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## Culture, Strategy and Foreign Policy Change: Israel's Road to Oslo

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What forces within Israel made possible its embrace of the Oslo Accords? I argue that a defining feature of Rabin's practices and policies was to create, however temporarily, a cultural space in Israeli politics in which a withdrawal from the territories became desirable and legitimate. To understand this outcome requires a blend of constructivist and institutionalist claims — the normative structure that constitutes and constrains actors also provides the wellspring for social practices and allows for strategic action; such strategizing occurs in a normative and an institutional context; and strategic action can be designed to rewrite the cultural landscape in order to legitimate foreign policy change. I employ the trinity of concepts of identity, narratives and frames as they are created and animated within an institutional context, and apply this conceptual architecture to understand Israel's road to Oslo.

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What forces within Israel made possible its embrace of the Oslo Accords? Some give all the credit to the person of Yitzhak Rabin, thereby elevating the heroic individual that daringly accomplishes what others could or would not. Such a position became particularly seductive and politically salutary after Rabin's assassination in October 1995, when he was immediately transformed from the pointperson on the peace process to its martyr. Others identify systemic forces, observing that the mighty shifts in the international and regional environment created the conditions for such a major foreign policy change. The end of the Cold War and the Gulf War represented seismic shocks to the region; for Israel it both reduced the risks for peace and increased the incentives to take such risks. Still others identify domestic forces within Israel, highlighting a changing of the guard from the hawkish

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Likud Party to the more moderate Labor Party and the role of liberalizing elites who desired to end the Arab–Israeli conflict in order to capture the fruits of economic globalization (Solingen, 1998). No understanding of major foreign policy change can proceed without giving Rabin his due, acknowledging the changing correlation of forces that stirred Israeli elites to recalculate their strategies, and recognizing that party politics matters for thinking about the peace prospects.

But these sometimes mechanistic and deterministic explanations fail to capture what arguably was a defining feature of Rabin's practices and policies — to create, however temporarily, a cultural space in Israeli politics in which a withdrawal from the territories became desirable and legitimate, that is, a construction of an Israeli national identity and interests that were tied to a peace process that involved a territorial compromise with the Palestinians. This was certainly the meaning imposed by many Israelis on the (in)famous handshake between Yitzhak Rabin and Yasir Arafat on the White House lawn on 13 September 1993. In Israel, that event represented not simply a pledge to make amends with a longtime enemy, it also signaled a watershed moment when Israel confronted itself, who it was, and who it was to become. The peace process has never been simply a territorial issue regarding whether or not Israel might withdraw from the territories without undue harm to its security; it also always has been about the Israeli national identity. For a vocal segment of ultranationalist and religious Israelis, Judea and Samaria are part of Israel and connected to its Jewish soul; these lands are no less a part of Israel than is Tel-Aviv. For centrist, secular and leftist constituencies, Israel must rid itself of these territories if it is to maintain a Zionist and liberal identity; to absorb these territories would give Israel the painful choice of extinguishing either its liberal or its Zionist character depending on whether the Palestinian population was denied or granted full citizenship. Greater Israel versus Eretz Yisrael.<sup>1</sup> The handshake and the Oslo process thus directly represented a contribution — welcome by some, highly unwelcome by others — to the debate over the Israeli identity. What was clear at the time and even clearer in retrospect was that Rabin and other partisans of the peace process were attempting to draw a line between an Israeli national identity that was Zionist and liberal, a frame that promised peace and prosperity, and a territorial compromise with the Palestinians.

Tying foreign policy change to identity and cultural politics represents a challenge to constructivist and institutionalist theories of International Relations and requires a careful consideration of how to situate and possibly blend their core insights. Although I will not foolishly claim to have engineered a hybrid, I will more modestly argue that constructivist theories that fail to incorporate a core insight of institutionalism — namely that actors strategize in an institutional setting — will be unable to address

foreign policy change, and that institutionalism that fails to incorporate a core insight of constructivist approaches — that actors are embedded in and circumscribed by a normative structure — will be unable to understand what creates and constitutes legitimate and acceptable action.

