# Asia-Pacific Research

# Lee Kuan Yew and Benjamin Netanyahu: The Politics of Fear

By David Palumbo-Liu

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When Lee Kuan Yew died on March 23, he was rightly acknowledged as having built Singapore into a strong and vibrant economic power after its tumultuous separation from Malaysia in 1965. His strict authoritarian regime over three decades was rationalized by his admirers – what else could he do, leader of this fledgling state, this tiny island in a "sea of Islam," with threats all around?

What he could, and did, do was turn to Israel for military aid after the British, Egyptians and Indians turned him down. Of course, this information had to be suppressed. As he wrote much later, "The British had made no offer to help us build an army as they had done with the Malayans in the 1950s ... Nasser, in his reply, extended recognition to Singapore as an independent and sovereign state, but he too did not refer to my request for a naval advisor to build up our coastal defense ... I told Keng See to proceed with the Israelis, but to keep it from becoming public knowledge for as long as possible so as not to provoke grassroots antipathy from Malay Muslims in Malaysia and Singapore.... A small group of Israelis arrived in November 1965, followed by a team of six in December. To disguise their presence, we called them 'Mexicans.' They looked swarthy enough." At that time, Israeli chief of staff and future prime minister Yitzhak Rabin admonished these teams by saying, "We are not going to turn Singapore into an Israeli colony."

In time, Israel and Singapore adopted analogic national narratives. As one Israeli state source puts it:

> Singapore has a remarkable story to tell, and paradoxically this south east Asian city-state has quite a lot in common with Israel, a small nation with a history of struggle and resilience. The two small nations have populations comprised of immigrants with different cultures and customs, surrounded by large countries with their own political and ethnic tensions.
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> Both of these small nations have managed against all odds to turn themselves in a single generation from poor, underdeveloped markets to global economic powerhouses with advanced infrastructures, skilled and highly educated workforces and ambitious entrepreneurs.

But to secure this success story took more than authoritarian military regimes. Besides military advisers, it took arms trade. As Haaretz reported in 2004:

[T]he alliance between the Israeli and Singaporean defense establishments has intensified and expanded, and it now encompasses cooperation between the two countries' military industries, as well. The scope of the deals, according to foreign sources, indicates that the Singaporean army is one of the major clients of Israeli combat means and military technology. The cooperation between Israel and Singapore rests on the two small countries' shared sense of being under threat, since both are surrounded by a hostile Muslim population and want advanced weapons systems to maintain a qualitative advantage over their neighbors.

More recently, it has been reported that Israel's Iron Dome defense system, used during the 2014 Gaza war, may have been originally designed for Singapore, not Israel – and it may have been paid for by Singapore as well. In April 2010, The Electronic Intifada [reported](#):

On 25 March the online publication Intelligence Online revealed the development of the vaunted Iron Dome anti-missile system. The system was developed by Haifa-based Rafael Advanced Defense Systems ostensibly to intercept Katyusha, Grad and Qassam rockets coming from the Gaza Strip and Lebanon. The [Intelligence Online article](#) however offers a different explanation, stating that "From the outset Iron Dome was always intended for Singapore, which helped finance its development. The island needs a very rapid antimissile system to defend its small territory of less than 700km2. Iron Dome will be battle tested in Israel ahead of export to Singapore at a later date."

One final thing that Singapore, under Lee Kuan Yew, and Israel, under Benjamin Netanyahu, share is a particular sense of fear, which not only manifests itself in these military alliances, but also is mobilized politically via a shared narrative of nation-states – a shared story with a particular twist. As Michael D. Barr and Zlatko Skrbis put it in their book, *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity and the Nation-Building Project*:

[The Singapore Story] is a story of humble beginnings, a struggle against the odds, which ultimately leads to success in which all Singaporeans can rejoice, regardless of the diversity of their backgrounds. In contrast to many similar stories, however, The Singapore Story does not project a pre-destined future age, but rather holds out the prospect of a stark choice between a celebratory future and one of anarchy and flames.

This unique aspect of this founding narrative persists today. In one of the last [interviews](#) he gave, Lee warned of the dangers of complacency, and said that being on guard against the threats posed to his small island formed a key part of his policy-making. The interviewer asks, "Is that sense of constant insecurity that has inspired you to shift your own sense and perception about where Singapore should be going?" To which Lee answers, "Yes, of course. [Singapore] is so small, so open to the outside world, and outside forces, and is so vulnerable. So we must always be alert to whichever forces are at work, and when the forces are in your favor, use them."

And recently Netanyahu played into similar fears in Israel in order to come from behind and win an election. It's not hard to see that in saying that there would never be a Palestinian state under his rule if he were to be re-elected, pointing to the threat posed by the states surrounding Israel, he was borrowing from the same playbook that Lee Kuan Yew deployed for all those years.

When asked about the recent elections, Israeli ambassador to the United States Ron Dermer echoed and advanced Netanyahu's reasons for raising the alarm against Arab Israeli voters claiming their democratic rights, and for saying that because of security concerns, there would never be a Palestinian state. A New York Times reporter writes:

> "The challenge now is that people see a strong Israel," Dermer told me. "But people don't understand something the prime minister often says – that Israel can go from great strength to great vulnerability very fast."
>
> Like [Elliott] Abrams, Dermer wasn't worried about liberal Jews. He argued that "a lot of the fissures" in the American Jewish community would seal up the moment Israel came under attack.

So when Avigail Abarbanel writes in Mondoweiss, "Israel has always prepared itself psychologically and economically to being isolated. All that openness to the rest of the world that Israel has enjoyed increasingly in the last generation or so, and Israel's acceptance by others, have always been seen as temporary in the eyes of most Israeli Jews. They had always expected it to end and had the mentality of 'let's enjoy it while it lasts and make the most of it while we can,'" one should not only register that Netanyahu was tapping into this strain of the national narrative to drive his supporters to the polls – he was also hiking up a mentality ready to use the arms developed in concert with Singapore.

Lee Kwan Yew ruled for 30 years; Benjamin Netanyahu will be the longest-serving Israeli prime minister in history. But the fear and alarm that was called up in order to gain Netanyahu re-election might do long-term damage to the chances for democracy and peace in Israel-Palestine. Commentators from the liberal Zionist camp note the divisions that have begun to fracture the group. Many are appalled not only by Netanyahu's comments about "droves of Arab Israelis" voting against what he termed the "real" interests of Israel, but also by his claim that no Palestinian state would ever exist under his watch. It is a sign of how troubling these two pronouncements are that even the White House is now openly questioning the Israeli occupation and its own relation to the Netanyahu regime. There is a danger in Netanyahu's use of Lee's political tactics since real historical political conditions make the analogy between Singapore and Israel only partially valid.

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**David Palumbo-Liu** *is the Louise Hewlett Nixon Professor, and Professor of Comparative Literature, and, by courtesy, English, at Stanford University. He has written three scholarly books and edited three academic volumes on issues relating to cultural studies, ethnic studies, and literary theory. His recent books are: The Deliverance of Others: Reading Literature in a Global Age (Duke UP, 2012), and a co-edited volume, Immanuel Wallerstein and the Problem of the World: System, Scale, Culture (Duke UP, 2011). He is part of the Public Intellectual Project at Truthout, and blogs for the Boston Review, Al Jazeera America, andThe Huffington Post.*

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