

The conversation has changed.

Almost counterintuitively, barring an actual indictment or some unexpected event, Prime Minister Netanyahu is so dominant in terms of personality and policy that no other Israeli leader or politician is all that relevant on almost any matter.

In some ways Netanyahu has never been stronger and this is underpinned by his regular wins in all opinion polls. Paradoxically, his lead over everyone else seems to be increasing with every bit of negative news on the personal front.

The Haredim (ultra-Orthodox) who want to be exempted from fighting for the State, have no qualms about fighting against it.

Their objection to the army service Draft Law and the blocking of the 2019 budget without its repeal, had provided a potential trigger for new elections, not actually due till later in 2019.

It seems as if Netanyahu has dodged this election call by allowing the Haredim to dodge the army.

In the midst of all of this, we are also imminently expecting the Trump administration peace deal.

In September of 1993, almost 25 years ago, we saw the Oslo Accord signed on the White House lawn. Essentially this formalised the 2 State process.

And for the past 25 years arguments raged around whose fault it was that this resolution had not come about.

But the conversation has changed.

Today no rational person inside or outside of Israel claims that Israel is THE obstacle.

Today the broad consensus across the Israeli body politic is simply that there is no partner on the other side and that a full and independent Palestinian State at this point in time is a security risk so grave, that Israel cannot afford to take that step.

At the same time, it appears as if there is a US administration that agrees.

So, the principle being debated, is what to do in this shifted paradigm where it is clearly recognised by the vast majority of Israelis, the US

administration and even by a significant wing of the US Democratic leadership, that it is the Palestinians who are the main obstacle to the 2 State solution – especially after Abbas unmasked himself recently.

And for good measure, the moderate Sunni countries led by Saudi Arabia and Egypt are less and less concerned about the Palestinians or if you prefer, are distracted by other priorities.

We now have the irony of people well to the left in Israel publishing countless articles, such as one by Shaul Arieli, trying to show that settlements are not the obstacle to a 2 state solution after all.

Shame they could not speak up earlier, before they did Israel's image so much damage.

Arieli writes: *"The settlement enterprise has failed to scuttle a two-state solution; separation is still eminently possible. The real data show that the settlement enterprise has failed to achieve its central aim of preventing the establishment of a Palestinian state by creating irreversible physical facts on the ground."*

And *"almost all of the larger settlements are along the Green Line or adjacent to Jerusalem. There is actually no significant Jewish settlement configuration deep inside the West Bank."*

Along comes AIPAC, this year gathering some 18,000 supporters of Israel in the US and with its CEO Howard Kohr beginning the conference on the 4th of March by saying: *"We must all work .. toward that future, two states for two peoples: one Jewish with secure and defensible borders and one Palestinian with its own flag and its own future"*.

And then facing a virtual hailstorm of criticism from various ministers of Netanyahu's government.

This year, after a two year absence, Prime Minister Netanyahu decided to appear live. Almost without seeming effort, all other speakers blended into the background as he gave a virtuoso performance. Truly. He had the entire audience – Republicans and Democrats – eating out of his hand and hanging on every word. Pure mastery.

He even gave Democrats and wayward Republicans a reason to support Trump by comparing him to the Persian King Cyrus the Great, who proclaimed the end of the Babylonian exile and allowed the Jews to come back to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple.

An imperfect vessel doing G-d's work as it were.

Little wonder if Howard Kohr the AIPAC Israel defender, couldn't understand why he was under attack from Israeli government ministers.

In terms of policy, almost only what Netanyahu says matters, and his ministers, not so much. However, and although the future is unclear, once again what is obvious, is that the conversation has changed.

In 2009 after taking office, Prime Minister Netanyahu gave his famous Bar Ilan speech where he said: *"In my vision of peace, there are two free peoples living side by side in this small land, with good neighbourly relations and mutual respect, each with its flag, anthem and government, with neither one threatening its neighbour's security and existence."*

Between 2009 and 2017 Netanyahu has moved between endorsing this statement, referencing it, or sometimes ignoring it, but without ever rescinding it.

Since Trump's election, whilst refusing to explicitly endorse a 2 State solution, Netanyahu has also rejected a one state solution and emphasises that he wants the Palestinians to govern themselves.

Simultaneously Netanyahu has blocked all moves by the right wing to formally end a 2 State solution scenario, preferring to discuss what sort of state the 2 Staters seek. As he asks, will any future Palestinian state be *"a Costa Rica or Yemen"*?

Indeed, Netanyahu has been a frontrunner in talking about different concepts of sovereignty and statehood. Not redefining the 2 State paradigm per se but shifting the conversation to the type of state envisaged.

Prior to his AIPAC appearance when meeting with Trump two weeks ago, Netanyahu said: *"we have no desire to govern the Palestinians, but we have every desire to protect ourselves. The main thing is that the security control west of the Jordan River remains in our hands, and we cannot see anyone else assuming that responsibility."*

And later to reporters: *"The Palestinians should have the power of government, except the power to threaten us."*

Interestingly, in the post Obama era, Jews in America are also starting to change the conversation.

Chuck Schumer the Democrat Senator from New York and the Senate Minority Leader, also addressed AIPAC.

For the first time he boldly told the conference the obvious but unspoken, by Democrats, reality: *“Some argue the settlements are the reason there’s not peace.... It’s sure not the settlements that are the blockage to peace. Some say it’s the borders..... But it’s not the borders, either. And the obstacle to peace is certainly not because we’ve moved the embassy to where it should belong in Yerushalayim. It’s not that either. The reason why we don’t have peace is because the fact of the matter is that too many Palestinians and too many Arabs do not want any Jewish State in the Middle East.”*

In yet another irony, in these matters Netanyahu is the ultimate consensus man across the middle. Particularly of all the mainstream opposition parties and a larger or smaller portion of his own coalition - wanting separation from the Palestinians whilst maintaining security control over the Jordan Valley. And retention of the main settlement blocks.

Those desiring some form of the above, really need to hope that Netanyahu stays in power. If he falls, it will be quite a while till the next Prime Minister develops the strength and ability to make concessions leading to even a 2 State minus plan.

Simultaneously, the right wing on the other hand, for the moment anyway, see Netanyahu as the person, for the very same reasons, who might be able to take up any opportunity opened by Trump, to head towards some form of annexation minus.

Pending an indictment, Netanyahu is the only game in town. The only person who can currently take Israel down either road.

Ergo his popularity.

And the question being posed – what will benefit the State more – Netanyahu’s continued leadership, or his removal?