

# A Farewell to Labor, the Peace and Partial-Annexation Party

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*By Ron Skolnik*

On April 26, the Central Committee of Israel's Labor Party [voted](#) (online, of course) to endorse Binyamin Netanyahu as prime minister. In doing so, the party lent its hand to the installation of a government that is poised to unilaterally annex West Bank territory this summer and perhaps deliver the knockout punch to the two-state solution. Significantly, but with less fanfare, the Labor Central Committee simultaneously [authorized](#) party chair Amir Peretz to pursue negotiations for a full and final merger with the much larger center-right Blue and White Party. In other words, last month's vote could have been the Labor Party's final bow as an independent political entity.

If that is the case, watching Labor depart the stage while facilitating annexation would be a fitting "last hurrah," as the once-heralded party's descent over recent decades is tied, at least in part, to the wishful thinking it peddled, both to itself and the Israeli public, for decades: That Israel could make peace while maintaining possession of vast sections of the Occupied Territories. In a sense, one might say, the final-status map envisioned by the Trump plan is a twisted variant on a theme pioneered by Labor itself.

Those whose interest in Israel began during the Oslo process of the 1990s understandably perceived Labor to be Israel's peace party. But that was never a fully accurate description. Since the war of June 1967, Labor has generally positioned itself between the full-fledged Greater Land of Israel annexationism of the right and the calls on the left to recognize the pre-war "Green Line" as the basis for a two-state solution. It has been a party of peace with partial annexation.

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin indeed broke new ground in 1993 in recognizing the PLO as the Palestinian representative and Israel's interlocutor. And Ehud Barak seven years later was the first Israeli leader to put the question of Jerusalem on the negotiating table. But, even during these banner years, Labor held on to hopes for a peace deal that would allow Israel to expand territorially. Rabin would never publicly utter the term "Palestinian state," for instance, using the noncommittal "Palestinian entity" instead. The incremental Oslo process that he agreed to kept the preponderant share of occupied territory in Israel's hands and postponed the question of borders to final-status talks – which never took place.

We will never know what the slain prime minister would have agreed to had he lived long enough to engage in those talks. We do know, however that when Labor had its next (and, apparently, last) chance, between 1999 and 2001, Prime Minister Ehud Barak's original thinking was that the Palestinians could

and would create a state on about [66 percent](#) of the West Bank. While Barak became more flexible over time (his offer at Camp David in July 2000 amounted to an Israeli annexation of about 10 percent of the West Bank, without equal land swaps), recognition of the Green Line was a principle he refused to accept.

To better understand the origins of Barak's position, one should begin decades earlier than the '90s. In the wake of the June 1967 "Six-Day War," Israel's government, then dominated by the Alignment (a predecessor to Labor) decided that Israel would never return to the prewar armistice borders it had had with Jordan, due to strategic (rather than ideological) considerations. Over the next decade – until it lost power to Menachem Begin's Likud in the 1977 elections – Labor governments toyed with a variety of ideas, including one for a fully encircled Palestinian mini-state in the northern West Bank; none were ever officially adopted, but all left Israel permanently in control of some or all of the occupied territory.

The most famous of these ideas was the Alon Plan, championed by Cabinet Minister Yigal Alon. Under the plan, Israel would retain, in perpetuity, roughly [30 percent](#) of the West Bank, including the Jordan Valley, while the remainder of the territory could eventually be returned to Jordan under a peace treaty. Labor would hold on to what it called this "Jordanian Option" until King Hussein of Jordan, in 1987, relinquished any claims to the West Bank in favor of the Palestinians.

Meanwhile, not long after the 1967 war, Alignment/Labor governments would launch an Israeli [settlement drive](#) in the Jordan Valley, the key strategic West Bank zone they insisted on keeping, where Palestinian population was relatively sparse. And while settling the whole of the Land of Israel was never an ideological goal for Labor, its governments acquiesced in the 1970s to the messianic Gush Emunim movement's creation of settlements throughout the West Bank, such as in Hebron/Kiryat Arba and Elon Moreh.

What's more, Labor figures who embraced a more dovish approach were either removed from the party, or left of their own volition. In the early 1970s, the dovish Aryeh "Lova" Eliav, for instance, committed the heresy of referring to the Palestinian people as a unique nation, and was forced out of his position as secretary-general and later out of the party altogether. Shulamit Aloni, Yossi Sarid, Yossi Beilin, Yael Dayan, Avraham Burg, and Colette Avital were among the other leftwing leaders over the years who began their political careers in Labor, but grew disappointed and joined or formed other political frameworks.