Much constructivist theorizing has attempted to trace state practices to prior sets of social rules that make those practices possible and legitimate. The typical claim here is that a shared meaning system and collective understandings have become taken for granted and thus have significantly narrowed the cognitive frames and scripts that are available for actors to understand the world.<sup>2</sup> These are important insights, but taken to their extreme they can lead toward an exaggeration of the integrity of the normative structure. This has three important implications that are foregrounded by the Israeli case. The first is the contestation over what should be the shared meaning system and the collective understanding, a point largely recognized but not thoroughly digested by constructivists. Debates over the collective identity can underlie debates over foreign policy practices, and vice versa. Second, constructivism has tended to operate with an oversocialized view of actors, treating them as near bearers of structures and, at the extreme, as cultural dupes.<sup>3</sup> The real danger here is the failure to recognize that actors have agency, can be strategic, are aware of the culture and social rules that presumably limit their practices, and as knowledgeable actors are capable of appropriating those cultural taproots for various ends. Third, actors can engage in practices that attempt to rewrite the cultural landscape, and their motivations for doing so might stem from principled beliefs and/or instrumental gain. Simply put, a consequence of this oversocialized view of actors is that it is virtually impossible to conceive of social change as engineered by them.<sup>4</sup> As actors vie over particular policies they frequently desire to change the social rules and norms in order to make a particular policy or outcome more legitimate and acceptable. And they do so in a strategic way, strategies born not only from the normative structure but also from the formal political context in which they are located.

Neoliberal institutionalism and its fellow theoretical travelers foreground how strategic calculations are made by self-possessed actors within an institutional context largely defined in formal terms (Keohane and Martin, 1995). This literature has exhaustively detailed that ideas do matter and how they matter, largely identifying how ideas represent focal points, serve as exogenously given road maps and identify cause-effect relationships (Keohane and Goldstein, 1993). This literature has been criticized on ontological, epistemological and theoretical grounds, and in particular for advancing both a fairly narrow understanding of ideas and a radical separation of the material and the ideational. My concern revolves around this literature's failure to acknowledge more fully two related and additional

ways that the cultural context shapes strategic actions.<sup>5</sup> The first failure is the inattention to how ‘actors deliberately package and frame policy ideas to convince each other as well as the general public that certain policy proposals constitute plausible and acceptable solutions to pressing problems’ (Campbell, 1998: 381). Also, institutionalists need to recognize explicitly how cultural resources, the underlying norms, values and symbols of society, are part of the arsenal available to actors as they press their policies. Although the institutionalism literature has been attentive to the formal political apparatus in which ideas are advanced and actors strategize, they have been decidedly less aware of the informal normative structure that constrains these actors, determines what are considered to be legitimate strategies, and provides the technologies of influence.<sup>6</sup>

The challenge is to recognize that the underlying structure that both constitutes and constrains actors also provides the wellspring for social practices and allows for strategic behavior. Several important social theoretic statements refuse to reduce action to either pre-given interests or social rules, but rather recognize how actors combine the legitimate models, symbols and scripts that comprise the normative structure in their strategies of action. This feature of social life is captured by Ann Swidler’s (1986) famous metaphor that culture provides a ‘tool kit’, Mary Douglas’s (1986) concept of bricolage and Pierre Bourdieu’s (1980) logic of practice. However we do it, we must recognize the ‘self-conscious capacity of actors to engage in deliberate and creative transposition . . . to inject agency into structural explanations and develop a more refined and dynamic theory of action’ (Campbell, 1998: 383).<sup>7</sup>

I employ the trinity of concepts of identity, narratives and frames to animate these aforementioned theoretical concerns and to situate Israel’s cultural path to the 1993 Oslo Accords. I will not be attempting to identify the discrete causes of the Oslo Accords, but rather will be exploring the cultural preconditions, preconditions that were made possible by political elites. Section I discusses the concepts of identity, narrative and frames, and gives examples from the Israeli case. The concept of identity is familiar to most by now, and my concern is with what I call identity conflict. The concept of narrative highlights that individuals and groups organize historical time into a coherent story, and that story provides a collective understanding of how to understand the past, situate the present and act toward the future.<sup>8</sup> Nations construct narratives about themselves, these narratives provide an account of where they have been and where they should be going, and actors are not only constituted by these narratives but also intervene to shape that narrative. The concept of frame highlights that actors are constantly attempting to guide political mobilization toward a particular outcome and for a particular goal by using symbols, metaphors

and cognitive cues to organize experience and fix meaning to events. These concepts are critical for understanding the cultural foundations that make possible and desirable certain actions. Yet what is possible and legitimate also is delineated by the institutional context that shapes: the calculations of strategically-minded political elites; which narratives and frames are selected and become politically consequential; and the societal aggregation and interaction processes that are the factory of new cultural configurations and policy making outcomes. Surveying the ideational and institutional context of Israeli politics permits me to forward several propositions regarding the cultural foundations of the peace process. Section 2, then, is a tale of the 1992 elections and the creation of the Oslo Accords, emphasizing the institutional context in which Rabin attempted to recreate a national identity that was situated in a new historical narrative and tied to a frame of peace and prosperity. The conclusion considers the need to situate strategic play in a cultural context, how institutional and ideational factors were jointly important for understanding identity and interest creation, and the relevance of my argument for interpreting the fate of the peace process under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

