The Political Psychology of Israeli Prime Ministers

This book examines leaders of the seemingly intractable conflict between Israel and its Palestinian neighbors. It takes as an intellectual target of opportunity six Israeli prime ministers, asking why some of them have persisted in some hard-line positions, whereas others have opted to become peacemakers. The author argues that some leaders do change, and explains why and how such changes come about. She goes beyond arguing simply that "leaders matter" by analyzing how their particular belief systems and personalities can ultimately make a difference to their country's foreign policy, especially toward a long-standing enemy. Although no hard-liner can stand completely still in the face of important changes, only those with ideologies which have specific components that act as obstacles to change and who have an orientation toward the past may need to be replaced for dramatic policy shifts to occur.

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When Hard-Liners Opt for Peace

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Dedicated to Rita, Mike, Eric, Maya, and Aidan Aronoff

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Preface

There is no more fundamental concern in international relations than war and peace. Although much has been written about why states go to war, there is insufficient attention to why they make peace. This is particularly the case for long-standing conflicts in which the opposing leaders hold apparently irreconcilable positions. This book examines leaders dealing with the seemingly intractable conflict between Israel and its Palestinian neighbors. It takes as an intellectual target of opportunity six Israeli prime ministers and asks why some of them have persisted in their hard-line positions, whereas others have opted to become peacemakers.

There is perhaps no situation in which the knife-edge between peace and war is more precarious and for which the impact of a leader's decisions – regarding the populations in the immediate area as well as global geopolitics – is more profound than the Middle East, and specifically the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Stretching over the past sixty-five years, this conflict has consumed the energies (and lives) of generations of Israelis and Palestinians and has been a thorn in the side of every U.S. administration dealing with the Middle East. If the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a powder keg, this book argues that political leaders can either light the fuse or extinguish the fire and engage in peace negotiations. The Israeli case is particularly fruitful for such an examination, both because of the geopolitical importance of the conflict and its passionate intensity, and because it forms an excellent laboratory in which to examine the differences leaders make. All six prime ministers considered here were responding to similar changes on the part of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) starting in 1988. By focusing on the Israeli leaders, I examine how different leaders operate in and respond to similar circumstances.

Some theorists imagine politics as a chess match, with rational calculations governing moves on both sides of the board, making individual personalities and

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psychologies irrelevant. I, however, analyze the differences leaders *do* make in determining war and peace by examining six Israeli prime ministers and their attitudes toward their long-standing enemy, the PLO. At the same time, even those international relations scholars who use constructivist approaches and *do* give great importance to agency, tend to focus their analyses at the level of international structure and interstate norms. At the state level, the focus is on changing identities and interests, but specific leaders and their worldviews often get ignored. A political-psychological approach focusing on leaders needs to be brought back into this discussion. At the same time, those scholars who do study leaders tend to assume that the leaders have stable political predispositions that make them resistant to change. From this it would follow that a change of leadership is necessary for a nation to shift from a hard-line strategy to a strategy of peacemaking.

This book argues against the formulation that leaders have to be replaced for enduring rivalries to be resolved. It shows that some leaders do change, and above all it explains why and how such changes come about. I go beyond arguing that "leaders matter" by analyzing how their particular belief systems and personalities can ultimately make a difference to their country's foreign policy, especially toward a long-standing enemy. Although no hard-liner can stand completely still in the face of important changes, only those whose ideologies have specific components that act as obstacles to change and who have an orientation toward the past may need to be replaced for dramatic policy changes to take place.

The book is informed by a political-psychological framework which stipulates that although changes in the opponent and the environment may be necessary to alter a leader's image of an enemy, the following conditions make it more likely that this image will change: (1) a weak link to an ideology that is inconsistent with change or the absence of such an ideology, (2) a present or future time orientation, (3) a flexible cognitive system, (4) emotional intelligence, and (5) a propensity for risk. It further stipulates that the following four aspects of ideology may inhibit change: (1) ideological goals that contradict those of the enemy; (2) a long, optimistic time horizon which prevents a belief that peace is urgent or that a policy has failed; (3) a perception that the world is permanently hostile; and (4) the view that security is possible without peace or territorial compromise. These variables inform the case studies of the Israeli prime ministers who appear in Chapters 2 through 7. The differences in ideology and personality among these six Israeli prime ministers have had significant impacts on their image of the enemy, their perception of and reaction to the intifadas (Palestinian uprisings) and the Gulf War, and ultimately on their ability to reach an agreement with the Palestinian Authority.

