

# Lieberman Speaks for All of Israel. The dangers of 'recognition'

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Nazareth — Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, has insisted from the launch of the current peace talks that the Palestinians set no preconditions, while making his own precondition the centrepiece of negotiations. Netanyahu has said talks are futile unless the Palestinians and their leader, Mahmoud Abbas, first recognise Israel as a Jewish state. "I recognised the Palestinians' right to self-definition, so they must do the same for the Jewish people," he told American Jewish leaders recently.

Netanyahu, of the rightwing Likud party, is not the first Israeli leader to make such a requirement of the Palestinians. His predecessor Tzipi Livni, leader of the centrist opposition, wanted the same recognition. Ehud Barak, the defence minister and head of the supposedly left-wing Labor party, also supports this position.

The consensus on this matter, however, masks a reluctance by Israeli politicians to clarify what exactly is being expected of the Palestinians and why recognition is so important.

Netanyahu clearly does not simply want the fact of Israel's existence acknowledged. That is in no doubt and, anyway, the Israeli state has been recognised by the Palestinian leadership since the late 1980s. It is recognition of the state's Jewishness, not its existence, that matters.

Debate on this subject focuses on Israel's desire to stifle the threat of a right of return for millions of Palestinian refugees. Though doubtless a consideration, that explanation hardly suffices. It is clear to everyone that the refugees are one of the main issues to be settled in the negotiations. In the unlikely circumstances that all other obstacles to Palestinian statehood were removed, it can be assumed that the international community would work to make that particular mountain a molehill.

The demand for recognition is directed chiefly at another party: the fifth of Israel's population who are Palestinian – the remnants of the Palestinian people who stayed on their land during the great dispossession of 1948, the nakba, and eventually gained Israeli citizenship.

They are only nominally represented at the talks by their state, Israel. Instead, Netanyahu hopes to use the promise of statehood to induce Abbas to sacrifice the interests of Israel's Palestinian citizens. The Palestinian minority's leaders, who have been lobbying Abbas hard in the run-up to the talks, understand what Netanyahu's demand for recognition entails.

During the early years of the Oslo peace process, when a concession on Palestinian

statehood appeared to be drawing nearer, the positions of Israel's Palestinian and Jewish leaders polarised. The assumption of Israeli politicians was that Palestinian citizens would soon either declare loyalty to a Jewish state – effectively become Zionists – or be “transferred” to the coming Palestinian state.

Faced with this challenge, Israel's Palestinian leaders encouraged a civil rights movement, demanding equality and an end to Jewish privilege. Their campaign, under the slogan “a state of all its citizens”, implied the end of Israel as a Jewish state and its transformation into a liberal democracy.

Over the past decade, during the years of the second intifada, relations between the two communities deteriorated further, with the Palestinian minority now routinely accused of being traitors.

Netanyahu's latest demand should, therefore, be understood as a cynical move to bypass his own Palestinian constituency and persuade Abbas to negotiate away the rights of Israel's Palestinian citizens on his behalf.

If the Palestinian president does recognise Israel as a Jewish state, the campaign by Israel's Palestinian citizens to reform their country into a true democracy will be over. Netanyahu will have Palestinian backing to label the reformers a fifth column and expel them to the slivers of West Bank territory he may one day deign to call a Palestinian state.

In the meantime, he will also have Palestinian permission to institute a loyalty drive of the kind already being advanced through the Israeli parliament. Loyalty tests for individual Palestinian citizens, and the dismantlement of the Palestinian parties in the parliament unless they sign up as Zionists, would be the first measures. Rounds of expulsions could be expected later.

If all this sounds familiar, it is because much the same programme was laid out by Israel's foreign minister last week during his controversial speech at the United Nations general assembly. Avigdor Lieberman's plan for an “exchange of populations” would initially require border changes to force hundreds of thousands of Palestinian citizens into a Palestinian “interim state” in return for the inclusion of West Bank settlements, some deep in Palestinian territory, in the newly expanded Jewish state.

There is one flaw in Lieberman's scheme. Many Palestinian citizens, such as those in the Galilee, are not near the West Bank and could not be exchanged through land swaps. His election slogan – “No loyalty, no citizenship” – tells the rest of a plan he has revealed to Israelis but not directly to the international community.

Although American Jewish leaders decried Lieberman's use of the UN platform to reveal a proposal that officially counters his own government's policy, Netanyahu baffled observers by remaining demure. His officials publicly distanced him from the scheme, but then privately told the Israeli media that the prime minister did not think the plan illegitimate and that he would not “chastise” Lieberman.

Netanyahu's silence should not surprise us. His foreign minister may be speaking more bluntly than other Israeli politicians, but he speaks for them nonetheless.

*Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is [www.jkcook.net](http://www.jkcook.net).*

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