### *1: Identity, Narratives and Frames*

I forward a trinity of concepts — identity, narrative and frames — to generate an understanding of the relationship between the contestation over the national identity; how that contestation is tied to an historical narrative that links the past, the present and the future; and how frames that tie together historical narratives and discrete interests are central for the societal mobilization in favor of a particular project or policy. Below I briefly discuss each concept and provide some illustrations in the Israeli context.

#### *Identity*

An identity is the understanding of oneself in relationship to others.<sup>9</sup> Identities, in short, are not personal or psychological, they are fundamentally social and relational, defined by the actor's interaction with and relationship to others; therefore, all political identities are contingent, dependent on the actor's interaction with others and place within an institutional context. This relational perspective informs the view that national and state identities are partly formed in relationship to other nations and states — that the identities of political actors are tied to their relationship to those outside the boundaries of the community and the territory, respectively.<sup>10</sup>

Although national and state identities are always in negotiation, these negotiations can be expected to be particularly intense during moments of

rapid changes in international and domestic politics. At the international level, a change in systemic patterns, caused either by transnational, economic or military politics, can trigger widescale domestic change and debates concerning the national identity and the state's relationship to the wider community. Such a possibility is evident in the post-Cold War years as many states have been debating the national identity and its relationship to other international communities. At the domestic level, changes in territorial boundaries, the political economy and demography can also enliven the debate over the national identity.

Particularly divisive debates over the national identity might be appropriately characterized as moments of 'identity conflict'. This identity conflict is likely to emerge under two conditions (Dittmer and Kim, 1993: 6-7). First, whenever there are competing definitions of the identity that call for contradictory behaviors. Although referring explicitly to the notion of role conflict (with minimal translation errors), identity conflict might be seen to exist:

... when there are contradictory expectations that attach to some position in a social relationship. Such expectations may call for incompatible performances; they may require that one hold two norms or values which logically call for opposing behaviors; or they may demand that one [identity] necessitates the expenditure of time and energy such that it is difficult or impossible to carry out the obligations of another [identity]. (Stryker, 1980: 73)

Identity conflict can also exist whenever definitions of the 'collective self are no longer acceptable under new historical conditions' (Dittmer and Kim, 1993: 7). In this view, identity conflict arises when the state's identity calls for behavior that is at odds with the demands and defining characteristics of the current challenge.

In general, as we think about the relationship between state identity and foreign policy behavior, we should remain attentive to two issues. First, national identity is a source of interests. Identity, however, does not cause action but rather makes some action legitimate and intelligible and others not so. Second, political actors are likely to have competing interpretations of the meanings associated with that identity, and compete to fix a particular national identity because of deeply held convictions and prior interests. Although these competing visions are an ongoing feature of political life, there do emerge periods of 'identity conflict' as domestic groups actively and intensively compete to establish how a particular identity is functional or dysfunctional for current circumstances.

The debate about Israel's identity has concerned the articulation of four constitutive strands — religion, nationalism, the Holocaust and liberalism (Elon, 1993: 4).<sup>11</sup> First, Israel has a Jewish identity; it is, after all, a Jewish

state (Eisenstadt, 1974). While the specific meaning of, and practices that are associated with being, a Jewish state are disputed, there is little debate that religion should have some role in guiding everyday life in Israel.<sup>12</sup> Zionism, the Jewish people's version of nationalism, emerged as a response to the Jewish community's exclusion from and persecution in European Christian society, is an obvious component of the national identity (Avineri, 1981). The Holocaust is the third strand of Israel's identity; memorials and museums like Yad Vashem, Holocaust Remembrance day and a host of other symbols deeply embed the Holocaust in Israel's national identity (Elon, 1993; Segev, 1993).