This book builds on a broad literature stressing the importance of domestic politics for understanding international relations, but it focuses on the importance of leaders' perceptions in explaining how conflict can lead to cooperation. It also builds on the literature connecting perceptions to policy preferences and

even behavior, but it focuses on *change* in views and desired policies. Much of the literature dealing with the impact of beliefs on policy preferences has dealt with why individuals are unlikely to change their attitudes regarding an enemy. Therefore, it is especially interesting to investigate how and why some leaders eventually shift their images of an enemy while others do not.

I explore why certain leaders are more likely than others to perceive changes in their opponent and in the regional environment. I describe the Israeli prime ministers in terms of their ideologies, time horizons, and cognitive flexibility. Time orientation refers to the degree to which an individual focuses on the past, present, or future. Cognitive flexibility accounts for the degree to which an individual fits incoming information into existing categories and maintains these categories. I also analyze the effects of risk propensity and emotional intelligence, the ability to understand and be sensitive to other people, especially regarding prime ministers for whom these factors are most influential.

I situate a leader's individual cognitive makeup within a larger, cultural context. Varied ideological goals among leaders who belong to different political parties explain the extent to which each leader changes, whereas the leaders' individual traits not only explain the probability of change, but the different rates and ways in which attitudinal change occurs in leaders who hold the same ideology.

The case studies proceed from prime ministers who most strongly resisted change to those who changed the most. In Chapter 2 I analyze how and why Yitzhak Shamir remained a hard-liner throughout his life. Shamir, Israel's prime minister from 1983 to 1984 and from 1986 to 1992, often said, "The sea is the same sea and the Arabs are the same Arabs." Shamir's image of the Palestinians did not change for more than seventy years. He maintained that "the Arabs" wanted to conquer Israel and throw the Jews into the sea.

A significant reason why Shamir did not soften his position toward the PLO was that he was an ideologue – one for whom ideology is the sole basis for policy making. His ideology was founded on the Revisionism of Vladimir Jabotinsky in the 1920s and 1930s, but was even more extreme than Jabotinsky's. This ideology, which has greatly influenced the ideology of the Likud Party, contains certain basic assumptions key to my concerns here: that time is on Israel's side in regard to its conflict with the Palestinians; that Israel has a right to the Greater Land of Israel (including the West Bank); that it faces a hostile world; and that peace is unlikely and does not require territorial compromise with the Palestinians. Shamir's lifelong dedication to this ideology resulted in policies that rejected territorial compromise in exchange for peace with the Palestinians, his refusal to negotiate with the PLO, and a continued building of Jewish settlements on the West Bank, in defiance of significant pressure from the United States.

Shamir's ideological barriers to recognizing the PLO were strengthened by his preoccupation with past conflict – not only with the Palestinians, but also with the centuries of conflict between Jews and their enemies – which strengthened his

view that the Palestinians were unchangeable. Shamir's cognitive rigidity reinforced his resistance to changing his image of the PLO and influenced him to ignore signals of its increasing moderation. His tendency to disparage opposing views and to perceive people and ideas in black-and-white terms prevented him from perceiving change among the Palestinians.

Chapter 3 focuses on the complex and perplexing leader Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister from 1996 to 1999 and its current prime minister since March 2009. He has remained a mystery to many observers: Some argue that he is an ideologue representing the Revisionist Zionist roots of the Likud Party who defies international and U.S. pressure, whereas others insist that he is merely an opportunist who has no deeply held beliefs. Does his support for a two-state solution (starting in 2009) represent a dramatic shift in his image of the Palestinians? Or is it a tactical and symbolic acquiescence to American pressure that will not translate into his working hard to accomplish this stated goal?

