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'There's no there there': The retreat of the Israeli state and US peace policy

In the aftermath of

Vice President Joe Biden's visit to Israel, U.S. policy circles have been debating how and whether to re-engage in the Middle East peace process. Seemingly pragmatic in their approach, these discussions are oddly insular, almost academic: The Israel they speak of no longer exists. Misunderstanding Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's recent ...

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DANIEL J. LEVINE | MAY 3, 2010,
5:06 PM**

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In the aftermath of Vice President Joe Biden's visit to Israel, U.S. policy circles have been debating how and whether to re-engage in the Middle East peace process. Seemingly pragmatic in their approach, these discussions are oddly insular, almost academic: The Israel they speak of no longer exists.

Misunderstanding Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's recent intransigence for

a hubris borne of strength, American policy intellectuals — even those ostensibly engaged in critiquing of the status quo discourse — fail to understand that the Israeli state is in a process of dissolution. It is this "retreat of the state" — to borrow a phrase from the late Susan Strange — that defines the present Israeli government's position, and it is from there that would-be peacemakers need to triangulate their positions.

This requires some explanation. For decades — until the 1970s — Israel was essentially a one-party state: Labor dominated the 'commanding

heights' of manufacturing, the labor and trade unions, the media, and the influential military and kibbutz sectors. Control of the government passed to Likud in 1977, yet Labor's ongoing dominance in economic, military, and social circles, and a series of unity governments in the 1980s, preserved a clear horizon of political and ideological consensus.

Since the early 1990s, however, the situation has changed. Key assets and industries were sold, the mass media was liberalized and marketized, and a series of electoral reforms gave the traditional "national" parties a

distinct disadvantage
vis-à-vis smaller
"fractional"
movements. A slimmer
public sector could no
longer be mined for
political patronage by
the traditional power-
brokers, while single-
issue parties proved
increasingly adept in
wrangling coalition
negotiations to deliver
political "goods." Into
this mix also came
events that undid the
existing political-
security consensus: the
first intifada and the
end of the Cold War.

These dynamics pulled
Israeli politics toward
the fringes, a process
which the collapse of
the Oslo-Madrid process
has only accelerated.
The result: Israel's

traditionally state-centered "left" and "right" have been in a permanent state of decline.

Since 2000, the former has found itself without a coherent narrative. Ehud Barak's abortive "rebranding" (à la Tony Blair) of Labor in 1999 stressed physical separation from the Palestinians over any serious discussion of national reconciliation, leaving the party ripe to be outflanked by Ariel Sharon's Kadima when final status talks collapsed. Hopes for a revitalized social-democratic agenda were dashed when Amir Peretz lent his support to the 2006 Lebanon "summer war." Labor

and its traditional allies
seem a spent force.

Likud has fared better at
the polls, but it has paid
a price. Its traditional
base — the adherents of
Jabotinsky's
"Revisionism" — find
themselves outflanked
by a new generation of
single-issue radicals
united only by their
rejection of Labor:
Russian
ultranationalists, Shas,
and a new convergence
between religious
Zionism and the ultra-
Orthodox. Likud's
survival depends on
Netanyahu's ability to
keep this fractious
group — only just —
together. Its precarious
nature actually grants
him considerable
freedom of action, but

in a negative sense: The radicalism of his coalition partners provides him cover for *not doing anything substantive* on the land-for-peace front.

In other words, with the retreat of the Israeli state the electorate is no longer divided into a traditional "left" and the "right." The real division now lies between *statists* and *radicals*.

By *statists*, we mean those who have inherited the state-centered discourse to which both Labor under Ben Gurion and Likud under Begin had — not without some fits and starts — committed themselves after 1948. The illegalism of Zionism's struggle for a

state — in settlement, and in the population transfers of Palestinians in 1948 and 1949 — were justified by the founders as necessary evils, reluctantly undertaken: the consequence of Arab opposition, British indecision, and the genocidal policies of Nazi Germany. Once that state had come into being, Israeli Jews would naturally discard this illegalism. This is the vision enshrined in Israel's Declaration of Independence and sealed in the post-independence confrontations by which the various right-wing Zionist militias were forcibly unified under a single sovereign authority. By *radicals*, we mean those who see

the Israeli state not as an end, but as a means: to achieve some "higher" purpose, whether messianic or nationalist in inspiration.

Israeli electoral politics is thus divided between statisticians who acknowledge and fear a reality in which the state has come to symbolize only a means to an (essentially contested) end, and radicals who are not only partly *responsible* for this condition, but also willing to hold everyone else hostage to threats that they may finish the job if "pushed too far" — viz. any number of variations on a "Third Kingdom of Israel" and the neutralization of

opponents within the Israeli body politic who might stand in the way. One of the more macabre jokes among the Israeli left goes thus: Q: "Why does every Leftist in Israel have a friend among the radicals?" A: "So that they can wangle a better job in the concentration camps." Israeli political commonsense for statist is obvious: "Until circumstances force us to make any 'fateful compromises,' it is better to let sleeping dogs lie."

Divisions within the statist camp are of lesser import. For its part, Labor is trapped: If it leaves the government, it abandons everyday policymaking — issues

of citizenship, women's and minority rights, education — to religious and nationalist radicals. Yet if it stays, Labor alienates its base on key foreign-policy issues: peace and reconciliation with the Arab world, sustaining good relations with the United States, Europe, and the larger international community. Labor's latest poll numbers are a dramatic testament to this losing proposition: to parry short-term threats to Israel's democracy, it must sacrifice its medium-term survival. Since parliamentary elections would likely wipe it off the map, its constant decline in the polls binds it to Netanyahu

ever more tightly.

The statist right finds
itself only slightly better
off: It can form
governments by
entering into coalitions
with the radicals, but
only if any hope of
governing effectively is
checked "at the door."

This is the real
significance of Eli
Yishai's announcement
on settlement
construction in East
Jerusalem during the
Biden recent visit — and
of Netanyahu's inability
to control its timing.

Statists on the left and
right are bound in a
death-embrace:
Netanyahu needs Labor
and Barak so as to not be
overcome by radicals
from outside Likud and
within it; Labor needs

Likud because without a place in government it has nothing.

Disaffected statist voters have, in effect, chosen to surrender peace with the Palestinians in order to avoid open confrontation with the radicals in their own midst: to purchase short-term domestic harmony at the cost of accepting an untenable, unending grinding down of Palestinians' rights and hopes. To confront the radicals on these points is to risk civil-cum-holy war. Since they pay no immediate price for having abandoned the Palestinians to the tender mercies of the radicals, that bargain (if one can call it that)

reaps benefits. Only if statist Israelis are faced with the consequences of their capitulation to the radicals, and with paying a price for it, can this tacit accord within the Israeli body politic be squarely confronted.

Coordinated U.S. policy could materially affect this complex state of affairs, but it must first *recognize* it. In failing to do so, would-be peacemakers in the United States merely invite further stalemate: borne of an (understandable) desire among statists to ensure their self-preservation in the face of a possible violent confrontation with radicals. Even worse, that failure threatens to leave the

United States with blood
— Palestinian certainly,
and perhaps Israeli too
— on its hands: for it
would make the U.S.
government complicit
in the statist's ceding
Palestine to the radicals,
and to those future
domestic conflicts that
might come, should the
statists ever try to win
back their lost
predominance.

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ISRAEL, MIDDLE EAST AND
NORTH AFRICA, PALESTINE

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