These three features of the Israeli identity are linked to a view that Israel is existentially isolated, its existence is always in jeopardy, and it faces a series of threats from various quarters that vary only in the level of overt intensity and hostility (Grossman, 1998: 55). While all national identities differentiate between 'us' and 'them', arguably the centrality of religion, nationalism and the Holocaust in Israel's identity make these affective and cognitive boundaries more severe and austere. In *Security Threatened*, Asher Arian (1995: Ch. 6) provides attitudinal evidence of this affective map, labels this attitude the 'People Apart Syndrome', and clearly distinguishes between the religious and historical roots of that 'syndrome'. Regardless of the specific pathogen, most Jewish Israelis have this syndrome and reject a 'geopolitical explanation of international conflict and persist in analyzing the Israel-Arab conflict in the spirit . . . of persecution suffered by Jews' (Arian, 1995: 27). Accordingly, there is arguably a cultural basis for a foreign policy that is quintessentially realist if not hyperrealist, as observers have linked culture to foreign policy practices that include a defiant and strident foreign policy, a reluctance to take risks for peace, and a 'Masada complex'.<sup>13</sup>

A fourth strand has become more widely featured in the debates about Israel's identity over the last several years — liberalism and democracy. Although Israel's status as a democracy generally goes unchallenged — for it has a free press, competitive party system, free and fair elections, and so on — there are four potential problems. The first is the Arab minority in the Israeli state, a minority that is viewed by Israeli authorities as having dual loyalties, and, therefore, unable to be trusted with the full benefits, obligations and markings of citizenship that are available to Jewish Israelis (Peled, 1992). The second is Israel's record in and hold over the territories captured in the 1967 war. Palestinians live in tremendous insecurity, without the same civil rights and protections available to Israeli citizens. These issues became more salient and pressing when the extension of Israeli sovereignty over these territories became a realistic option. The third is the relationship between liberalism and Judaism and whether law emanates from the citizenry or from God. Although during the first decades of the state's

existence this tension was temporarily resolved, the decline of Labor Zionism and the rising power of Orthodox Jewry have created a cleavage that many Israelis believe is more threatening to the state's existence than that posed by the Arab states or the Palestinians. Fourth, the communal narrative that defines the religious and nationalist ethos of the Israeli identity makes an individualistic liberalism difficult to sustain or legitimate (Ezrahi, 1997).

Ever since the beginnings of Zionism, Jews and Israelis have debated how the constituent threads of religion, nationalism, the Holocaust and liberalism would and should shape the Israeli identity. That said, for the first three decades of the state's existence there was little debate about the Israeli identity because of the territorial status quo and the hegemony of Labor Zionism, which produced a nationalist, Zionist personality. After 1967, however, that debate returned, first like a lamb and then like a lion because of demographic shifts, the decline of Labor Zionism, the capture of the occupied territories, and the collapse of the Cold War.<sup>14</sup> These cascading developments are responsible for Israel's widely observed identity crisis.

### *Narratives*

National identities are typically situated within a broader historical narrative. The establishment of a narrative, argues Yael Zerubavel (1995: 214), 'constitutes one of the most important mechanisms by which a nation constructs a collective identity'. Quite simply, a narrative concerns a story that is joined by a plot.<sup>15</sup> As applied to the national identity, the claim is that nations typically construct a storyline concerning their origins, the critical events that define them as a people, and some broad agreement over where they should be headed. This claim raises several critical issues concerning the relationship between how the nation comes to construct an understanding of its history, and how that subjective interpretation provides a map for the future.<sup>16</sup>

First, narratives are not simply imposed by the outside observer but rather are constructed by the participants themselves (Fay, 1996: Ch. 9; Rosaldo, 1993: Ch. 6; Schiebe, 1986: 131). Because actors locate themselves within a storyline, an actor's identity is lived history and continues a storyline from the past through the present and some imagined future. Early Zionists told a story about the Jewish people that had a concrete beginning, the expulsion of the Jews from ancient Israel by the Romans, a middle, in which Jews reside in fear and insecurity in alien lands, and a hopeful ending, in which Jews are resurrected and transformed as a consequence of their relationship

to the land, and ultimately become treated as a 'normal' people among the community of nations (Ezrahi, 1997: 6; Handelman, 1990: 227; Zerubavel, 1995). This narrative was constructed, lived and acted upon by all those who defined themselves as Zionists.

