



Settling Settlements

Netanyahu's Real Policies, Before and After the Election

By *Elliott Abrams* and *Uri Sadot* / April 16, 2015

For the first time in over 15 years, Israel may soon form a coalition government that is composed solely of right-wing factions. This could have major implications for settlement expansion. After all, both of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's previous governments (2009–2013 and 2013–2015) included center-left parties that opposed settlement expansion outside areas that—according to past negotiations and in any realistic future peace accord—would end up as part of Israel. That is, his governments allowed population growth to expand freely in the major settlement blocs that Israel is expected to keep, but they constrained growth in the smaller settlements beyond Israel's security barrier, which would likely be part of any future Palestinian state.

In the years to come, though, the United States might have to contend with a new policy. During Netanyahu's past six years as prime minister, his settlement policy has been the subject of great controversy and contradiction. On the one hand, the United States and Europe frequently criticized the policy as expanding Israeli presence in the West Bank. On the other, right-wing constituencies in Israel lashed out at Netanyahu for doing the exact opposite—implementing a “quiet freeze” policy that effectively halted Israeli construction outside of Jerusalem and the major settlement blocs.

Netanyahu's policy allowed him to enjoy the best of both worlds—but also suffer the worst of them. On the positive side for Netanyahu, constant critiques by the international community (because there was considerable construction in East Jerusalem and the major blocs) solidified his position as the irreplaceable leader of the Israeli right leading up to his reelection. Meanwhile, his constraints on construction beyond the security fence kept alive the option of a two-state solution and encouraged peace hopefuls, such as State Secretary John F. Kerry, to stay engaged. On the negative side, Netanyahu's equivocation bought him the distrust and scorn of many, in Israel and abroad, on the left and right. As a result, he is surprisingly unpopular for someone who just won a solid reelection victory.

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