would prosper and endanger the very security for Israelis that the step purports to promote. And for a peace plan to simply assume that Palestinians would entirely give up on Jerusalem's Old City and its environs only builds antagonism and hostility among Palestinians toward Labor's broader intentions in the city and beyond.

Making Peace with the Palestinians by Focusing on the Israelis

Whether or not Labor leaders see these as policy disadvantages, it is evident that they pursued such a plan because their immediate focus is understandably winning the support of a majority of the Israeli public. Their main goal is to embarrass Netanyahu: to demonstrate that he fails to address a major strategic problem. To demonstrate that Netanyahu is unable to provide security for Israel's citizens: because of his unfavorable ideological disposition toward Palestinian statehood and its undeniable price, including letting go of most of the West Bank and Jerusalem's Arab sections, and because of his political commitment to his pro-settlement, national religious allies. And most importantly, Labor's goal is also to highlight that the recommended steps can be implemented without taking any security risk — hence the plan's pledge to keep the Israeli military in the West Bank to show that Labor will not repeat the mistakes committed by (Likud-led) Israel during its 2005 withdrawal from Gaza.

From an electoral perspective, it is irrelevant whether this were the exact plan Labor would indeed pursue if it were at the helm. This is why Labor leaders advocate completing the construction of the separation barrier without acknowledging any of the reasons its construction was not completed. This is why they call to divide Jerusalem without coordinating with a Palestinian interlocutor even though most, in fact, would prefer to do so. And this is why they sell what Israeli experts also consider empty promises in respect to the demilitarization of Gaza. And undergirding all these, this is why Labor presents a plan which on paper appears to be implementable without Palestinian consent: because it focuses on showing Netanyahu's omissions to Israelis.

These considerations also determine the plan's tone, not only its substance. In contrast to the cosmopolitan win-win rhetoric and the emphasis on international law, which characterizes the informal Geneva Initiative that prominent Israeli left-wing leaders have crafted with Palestinian counterparts, Labor now embraced a self-interested rhetoric. Upon the launch of the program, its chairperson declared: »I want to get rid of as many Palestinians as possible, as quickly as possible.«

In the past, Labor leaders took pride when Palestinian leaders supported their views: they cited congruent statements as evidence for feasibility. But nowadays, Herzog presents Palestinian rejection of the plan — such as the PA's objection to the separation of Palestinian villages from Jerusalem — as evidence for its value to Israelis. In this sense, the plan is presented within a zero-sum game perspective that has come to dominate Israeli mindset under Netanyahu's rule. Worse, the plan's strong focus on separation and the omission of the option of interim agreements suggests that the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) is currently not even considered a partner for more modest peace accords by the Labor party.

This indeed is unpleasant to foreign and, of course, to Palestinian ears. But with Labor being in a dramatic electoral crisis, and with Israeli Jews increasingly placing high priority to the preservation of their ethnic identity, the party leadership opted for a sharper focus than ever on separation when relating to such trends.

The Electoral Advantages of Aiming Low

The plan moves Labor rightward in the diverse spectrum of Israeli politics, toward those who seek to separate from the Palestinians in order to ensure Israel's character as a democratic nation-state for the Jewish people, but believe it is impossible to do so currently via a conflict-ending agreement. Many such people have so far opted for Likud because they felt it is the only party that would not irresponsibly expose Israel to enormous security risks. This rationale has gained more resonance with Israelis ever since Arab states around them collapsed and faltered. Fears that Palestine would become a failed state from which rockets and mortars land on Israel seem increasingly realistic.

Prominent Likud members like Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon and MK Avi Dichter, a former General Security Service Director, base their Likud membership exclusively on this rationale. They note in private that they are willing to tolerate the growing influence of pro-settler groups within Likud, even though they prod the party to a policy that gradually renders the two-state solution unfeasible: expanding settlements and gradually applying more Israeli laws and regulations to the West Bank. At least, they explain, these steps do not immediately drive Israel into a security calamity by turning the West Bank into a launch pad for attacks against Israeli citizens.