Second, to the extent that actors locate themselves within a shared or congruent storyline they can be said to have a collective identity (Carr, 1986: 163). Part of what makes a nation an 'imagined community' is its ability to imagine itself within a shared historical space, a space that is distinct from the storyline that defines other nations and political communities. Zionism, as it shapes the Israeli 'nation', explicitly defines the period of Jewish life in exile as a wholly negative reference point, characterizing non-Zionist religious Jews, who lived a life of 'cultural stagnation, political inaction, and victimization that was characteristic of the Exile', and in sharp contrast to the perceived vitality of Jewish life in antiquity and modern Israel (Zerubavel, 1995: 215).<sup>17</sup>

Third, events play a central role in an historical narrative; in fact, it is virtually impossible for a narrative to exist absent a series of events that are cognitively connected. The connection of the present to the past is a fundamental feature of the organization of historical time; temporality is organized around events, turning points that are made meaningful by their placement within the context of a community that has some understanding of its origins and its life history (Carr, 1986: 166; Cohen, 1985). In this fundamental way, events do not have an objective meaning but rather are made politically meaningful and intelligible by actors who locate them within an overarching narrative that provided a link between an interpretation of the past and an image of the future (Edelman, 1988). As Zerubavel (1995) notes, Masada and Tel Hai were not simply events that occurred nearly two thousand years apart but rather were similarly situated and became symbols that defined the collective identity because they were invested with political and cultural meaning.

National societies will debate what is the dominant narrative. Different narratives will connect different events in different ways with different emphases and with different implications for their collective identity. Consider the case of Masada, a mountain fortress overlooking the Dead Sea that was the site of the last Jewish resistance to the Roman empire in 73 CE. According to Yael Zerubavel (1995), in the Zionist narrative Masada connected the present day Israel to ancient Israel, became a symbol of the willingness to fight nearly insurmountable odds for the national homeland, and generated a symbolic marker to distinguish Zionists from Jews in the diaspora who had a 'defeatist' and 'passive' mentality.<sup>18</sup> But by the early

1970s there developed challenges to the historical foundations and subjective understandings of Masada. Masada, according to this counter-narrative, distorted the nature of the Jewish resistance, and generated a 'complex' that led Israel to take uncompromising positions and to perceive itself to be much weaker than it was. According to one revisionist study, Masada's centrality has receded in recent years, suggesting the shift from a Zionist to a post-Zionist narrative (Ben-Yehuda, 1995).

The debate over how to understand the past implicates the understanding of the present and an orientation toward the future. The diversification and political polarization of Israeli society, the 'New Historians', who have been performing an autopsy on Israel's foundational myths, the recent controversy over the television program *Tekumah* (resurrection), these and other events and developments have produced greater conflict over how to understand the past as well as the past's implications for the future.

This last point deserves emphasis. The concept of narratives brings us closer to how actors make decisions. Many decision-making theories have moved away from the computational theory of decision making, the image of the organization as a perfectly crafted information processing unit that magically and automatically conforms to our blackboard models of rational choice.<sup>19</sup> Specifically, this literature argues that decisions are made by knowledgeable actors whose interpretations of the world around them, and the reasons that they give and the motives underlying their behavior, are tied to a narrative. As actors fix a narrative of the past, they imagine, in Jerome Bruner's (1986: 49–50) words, 'possible maps and possible worlds'. In order for actors to have a sense of how they should proceed, they must have some understanding of where they have been, and those narrative understandings constitute the cultural stock that individuals use to reason, calculate probabilities and estimate the consequences of their actions for the future. As Brian Fay (1996: 191–2) argues, 'the moment of acting is precisely the coming together of the agent's sense of his or her past history, present situation, and future possibilities'. Yet so long as actors are aware of the influence of such narratives on guiding the future, they can be expected to appropriate that narrative for ulterior purposes and to try and mend or alter that narrative in a such a manner that it better connects to their vision of the future.

In general, the narrative of the national identity provides an understanding of the past, present and future, events are symbolic and constitutive of, and subjectively linked to, that identity, and a particular construction of the past will be the umbilical cord to the present and the future. This narrative of the national identity is not given but rather is a social construct, and actors will reconstruct the past as they debate the future, and as they act toward the future they are likely to (re)remember the past.

