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**Subject:** Fareed Zakaria on the Middle East superpower

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In Thursday's Washington Post, Fareed Zakaria looks at why Israel is stronger than ever -- and what Netanyahu should do with its strength.

Please visit the following link, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/under-netanyahu-israel-is-stronger-than-ever/2012/05/09/gIQAcTH2DU\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/under-netanyahu-israel-is-stronger-than-ever/2012/05/09/gIQAcTH2DU_story.html) or scroll down to read the article in its entirety.

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Under Netanyahu, Israel is stronger than ever

By Fareed Zakaria

While incumbents around the world are struggling to hold on, one is thriving. By bringing the rival Kadima party into his ruling coalition, Benjamin Netanyahu has become "king of Israel," in Aaron David Miller's phrase. He has an unusual, perhaps unique, opportunity to use his new power to secure Israel's future.

Netanyahu's coalition now commands the largest parliamentary majority in Israeli history. He faces no plausible rival as prime minister. When pushed on the Palestinian issue, Netanyahu has often cited the constraints of his coalition to explain why he had not taken bolder steps toward resolution. Perhaps he liked being constrained: He refused to form a national unity government in 1996 (with Shimon Peres) and refused again in 2009 (with Tzipi Livni). But now he has a broad enough base of support -- with many moderates -- and could move toward a peace settlement without endangering his hold on power.

Look beneath the recent war fears, and Israel is in a stronger position than ever. Its per capita gross domestic product rivals Italy's (at \$31,000). The World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Index ranks Israel sixth in innovation capacity, just after the United States. It is behind only the United States and China in the number of companies listed on Nasdaq. Militarily, Israel is the region's superpower, with an armed force that could easily defeat any of its neighbors. U.S. aid (Congress recently moved to add \$1 billion for Israel's missile defense program to the president's budget) enhances its military edge. It also has one of the world's largest nuclear arsenals, estimated at more than 200 missiles. At home the wall along the West Bank has essentially solved the problem of Palestinian suicide bombing, rendering Israel safer than at any point in its history.

While Iran does pose a threat, it has been systematically exaggerated over the past few years. Many serious Israeli leaders, including several senior members of its military and intelligence establishment, have spoken up about this in an unprecedented manner. Tamir Pardo of Israel's intelligence agency, Mossad, has said that Iran is not an existential threat. Last month, Army Chief Benny Gantz described the Iranian regime as rational. Mossad's Meir Dagan has said that an attack on Iran would be "stupid." Kadima party head Shaul Mofaz, the new vice prime minister and a former army chief, has said that an Israeli attack on Iran would produce a regional war and accelerate Iran's nuclear program. He argues that "the threat that Israel will become a binational state is far more serious than the Iranian nuclear issue."

In his passionate and intelligent book "The Crisis of Zionism," Peter Beinart observes a distinction between the ethics of weakness and power. If you see yourself as weak, besieged by the world, and as a victim, Beinart argues, you will embrace any policy that allows you to survive, regardless of its impact on others. On the other hand, an ethic of power recognizes that you are strong and must promote your own interests but with some concept of responsibility as well. Worse, Beinart argues, the obsession with victimhood has prevented people in Israel and the United States from focusing on the gravest threat to Israel's existence as a Jewish and democratic state: demography. If there is no progress toward a two-state solution, at some point Israel will not be able to continue to rule over millions of Palestinians without giving them the right to vote -- at which point it will cease to be a Jewish state.

In the past, Netanyahu has fiercely embraced the ethic of survival. For decades he has argued that Israel was in imminent danger of extinction, making comparisons to the Nazi threat to Jews in 1938. Long opposed to a Palestinian state, he railed in 1993, when Yitzhak Rabin and Peres signed the Oslo accords, that Peres, then foreign minister, was "worse than [Neville] Chamberlain." In the book Netanyahu published that year, he argued that dismantling Jewish settlements would produce a "Judenrein" West Bank ("free of Jews," a phrase the Nazis used). When he reissued his book in 2009, those phrases were still in the text. Since then, perhaps recognizing the demographic dangers to Israel, he has said he now supports a two-state solution, but he has done nothing to move toward it.

Israel faces real dangers. It sits in a hostile neighborhood, with anti-Semitism rising. Obstacles to Israel-Palestinian peace include the weakness of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and radicalism from the terror group Hamas. But a politician of Netanyahu's skill can find ways to navigate this terrain. The larger questions are: Does he see an opportunity to become a truly great figure in Israeli history? Can he use his power for a purpose other than his own survival?

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