In light of Labor's latest plan, particularly when Palestinian violence seems insuperable, security-focused Israeli voters would now arguably find themselves confronted with a real choice between what they would see as Labor's pragmatic, security-centered policy and Likud's ideologically-tinged policy that entrenches Israel in an irresolvable problem.

Israeli politics is not all about strategy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There are many reasons why such security-focused voters and opinion leaders would still not opt for Labor: Labor's condescending Ashkenazi, urban, upper-middle class image and its historic record of discrimination toward certain groups; its avowedly secular attitude; and Herzog's lack of security credentials and charisma deficit. But while these will make it impossible for many to place a Labor ticket in the ballot box, the party's policy shift would nevertheless make it less problematic to support centrist parties who would enter a Labor-led government. The 2015 elections were in fact decided two months before they took place when the leaders of key parties — Shas and Israel Beitenu — promised, respectively, to empower Netanyahu and to disempower leftist parties. These promises were kept and Netanyahu won another term.

In Israel's coalition-based system, acceptance by potential coalition partners can be more decisive than the number of seats a party wins at the ballot box. And endorsing a policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which allows political kingmakers to throne Labor is therefore consequential. The plan's insistence that a final status agreement would provide for mutual recognition between the two nation states — seen by Israelis as the most indicative signal of change in Palestinian intentions — and that the agreement will be brought to a

national referendum (rather than by a Laborite leader alone in his office) is helpful in making Labor and its plan easier to stomach — if only as allies.

Implications for 2016

What, if anything, would this plan change? It is far from clear that it would place Labor as the centerpiece of Israel's next government. But it would likely affect Israel's national conversation. Two initial changes and an important trend can already be identified.

Firstly, a single day after Labor endorsed its Separation Plan, Netanyahu, who has not done so since he entered office in 2009, publicly committed to completing the separation barrier (as part of a broader project of surrounding the country with defensive walls). Three weeks later, Netanyahu passed a cabinet decision to continue the construction of the barrier (around Jerusalem and the South Hebron Hills) despite opposition from pro-settler forces in Israel and from within his party,³ and despite reservations of the defense establishment regarding the barrier's inferior route.

Secondly, the wisdom of Israeli rule over the Arab parts of Jerusalem — unchallenged for nearly a decade — has been put into question since the publication of the plan. Labor politicians like MK Omer Barlev, MK Hilik Bar and former Defense Minister MK Amir Peretz defend the proposal in the Israeli media while the hard-line Education Minister Naftali Bennett clashes with Herzog over the proposal by declaring 2016 a year in which Israel's education system will celebrate Jerusalem's unity. British Prime Minister David Cameron's statement days later in a parliamentary debate that the »effective encirclement of East Jerusalem (...) is genuinely shocking« strengthened the pro-partition position and may serve as an example for how statements by the West can positively affect the internal Israeli debate.

While Labor's potential allies in the Jewish part of Israel (centrists, ultra orthodox, Russian speaking, Sephardic) generally received the plan positively, Israel's Arab-Palestinian citizens clearly view it negatively. Its ethnocentric

rhetoric reinforced existing trends that push the state's national minority toward alienation, falling out with Israel's political establishment. If even the opposition among Israel's Jewish majority does not propose an alternative, inclusive policy toward the state's national minority, the likelihood that Arab citizens would ultimately withdraw from participating in Israel's electoral democracy increases. Moreover, Labor's own chances to reassume power may well require the support of Israel's Arab parties — a support which the plan only makes less likely.


What the Future Holds

The plan's relevance would also be determined — for some primarily — by events. Specifically, if violence continued or escalated, advocating for separation would, perhaps tragically, become more relevant for Israelis. Depending on the origin of its perpetrators, be it Jerusalemites or West Bankers, separation in Jerusalem and completing the separation barrier would likely gain popularity on either side.