*Frames*

Frames 'are specific metaphors, symbolic representations, and cognitive cues used to render or cast behavior and events in an evaluative mode and to suggest alternative modes of action'.<sup>20</sup> What is important here is that actors strategically deploy frames to situate events and to interpret problems, to fashion a shared understanding of the world, to galvanize sentiments as a way to mobilize and guide social action, and to suggest possible resolutions to current plights. Frames have two key characteristics that are particularly relevant for my purposes. First, actors compete to frame the event because how the event is understood will have important consequences for mobilizing action and furthering their interests. This competition can be understood as a strategic framing process — the 'conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate collective action' (McAdam et al., 1996: 6). Toward that end, political elites will draw on 'cultural symbols that are selectively chosen from a cultural toolchest and creatively converted' into frames for action (Tarrow, 1994: 119; also see Cohen, 1985; Swidler, 1986). That cultural toolchest includes a stock of symbols that can be used to mobilize sentiment and guide action. Actors engage in symbolic mobilization, it bears repeating, for strategic reasons and principled purposes.

Second, although frames are always important for collective mobilization, their importance is amplified at historical moments defined by cultural contradictions and competing visions of the future. As Mayer Zald (1996: 268) notes:

Political and mobilization opportunities are often created by cultural breaks and the surfacing of long dormant contradictions that reframe grievances and injustices and the possibilities for action. Sometimes these breaks are behavioral events that recast or challenge the prevailing definitions of the situation, thus changing perceptions of costs and benefits of policies and programs and the perception of injustice of the status quo.

At such moments political entrepreneurs must construct frames that are able to reconcile these contradictions, to situate these events in ways that mesh with the cultural terrain, or to recast the relationship between the cultural foundations, the costs and benefits of particular policies and the circumstances at hand. For an Israel in the midst of an identity crisis that is produced by conflicting visions of the future, a successful frame is one that accomplishes this seemingly herculean task.

Thus far I have claimed that to connect the Israeli identity to the peace process requires a consideration of the contestation over the Israeli identity, how that identity is understood and situated within a larger historical narrative, and how that narrative itself provides important elements of the

‘cultural tool kit’ that is available to Israeli leaders as they vie to frame the peace process in various ways in order to organize experience and mobilize society for collective action. Political elites are keenly aware that to legitimate and to make plausible their policies requires demonstrating how they are consistent with the cultural terrain, and sometimes that will require revising the cultural terrain in order to legitimate their policies.

### *Institutions*

But these debates over the national identity, construction of national interests and policy orientations also have to be situated within an institutional context. Identity will shape policy by drawing together and shaping societal interests into a national interest (Bukovansky, 1997), and the formal institutional context represents the political space in which that occurs and, importantly, suggests whose interests are incorporated. This point is generally accepted by students of social movements and collective action, who recognize that the mobilizing capacity of a frame will also be dependent on a ‘political opportunity structure’, broadly understood as the institutional context that gives incentives and disincentives for individual and group action (McCarthy, 1986), and by students of historical institutionalism, who recognize how institutions both determine which groups are mobilized and shape how they can reconfigure societal constellations (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992). To concentrate on the ideational to the neglect of the institutional is to ignore the political context in which actors strategize and are potentially organized across a political space and toward a policy outcome.

In Israel the relevant institutional context is electoral, coalition and party politics. Briefly, Israel’s proportional representative system makes it relatively easy for smaller parties to get elected to the Knesset, the Israeli parliament. One result of this electoral system is that no single party has ever managed to gain an outright majority, forcing the largest vote-getting party to assemble a coalition with smaller parties, handing the latter greater clout than is arguably warranted by their electoral tally. The politics of coalition formation carry over into the politics of coalition maintenance, as smaller parties have the capacity to extract economic and political dividends in return for their pledge to stay in the coalition.

Israeli political parties play a central role in mobilizing group action, defining policy options and articulating alternative paths for the future. On this latter, critical issue, it is important to recognize that different parties interpolate different strands of the Israeli national identity in different ways. The available public opinion data suggest that the Jewish Israeli population ranks the following four values in descending order of importance —

maintaining Israel as a Jewish state; securing peace; and, running neck-and-neck, maintaining Israel as a democracy and preserving Greater Israel. Although the Jewish Israeli public is unified on the necessity of maintaining Israel as a Jewish state, the parties on the left and the right differ dramatically in terms of the value they place on democracy and Greater Israel, with leftist parties preferring liberalism and democracy over Greater Israel, and rightist parties reversing this order (Arian, 1995: 230). Labor and Likud are somewhat hazier on these fundamental issues, but Labor articulates a narrative that can be sustained without the territories and offers a more hopeful appraisal of progress and peaceful co-existence, whereas Likud's narrative is based on the saga and unceasing nature of Jewish persecution, the redemption and protection provided by Jewish military power, and a mission to settle the whole of Israel and the occupied territories (Ezrahi, 1997: 12, 14; on their haziness, see Arian, 1995: 230). In sum, the articulation of the Israeli national identity, and how that identity is tied to a national interest and the possibility of peace, is profoundly shaped by the nature of party and coalition politics.