Chapter 3 argues that although public opinion plays a larger role in influencing Netanyahu's policies than it does for any other leader analyzed, his ideology still has a strong effect on the extent and timing of his compromises. During Netanyahu's first term, he remained true to his ideology by trying to keep as much territory as possible, and the tactical changes he made – agreements with the Palestinians and meeting with Yasser Arafat – were designed to maintain this ideology. Strategically, he remained only formally committed to the Oslo agreement, while he tried to undermine it by slowing down its implementation and minimizing its effects. Netanyahu's ideology restricted him from conceding nearly as much land as Labor leaders were willing to give and constrained him from implementing all of the withdrawals. In addition to his ideology, Netanyahu's focus on the past, his cognitive rigidity, and his lack of emotional intelligence also prevented him from changing his hostile image of the Palestinians. He was emotionally involved in the historic conflict, did not respect or listen to opposing opinions, and was suspicious of his own advisors as well as of the Palestinians.

In his second and third terms, Netanyahu largely remains a hard-liner who holds a monolithic and hostile image of the Palestinians and remains deeply skeptical about the chances for peace. Netanyahu's policies, however, have softened. Despite his vehement opposition to the Oslo Accords, he argued that he would abide by them if the Palestinians honored their commitments. He signed the Wye and Hebron Agreements, granting additional land and jurisdiction to the Palestinians in order to improve his chances of getting reelected. In 2009, he accepted a two-state solution under American pressure; he then largely froze settlements in the West Bank for ten months in 2009–2010 in order to facilitate peace negotiations. Although he refused to renew the settlement freeze, in the summer of 2013 he agreed to release Palestinian prisoners to facilitate renewed negotiations with the Palestinian Authority.

Chapter 4 examines the enigma of Ariel Sharon, who fought in all of Israel's wars, beginning with the War of Independence. Sharon served as prime minister from February 2001 until January 4, 2006, when he suffered a severe hemorrhagic stroke. By the time he was struck down by the stroke, Sharon had overseen the withdrawal of all Israeli troops and settlers from the Gaza Strip and was setting the stage for a unilateral withdrawal of Israeli troops and settlers from much of the West Bank. Would Sharon have completed this withdrawal, thereby making a political change as dramatic as Richard Nixon's trip to China? Or was Sharon's Gaza withdrawal a cynical ploy to hang on to the West Bank by a hard-liner who had not undergone any real change? What can explain the decision of one of the architects and strongest supporters of settlements in the West Bank and Gaza to unilaterally withdraw from the Gaza Strip and four West Bank settlements and pursue a new strategy of unilateral disengagement?

Unlike Shamir and Netanyahu, Sharon was a nominal member of the Labor Party in his youth, as were his parents. Not having grown up steeped in Revisionist ideology, he did not rigidly toe the ideological line and publicly accepted the idea of a Palestinian state. He took the risk of unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, just as he had taken risks in the military realm throughout his career. However, adopting other elements of Likud ideology, Sharon believed that time was on Israel's side, that the Arabs' relative military strength would diminish, and that peacemaking could be put off for another twenty years while Israel built other settlements and increased immigration. Sharon believed that Israel's enemies could be "walled off" to ensure security and that in time the Palestinians would acquiesce to Israel's greater strength and significantly reduce their demands.

Chapter 5 traces Yitzhak Rabin's transformation from hawk to Nobel Prize peacemaker. Rabin, prime minister from 1974 to 1977 and from 1992 to 1995, is one of the most dramatic examples of a hard-liner opting for peace with a long-standing enemy. In 1988 he was a hawkish defense minister who cracked down on the intifada through force. Thousands of Peace Now activists demonstrated, demanding Rabin's resignation. Yet, only five years later, this same man reluctantly shook the hand of his mortal enemy Yasser Arafat, after signing the Oslo Accords, which provided for mutual recognition between the PLO and Israel. Only two years from that moment, he stood on a stage, singing a peace song in front of tens of thousands of Peace Now members and other supporters of the Oslo Accords, who were now cheering him on. On that same night, an assassin's bullet tore through the lyrics of the song, which he had placed in his breast pocket, and pierced his heart.