Seen in the context of Labor's history, therefore, Ehud Barak's offer to the Palestinians in the last months of his government was a relatively sharp – albeit not total – break from the party's past. But, even then, Labor never accepted the principle that peace would require Israel to forego permanent territorial gain; and after Barak suffered a major electoral defeat to Ariel Sharon in 2001 amid the escalating violence of the Second Intifada, the party sought to beat a retreat from its newly-acquired "soft" and "compromising" image.

As “peace” and “negotiations” became increasingly unpopular terms in Israeli discourse, a series of Labor Party leaders would seek to steer their party back to its centrist origins on relations with the Arab world. So Labor agreed to serve under two Likud prime ministers during the 2000s (first Sharon, and later Netanyahu), and in the 2010s chose a series of leaders who sought electoral salvation through an appeal to Oslo-skeptical voters. Shelly Yachimovich, for example, who took over as party chair in 2011 amid that year’s massive social justice protests, [diverted](#) the party entirely from a discussion of the occupation, two states, and peace, focusing instead on supposedly more “electable” topics like the cost of living. Yitzhak Herzog succeeded Yachimovich and promoted a new ten-year [interim plan](#) that would have left the occupation in place until at least 2027.

Over the years, the consistent underlying message that Labor delivered to Israelis has been that, while certain areas of the West Bank might be conceded in the framework of peace, other areas would be Israel’s forever – and no equivalent territorial exchanges would be required. Since the Israeli right favored no territorial concessions whatsoever, Labor’s position produced a sense that there was a wall-to-wall Israeli “consensus” regarding the untouchability of the Jordan Valley as well as areas of intense settlement growth that came to be known as the “settlement blocs.” If a settlement area had become large enough or urbanized enough, Labor’s position held – e.g., Ma’aleh Adumim or Ariel – it was ipso facto “too big to evacuate,” to remain Israel’s in perpetuity, and therefore kosher for even further expansion.

One could certainly argue, therefore, that 53 years of Labor’s unwillingness to commit to the internationally recognized lines of June 4, 1967 has provided a scaffolding of legitimacy within which Netanyahu has been able to market his much more extremist moves to the Israeli mainstream.

Because it was unwilling to recognize the Green Line, Labor also never recognized the principle that all settlement in Occupied Territory is illegitimate. Instead, it sought to distinguish between “security” settlements in the Jordan Valley or “consensus” settlements in the blocs (good) and “ideological” settlements elsewhere (bad). The former were hailed, of course, because they were consistent with Labor’s intention of ultimately expanding sovereignty to those areas.

But Labor’s effort to straddle the fence – to be both pro-peace and pro-expansion – ultimately left it wanting on both counts and proved to be its electoral undoing. Because it refused to accept the June 4, 1967 borders as the legal/political term of reference (remember that, in 1988, the Palestinians had adopted their historic compromise – a small Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, representing only 22 percent of the area between the Mediterranean and the Jordan), it settled on a process that ultimately – and, one could say, logically – imploded: Labor’s piecemeal territorial handovers to the new Palestinian Authority during the Oslo years weren’t nearly enough to satisfy Palestinian aspirations and bring peace; and those same “redeployments” came to be seen by a terror-stricken Israeli society as altogether too generous – and dangerous.

With Israelis over the past 20 years increasingly seeing peace as unfeasible and conflict as inevitable (recall Netanyahu's 2015 [statement](#) that Israel would "forever live by the sword"), Labor's limited territorial claims took on the appearance of "Likud-lite" – a paler, less effective, and more naïve approach, compared to the rightwing's more robust and self-confident ambitions.

Labor, unwilling to stake out a truly leftist position on the territories, and unable to compete with the right, had no real message on the Palestinian issue to offer the public and it began to hemorrhage voters, first in a trickle, and then, over the past year, in a torrent, until its base of support had run dry. Polls taken since Labor broke away in early April from its parliamentary alliance with Meretz show the party of Ben-Gurion and Rabin [well below](#) the minimum vote threshold needed for election, should it decide to run independently again. Barring a major surprise, it seems that the party that created the State of Israel has reached the end of the road just as the country approaches its most fateful turning point since 1948.



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