While some significant pundits associated with the center-left lauded Labor for finally endorsing a pragmatic plan, many ideological leftists criticized Labor for abandoning humanistic values. However, so far Labor failed to place the proposal at the center of the popular debate as a prominent alternative. Labor now promotes a plan that, according to polls, wins clear a majority support — some 65 per cent of Israelis (even more among the Jewish citizens). But only a minority of Israelis actually identifies the plan with the party. It would be Labor's failure if prominent center-right figures like former Netanyahu adviser Yoaz Hendel and MK Michael Oren, Netanyahu's former ambassador to the US, could continue to advocate similar plans without even referring to Labor's plan when doing so.

How Labor would seek to operationalize the plan is another open question with potentially significant consequences for Israelis at large and more specifically for the party itself. Herzog does not have a bold leadership style. Internal party dynamics ultimately pushed him to endorse the plan. Labor MKs Hilik Bar and Omer Bar Lev have both published progressive diplomatic plans many months before violence erupted in late 2015. So did MK Amir Peretz of the Hatnuah party (who has since returned to Labor). Notably based on MK Bar's plan, 700

3. Settler leaders fear that the barrier would deem the roughly 92 per cent of the West Bank — including 75 Jewish settlements, home to roughly 85,000 settlers — as areas that would fall outside of Israeli sovereign claims and ultimately become a Palestinian state.



Labor Convention members forced Herzog to summon a party gathering on the issue in which a plan was ultimately adopted. Would Laborites prod their party to take a further step? If past is precedent, Herzog would not do so himself. Would a subset of Labor MKs now promote Knesset bills based on the progressive components of different plans which were not taken into the party's plan? Would Labor MKs, for example, now support a voluntary evacuation-compensation bill for settlers beyond the barrier as Bar's plan did? Would they pass a bill calling the Israeli government to declare that Israel seeks separation from most of the West Bank lands and the Palestinian population there as MK Bar Lev suggested, or recognize the State of Palestine as MK Bar has proposed?

Considering that Europe and others in the international community seek to propel such actions by the Israeli government and their support for them by the Israeli public, they could harness public diplomacy to the cause. They

would do well to ask publicly, both in their capitals and in Israel, why the Israeli government avoids these and other pragmatic modalities that do not endanger Israeli security and lie within the spectrum of a full resolution of the conflict on the one hand and its tactical management on the other.

It is impossible to predict how the plan and its promotion would make Labor stronger in the next elections. This would depend on many other things and on the changing context and personalities. Even if the context were to make the plan more relevant, it is at least as plausible that other parties would embrace it to preempt Labor's rise. To the extent that Likud would do so, Labor would be robbed of its distinctiveness but compensated by affecting Israeli policy. If centrist parties adopted similar agendas, Labor would not be able to significantly increase its power in the Knesset but it would increase its acceptability among king makers, turning into real contenders for Israel's premiership.

The Resolution Approved on 07/02/2016 at the Labor Party Conference Regarding a Comprehensive Diplomatic-Security Plan

1. Introduction

A. For several months, Palestinian terror has haunted the citizens of Israel across the country. This wave of terror has taken the lives of dozens of civilians and wounded hundreds. Hostility and enmity between Israelis and Palestinians has worsened, and both leaders do not wish to take significant steps required of them to realize the vision of two-states living side by side in peace.

Despite rhetoric, Israel is moving towards one Arab-Jewish state, meaning the end of the Zionist dream. Therefore, with the understanding that a full peace treaty is not, unfortunately, around the corner, and that it is not presently possible to realize the vision of two-states, we must take steps to begin separation from the Palestinians.

B. We reiterate our commitment to the two-state solution, while ensuring security for Israel. We will strive towards the process that will eventually end the conflict and for the realization of a final status agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, creating the conditions for ensuring the security and wellbeing of the State of Israel and its citizens, and preventing turning the West Bank into a terror base.

C. As long as no permanent agreement has been reached, Israel will take interim measures to ensure national security, while avoiding the reality of one Arab-Jewish state, and promoting the eventual realization of the two-state vision.