Rabin's dramatic shifts can be explained by aspects of his ideology and his personality. His Labor Party ideology emerges as a permissive variable that enables its adherents to perceive change in the opponent and in the regional environment. Labor ideology does not have an extended, optimistic time frame with regard to winning the conflict with the Palestinians; therefore, Rabin increasingly believed that time was not on Israel's side and peace had to be

promoted with greater urgency. Labor ideology also did not hold that world
hostility toward Israel was permanent, and this enabled Rabin to be open to
changes on the part of the Palestinians and to be influenced by world opinion.
Labor ideology focused on security and viewed territory more pragmatically
than its right-wing rivals. Therefore, it was always willing to compromise
territory for peace. Finally, Labor leaders were more likely to risk political
solutions, as they did not view long-term security as possible without peace.

Although most Labor members, like Rabin, underwent a softening of their
positions toward the Palestinians, not all members changed at the same rate or
through the same mechanisms. Rabin's cognitive rigidity and his focus on the
present led to his changing more slowly than Shimon Peres, learning from events
as opposed to trends, and reacting to daily occurrences as opposed to initiating
dramatic changes.

Chapter 6 critically examines Ehud Barak's all-or-nothing approach to peace
negotiations. Prime minister from July 1999 to March 2001 and defense minister
from March 2009 to March 2013, Barak pledged to follow in the footsteps of his
mentor Yitzhak Rabin and provide Arafat with sufficient concessions to "test"
his desire to reach an agreement with Israel. Barak started his term after winning
an unprecedented majority with a broad coalition and a close relationship with
U.S. President Bill Clinton. Yet, despite these advantages and his making more
far-reaching concessions than any previous prime minister, Barak lasted only
eighteen months and was unable to reach peace with the Palestinians and Syrians
as he had hoped.

Barak is also a hard-liner who underwent significant change. He not only
started out against a Palestinian state, but he also opposed the Oslo Accords as
chief of staff in 1993 and abstained from the vote on Oslo II as a member of the
cabinet in 1995. However, during talks at Camp David, he became the first
Israeli prime minister to break the taboo against negotiating the division of
Jerusalem. Barak was ideologically open to compromise, but his personality
played a part in the ultimate failure of these negotiations. Barak fully admits
that he lacks sensitivity to others' emotions and believes that everyone's think-
ing is merely made up of logical steps that he can anticipate based on his own
logic.

Chapter 7 analyzes the transformation of Shimon Peres from a security hawk
to a leading supporter of the peace process. Prime minister from 1984 to 1986
and 1995 to 1996 and president of Israel since 2007, Peres changed from a
hard-liner, relying on military force to deter Israel's foes and initiating Israel's
nuclear military facility in Dimona in the 1950s, to signing the Oslo Accords
with the Palestinians in 1993. Although Peres still believes that Israel's military
has to be strong, he now relies to a greater degree on political and economic
solutions to resolve conflict with the Palestinians. Peres's changes in attitude are
reflected in the titles of his books: In 1970, he wrote *David's Sling*, in which he
emphasized Israel's defense buildup and his primary role in it. In contrast, in
the late 1980s and early 1990s, he wrote *Battling for Peace* and *The New*

Middle East, emphasizing Israel's need to take the initiative in making peace with its neighbors. Peres believes that the world has changed, and that borders and territory have grown less important in relation to global economic cooperation.

Labor ideology made Peres's shift to a more dovish position possible. Peres believes that time is working against Israel and that new options for achieving peace have to be considered. Labor ideology's unlinking of security and territory allowed Peres to contemplate territorial compromise, whereas the view that sustainable security cannot be achieved without peace reinforces Peres's willingness to risk political solutions. Labor ideology enabled Peres to think not only that neighbors' perceptions of Israel are open to change but also that Israel needs to be more sensitive to world and U.S. opinion.

