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October 24, 2010

Some Question Insistence on Israel as Jewish State

By ISABEL KERSHNER

JERUSALEM — The more stridently Israel insists on Palestinian recognition of it as the nation-state of the Jewish people, the more adamantly the Palestinian leadership seems to refuse.

As a result, some senior Israeli officials are beginning to question the wisdom of the policy of their prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, who has made recognition of the legitimacy of the Jewish nation-state a prerequisite for any final agreement with the Palestinians.

More recently, Mr. Netanyahu offered it as a *quid pro quo* for a temporary extension of a moratorium on building in Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Nascent Israeli-Palestinian peace talks have stalled since the moratorium expired last month.

“Of course we are a Jewish state,” Israel’s defense minister, Ehud Barak, told an audience attending a conference on the Future of the Jewish People last week, organized by the Jewish People Policy Institute in Jerusalem.

“But we have to make sure we do not get on a slippery slope,” he continued, “where our justifiable demands become prohibitive obstacles” along the way to a deal, particularly so early on.

Another senior Israeli minister, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he did not want to appear in conflict with the prime minister, said that the very act of asking for confirmation of Israel’s legitimacy “may raise questions and have the opposite effect” by putting it up for debate.

Many Jews in Israel and beyond consider it essential that they are recognized not just as members of a religion but also as a people with historic rights to a sovereign state in the Holy Land. The issue, they say, goes to the core of the conflict and will serve as a litmus test for Palestinian intentions.

“Only when our peace partners are willing to recognize the legitimacy of the Jewish state,” Mr. Netanyahu said Friday at the same conference, “will they truly be prepared to end the conflict and make a lasting peace with Israel.”

But given the opposition to this demand by the Palestinians and many of Israel’s own Arab citizens, some are questioning how vital it is.

At least publicly, the Palestinians seem to have hardened their position.

In its Declaration of Independence in 1988, the [Palestine Liberation Organization](#) invoked the “historical injustice” inflicted on its people after [United Nations Resolution 181](#) of 1947, “which partitioned Palestine into two states, one Arab, one Jewish.”

“Yet it is this resolution,” the declaration continued, “that still provides those conditions of international legitimacy that ensure the right of the Palestinian Arab people to sovereignty.”

[Yasir Arafat](#), the late Palestinian leader, was asked in an interview with the Israeli newspaper Haaretz in 2004 whether he understood that Israel had to remain a Jewish state. “Definitely,” he replied.

Unofficial Palestinian negotiators appeared to accept the idea of Jewish nationhood in the [Geneva Accord](#), a 2003 blueprint for a final Israeli-Palestinian agreement, by recognizing “the right of the Jewish people to statehood and the recognition of the right of the Palestinian people to statehood, without prejudice to the equal rights of the parties’ respective citizens” — and without specifying where.

The accord also stated that the “parties recognize Palestine and Israel as the homelands of their respective peoples,” without specifying who they might be.

Reflecting the current dynamic, fewer Palestinians support the mutual recognition idea now than just a few months ago. An October [poll by the Harry S. Truman Institute](#) for the Advancement of Peace at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the [Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research](#) in Ramallah indicated that 64 percent of the Israelis supported and 24 percent opposed mutual recognition of Israel as the state for the Jewish people and Palestine as the state for the Palestinian people.

Among Palestinians, 49 percent supported and 48 percent opposed this step. In June, 60 percent of the Israelis supported this mutual recognition of identity, while among the Palestinians support stood at 58 percent.

The Palestinian leadership insists that it is enough to recognize the State of Israel, as the

P.L.O. did as part of the Oslo agreement in 1993.

“The issue of recognition is settled, it is done,” said Muhammad Shtayyeh, a member of the Palestinian negotiating team, in a telephone interview from Ramallah.

Mr. Shtayyeh said the Palestinian leadership believed that Mr. Netanyahu was only placing obstacles in the way of peace, and that there was certainly no relationship between freezing settlements and recognition.

Dismissing the Geneva Accord as an effort of private individuals, Mr. Shtayyeh and other Palestinians argue that recognition of Israel as the Jewish state will negate their demand for a right of return for Palestinian refugees of the 1948 war and their descendants, before any negotiation. They also say it undermines the status of the Palestinian-Arab citizens who make up 20 percent of Israel’s population, and who are afforded equal rights in Israel’s Declaration of Independence.

The recognition debate, in the meantime, has become entangled with the highly contentious issue of a loyalty oath for new immigrants to Israel. A draft amendment to the country’s [citizenship law](#) approved by the cabinet this month would require non-Jews seeking to become naturalized citizens to swear allegiance to Israel as a “Jewish and democratic” state.

The proposed amendment was a gesture to the ultranationalist Yisrael Beiteinu Party led by Israel’s foreign minister, [Avigdor Lieberman](#), widely viewed as anti-Arab.

“When Israel is attacking my identity, I defend my identity,” [Ahmed Tibi](#), an Israeli-Arab Parliament member, said in a telephone interview. “This is the way.”

(Mr. Netanyahu’s government said last week it would seek to alter the draft amendment so that all immigrants, not just non-Jews, take the oath.)

There is no consensus even within Israel on the meaning and nature of a “Jewish state.” For many Israelis, it describes the country as it is: with a Jewish majority that speaks Hebrew, living in a dominant Jewish culture. Some would like to see a more religious element; others worry that it denotes an ethnocracy.

In a cartoon in Haaretz, Mr. Netanyahu was depicted eating breakfast at a “Jewish”-labeled table with “Jewish” jam and cheese and a “Jewish” kettle.

“The Jewish state is what? A Lieberman state?” asked [Mohammad Darawshe](#), the Israeli-Arab co-executive director of [The Abraham Fund Initiatives](#), an organization that promotes coexistence and equality among Israel’s Jewish and Arab citizens.

“I think the Jews deserve a homeland of their own,” Mr. Darawshe said, “but not one that negates the rights and status of other citizens.”