D. National security is the top priority of Israel's national interest at every level, and we are committed to Israel's security, and that of its citizens. Among other means, one is the creation of physical and geographical separation between the two peoples. To clarify, the IDF will remain in all areas, and not withdraw.

2. Before Reaching a Permanent Agreement – Avoiding the Realization of One State

A. To ensure the future implementation of the vision of two-states, and in light of the situation described above, we will work for Israel to refrain from taking measures which will prevent such implementation.

In view of this, we are committed to separation between Israel the Palestinians before reaching a final status agreement. Separation will preserve the Zionist vision, and stop the progression towards the reality of one state between the Jordan and the Mediterranean, which would lead to the loss of Israel's Jewish identity.

B. To ensure the preservation of the principle of keeping the settlement blocs in Judea and Samaria by completing the security fence between them and the Palestinian territories to prevent infiltration of terrorists.

C. Israel must avoid construction outside of the settlement blocs, and implement the decision of the Israeli government in March 2001 regarding the evacuation of illegal outposts.

D. At the same time, while maintaining control over the security issue, Israel will transfer civil powers to the Palestinian Authority in the territories beyond the security fence, to allow improvement in the functioning of the authority, and its ability to govern, leading to the improvement of the Palestinian economy and the PA's ability to counter terrorist organizations (including to implement previous understandings in this regard to expand area B in Judea and Samaria).

E. As previously noted, the IDF will remain in every region to maintain security for as long as conflict continues.

3. Gaza

- A. Gaza must be a part of a final status solution. Any solution that does not include the Gaza Strip would be dangerous for the realization of the vision of two-states. Therefore, we must act as much as possible for the accountability of the Palestinian Authority for the situation in the territory.
- B. For this to be realised, steps must be taken to stabilize the current ceasefire and move decisively towards a political process to ease pressure on the people of Gaza, isolate Hamas and other terrorist organizations, and lead towards demilitarization in return for development for the region.
- C. We steadfastly support any military action against terrorist organizations and terrorists that attempt to hurtw Israeli citizens and sovereignty. This includes fighting terror tunnels with an iron first, as well as any other infrastructure aimed at harming Israeli citizens, and especially those living in the vicinity of Gaza.

4. Jerusalem

- A. Labor is committed to the unity of Jerusalem, creating and strengthening the capital of Israel and maintaining a Jewish majority in the city for future generations.
- B. To this end, we will separate the scores of Palestinian villages surrounding the city, from Jerusalem's municipal boundaries.

5. Security and the Fight against Terror

- A. We reiterate our firm commitment to an uncompromising war on terror, against terrorist organizations, their leaders and activists, and individual terrorists who seek to carry out terror attacks, and wish to thwart a two-state solution.
- B. We support the army and security forces in their actions in fighting terrorism and ensuring security.

C. Even after separation, the IDF will be the only army that operates between the Mediterranean and the Jordan.

D. We support the strengthening of military cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority and every step that the security authorities will recommend to ease the security situation in Judea and Samaria.

6. Regional Dialogue

- A. We see the inclusion of moderate states in the Middle East as an essential element of this process, mainly our immediate neighbours of Egypt and Jordan.
- B. Israel should officially respond to the Arab Peace Initiative, and submit its comments and reservations about the initiative.
- C. We will convene a regional security conference to formulate a plan that will work to eradicate radical Islam, and serve as a basis for future discussion and regional dialogue on the Israeli-Palestinian agreement.

7. Principles of a Permanent Agreement

- A. When the parties will begin negotiating on a final status agreement, it will be based on the principles adopted in the past by the Labor Party on the basis of the Clinton parameters of December 2000, and the understandings, measures and plans formulated since, initiated, among others, by MK Tzipi Livni, former Foreign Minister in charge of the negotiations, and the broad outline presented by MK Hillik Bar.
- B. As part of a final status agreement, Israel will be recognized as the nation state of the Jewish people, and a Palestinian state as the nation state of the Palestinian people.
- C. The permanent status agreement which will be reached between Israel and the Palestinians will be brought to a national referendum for approval.



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