Whereas Peres's flexible ideology fostered change, his orientation toward the future influenced his rate and mechanisms for change. Peres was influenced by a perception of what evolutions *would* occur – such as changes in the relative importance of economic cooperation, rather than territory, in fostering peace – than by specific events such as the intifada. Finally, Peres's cognitive flexibility allowed him to listen to a variety of opinions and to think creatively with staff about possible solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This in turn enabled him to alter his image of the PLO more quickly than Rabin, whose mind was relatively less open and whose ideas were less differentiated.

Thus Peres changed his view of the Palestinians and the PLO a decade earlier than Rabin, and to a more extensive degree, as well as through different mechanisms (perceived trends as opposed to events). Although both leaders increased their propensity to favor political over military solutions to conflict, Peres's changes in his notion of security were more extensive, encompassing a new focus on regional economic development and cooperation. As president today he is still urgently pursuing peace and declared, "I'm willing to go by air, land, sea, even to swim, to achieve peace."

Chapter 8 relates the implications of the case studies to the scholarly literature on the psychology of political conversion. The analysis of these Israeli prime ministers strongly suggests that although changes within the enemy and in regional and international contexts are necessary to explain the change in a leader's image of the adversary, they are not sufficient. The perceptions of leaders make a significant difference in reaching agreements such as Oslo and in influencing the success or failure of a peace process. This study refutes the main alternative explanation that leaders react to the changes in the regional environment and in the opponent similarly, and, thus, there is no need to examine leaders to explain their nation's foreign policy. The differences in ideology and personality among the six Israeli prime ministers have had a significant impact on their images of the enemy, their perception of and reaction to the intifadas, the Gulf War, the Arab Peace Initiative, the uprisings in the Middle East over the past three years, and ultimately on their ability to reach an agreement with the Palestinians.

The evidence in this book suggests that risk-tolerant leaders may also be more likely to make peace, complicating Daniel Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack's hypothesis that risk-tolerant leaders are more likely to cause wars.[1] Moreover, the analysis of the leaders' individual time orientations provides greater empirical verification that individuals who focus to a greater extent on the past are less likely to reevaluate a hostile image of an enemy.[2] The findings here also suggest that those leaders who are emotionally attached to and focus on a violent, conflict-ridden past are less likely to be able to reach durable peace settlements because they are less able to forge a new image of a past opponent as a partner.

This finding is also relevant with regard to current debates over how groups move toward reconciliation in the face of past injustices, suggesting that a certain amount of "forgetting of the past" may be necessary in order first to establish a "cold" peace, while an engagement with the past injustices may be necessary in the future to establish a "warmer" peace. Leaders who focus mostly on the present, receiving information about ongoing changes in small increments, are slower to perceive overall shifts and to implement changes. This builds on Jervis's notion that information arriving gradually is more likely to be dismissed or lead to slight modifications by arguing that a focus on the present and its immediate events likewise leads to the perception of information arriving gradually and has the same consequences.[3] However, unlike leaders who focus on the past, those leaders who have a present time orientation are capable of change, although their rate of change is slower than those leaders oriented toward the future.

Two of the prime ministers analyzed in this book continue to be major players. Benjamin Netanyahu is prime minister and Shimon Peres is president. The question on everyone's mind is whether Netanyahu, a hard-liner, will make dramatic shifts or need to be replaced through elections for a peace agreement to be achieved. My analysis also has implications for U.S. foreign policy, as the United States continues to play a significant role not only in mediating the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, but also in engaging in preventive diplomacy to contain conflicts around the world before they erupt into large-scale violence. Analyzing leaders by the criteria used in this book will also help guide policy makers to the best methods for persuading leaders to end enduring conflicts and to prevent other conflicts from erupting.

[1] Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, "Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In," *International Security* 25, no. 4 (Spring 2001), 137.

[2] See Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976); Charles W. Kegley, Jr., and Gregory A. Raymond, *How Nations Make Peace* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 230–9.

[3] Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 308–9.

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