These ideational and institutional considerations provide the basis for forwarding some propositions concerning the evolution of the Oslo Accords. Israel's identity conflict is partly shaped by its control over the territories. A peace process that explicitly implicates a withdrawal from the territories will antagonize and animate that identity conflict, suggesting that any movement in the peace process is predicated on the establishment of an Israeli national identity, narrative and frame that can mobilize diverse interests, which, in turn, generates an understanding of Israeli national interests that are tied to a withdrawal.<sup>21</sup> But because a significant percentage of Israelis, those who inhabit the 'political middle', articulate values that are consistent with a withdrawal given the proper arrangements and conditions, creative, believable and cunning political elites have the potential to strategically frame the peace process that rearticulates core values and immediate interests toward that end.

Whether these cultural resources are rearticulated and aligned in a way that makes a withdrawal legitimate and desirable is highly dependent on the institutional context in which political elites strategize and calculate their political interests, and even cause actors to discover their preferences. Because of political and symbolic resources at his disposal, the Prime Minister plays a commanding, though by no means exclusive, role.<sup>22</sup> The Prime Minister's willingness and ability to create the cultural conditions for a change in the peace process, however, will be affected by the ruling party's dependence on smaller, extreme parties for coalition maintenance. Consequently, a Left-Center coalition is highly likely to articulate a view of the Israeli national identity that is tied to and makes possible a withdrawal from

the territories, a Centrist coalition is less likely to do so, and a Center-Right coalition is least likely to do so and will, in fact, articulate a national identity that is dependent on the control over these territories. By marrying ideational and institutional politics, the goal is to identify the conditions under which a peace process defined in terms of withdrawal from the territories becomes possible, legitimate and even desirable. Simply and generally put, if the Israeli identity is defined by an explicit preference of democracy and Zionism over Greater Israel (defined in both religious and security terms) and there exists a coalition that rank orders these values in a similar way, then there exist the cultural foundations for a peace process that allows for the withdrawal from the occupied territories. These possibilities are not already present and readily available to the first willing politician. Instead, actors are actively creating these possibilities through the appropriation of cultural and symbolic resources.

## *2. The Road to and from Oslo*

Three developments in the late 1980s and early 1990s ignited a debate about the Israeli identity and provoked an identity crisis. One was the Israeli state's relationship to the territories, a hotly contested issue the moment Israel captured the lands in the 1967 war, and causing greater friction when settlement expansion was more intensely scrutinized, during the Intifada, and whenever a land-for-peace deal was being discussed. But until Israel and the Arab states and the PLO entered into direct negotiations, the debate over whether and how Israel should dispose of the territories was largely academic. The second event was a growing and grudging acceptance by Arab states of Israel's legitimacy and existence. A product of decades-long frustration with a conflict that clearly had no military solution, the end of the Cold War, the decline of Arabism and the rise of statism, and the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait when the Arab states determined that they had enough of conflicts in the name of pan-Arabism and of the PLO that provided emotional support to Saddam Hussein, the Arab states signaled their readiness to negotiate directly with Israel (Barnett, 1998: Ch. 7). It was well understood that any solution would require Israel's withdrawal from the territories with the real possibility of a Palestinian state.

The third event was the end of the Cold War. The USA and Israel supposedly had a 'special relationship', one that presumably was forged not by shared interests but rather by a shared bond. The end of the Cold War, however, would test that hypothesis. Since 1967 Israel had been a strategic ally of the USA in the fight against communism and Soviet interests in the Middle East, but the end of the Cold War stripped Israel of that role and, it was feared, the true basis of its alliance with the USA. In the context of the

aftermath of the Gulf War and a possible momentum for the peace process, the Bush administration argued that the US–Israeli bond was unshakeable — but that the USA expected Israel to capitalize on this rare opportunity for peace. In response to an autumn 1991 request by the Shamir government that the USA provide \$10 billion in loan guarantees, the Bush administration announced that such guarantees were contingent on the Shamir government’s pledge not to use the monies secured by these loans for West Bank activities. Shamir balked at this conditionality, Bush and Secretary of State Baker refused to acquit themselves of this demand, and for the next several months the USA and Israel were at loggerheads. In Israel, this crisis in US–Israeli relations unleashed a debate over whether this episode represented the opening of a new chapter in US–Israeli relations, whether Shamir was unnecessarily provoking a crisis with the USA, and whether Israel’s economic fortunes were being sacrificed for the ideology of Greater Israel.

