

## Both states must be real

*Binyamin Netanyahu has taken one essential step. Now he must take a whole lot more.*



AP

Israel's prime minister has at last accepted that a Palestinian state must exist alongside an Israeli one if there is to be any chance of a durable peace between Arabs and Jews in that tragic sliver of land that three great faiths consider holy. In a much-heralded speech meant to answer Barack Obama's ringing re-endorsement of a Palestinian state in Cairo ten days earlier, Binyamin Netanyahu spat out the required pair of words. They were welcome; but unless he shows a greater readiness to negotiate in good faith, his belated move will turn out to be pointless.

Mr Netanyahu hedged his acceptance of two states with conditions, promises and evasions. He turned a deaf ear to Mr Obama's demand that the building and expansion of Jewish settlements on the land that must become part of that Palestinian state must stop. Despite the fact that Arab citizens of Israel make up a fifth of the population, he demanded, as a new precondition for negotiations, that the Palestinians must acknowledge Israel as a Jewish state, which is code for their renouncing in advance the right of any Palestinian refugees to return to Israel. He insisted on a series of curbs and limitations on a putative Palestinian state that would deprive it of sovereignty. He said that Jerusalem, which the Palestinians want to be a shared city and capital of their new state, must stay united under Israeli control. Mr Netanyahu, who opposed the withdrawal of Israeli troops and settlers from the Gaza Strip four years ago, made no hint that he would hand back any Palestinian territory that might make Israel's border less "defensible".

As his shift on two states shows, Mr Netanyahu is not wholly immovable. Some of his conditions—say, over the degree of demilitarisation of a Palestinian state—are likely to be open to negotiation. On other areas, Mr Obama must keep pushing him. His intransigence over the settlements cannot be allowed to stand. Mr Obama should intensify his rhetoric, even threatening to withhold some financial and technological aid, if the Israeli leader refuses to budge.

Mr Netanyahu, of course, is under pressure from coalition partners even more hawkish than himself. Some of them are annoyed by what they regard as his truckling to Mr Obama. But they are not the only possible partners for him. If they walked away, he could try to bring on board Tzipi Livni, leader of the centrist Kadima party, who won Israel's general election earlier this year but failed to form a ruling coalition precisely because Mr Netanyahu refused to countenance the two-state idea. Ms Livni's co-operation might improve matters all round.

## The gulf

At the same time, there is work for Mr Obama to do on the other side. Rifts in the Palestinian movement are so deep that even the best-intentioned Israeli government would find it hard to strike a two-state deal that would stick. Mr Obama, with help from friendly Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan, should strive to bring the Palestinians together, in the hope that the rejectionists of Hamas, the Islamist movement that has so far refused to recognise Israel, should be drawn into negotiation. It may be doable: Hamas's leader gave rare if grudging approval to Mr Obama's sweet words in Cairo, where America's president acknowledged that "some Palestinians" supported it and urged it to join the diplomatic fray.

The gap between Israelis and Palestinians remains wide. While Israel's leader refused to accept the two-state idea, it was unbridgeable. The Palestinians cannot and should not accept the sort of state that Mr Netanyahu is offering. But he has conceded a huge point of principle, and given Mr Obama something to work on.

BOTH states must be real. **The Economist**, New York, June 18, 2009. Disponível em: <[www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)>. Acesso em: 19 jun. 2009.

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