These three developments placed tremendous pressure on Israel to reconsider its relationship to the territories and to determine what were acceptable risks for peace. Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir made quite clear that he could never envision a West Bank-less Israel. Although he agreed to go to Madrid and sit down with his Arab neighbors and a PLO-sponsored delegation, his reluctance to do so, he proclaimed, sprang from an unwavering belief that Israel must retain Judea and Samaria. His views were supported by an array of domestic groups. Settlers and the religious right argued that Israel had a God-given right to the land, and Israeli hawks insisted that the West Bank was an important buffer between itself and Jordan, and a Palestinian entity, let alone a Palestinian state, would represent a military threat to Israel’s existence. The Israeli Labor Party and others on the left assailed these pre-negotiation conditions as sacrificing a rare opportunity for peace and Israel’s prosperity. The subtext to this debate was — what was Israel to be?

The 1992 elections transformed subtext into text. Israel’s identity crisis was played out in the 1992 Israeli election, pitting the ‘two Yitzhaks’ — Shamir and Rabin — with two alternative visions of Israel’s identity in relationship to the territories. Shamir campaigned in defence of his policies, of his handling of the USA and, fundamentally, of his belief in Greater Israel (Shamir, 1994: 251–6). Rabin countered with a campaign strategy that deftly framed Shamir’s policies as costing Israel a chance for peace, and causing Israel to divert scarce resources from high priority domestic items, that is, from Israel proper, to superfluous ideological settlement expansion and the undeserving yeshivot and religious institutions (Arian, 1995: 157). At a campaign rally in the Likud stronghold of Beer Sheva, he sent the crowd wild with enthusiasm when he stated — ‘The Likud took your money,

the money you paid in taxes, and threw it away in the territories.<sup>23</sup> Rabin, in short, consistently and constantly framed the settlements as holding hostage Israel's future peace and prosperity and as depriving Israel of its Zionist and liberal identity, and in doing so was able to win over constituencies that were historically hostile to Labor.<sup>24</sup>

The contrast between Rabin and former Prime Minister Shamir could not be more stark. Unlike Shamir, the Likud, and those on the right who continued to embed Israel's past in a religious and ultranationalist storyline and thus rarely acknowledged that the end of the Cold War, that is, a rupture of a narrative, might have political relevance for Israel, Rabin and others on the left constantly elevated this event as an unprecedented break in the narrative of international politics and as providing Israel with a rare moment to join the rest of the Western nations in a common story. Whereas Shamir articulated a characteristically collectivist position that Israel is an 'ideological country' that must retain the territories, Rabin exclaimed at his swearing in ceremony that 'we are determined to put the citizen at the top of our concerns', and then proceeded to discursively connect the emphasis on the citizen who is interested in security and welfare to a withdrawal from the territories (Ezrahi, 1997: 71). An Israel that was consumed by the legion of injustices that were committed against the Jews and believed that such injustices were always part of Israel's future would have a difficult time recognizing the values that bound it to other states and an even more difficult time relinquishing the territories that would be expected in a peace agreement.

Although interpreting electoral results is always a tricky business, Rabin's victory was widely read as mandate for a vision of a 'State of Israel' and a blow to those championing 'Greater Israel' (Arian, 1995: 151). Called the *mahapach*, the reversal or turnabout, Labor received 44 seats, Likud 32, Meretz 12, Tzomet 8, the religious parties 14 and the Arab parties 5. The first governmental change since 1977 and the second in its entire history, Yitzhak Rabin's Labor Party returned to power and entered into a coalition with the leftist Meretz and several smaller parties. The election was more than a defeat for Likud, it also signaled a dramatic drubbing of the parties on the political right.<sup>25</sup> The rightist parties had fared quite badly, and the extreme right Moledet party (which advocated the forcible expulsion of the West Bank Palestinians) failed to capture a single seat.<sup>26</sup> The nationalist and religious compact that had largely ruled Israel since 1977 was now in the opposition, and the Labor-Left coalition tasted its first outright electoral victory in two decades and basked in this widely interpreted mandate for change.

Rabin's onslaught continued after the campaign.<sup>27</sup> The moment he was sworn into office, Rabin voiced his views on the Israeli collective identity,