Decades of efforts to reduce the death toll from drunk driving in the United States produced the mantra, “Friends don’t let friends drive drunk.” After Israel’s election last week, the country’s friends around the world should adopt a similar slogan: “Friends don’t let friends govern blind.”

Israel’s blindness is self-induced. Its government cannot solve the conflict with the Palestinians on Israeli terms, so it has decided to behave as if the entire issue did not exist. Astonishingly, when Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu addressed the United States Congress earlier this month, his 39-minute speech about Iran’s existential threat to Israel did not contain a single mention of the Palestinian people. Campaigning at home, however, he talked only about the threat some Palestinians pose to Israeli security today, never of the opportunity that other Palestinians offer for peace tomorrow.

Israeli voters chose the politics of fear over the politics of possibility. Whether to support the right or the center-left was a classic choice between guns and butter, security and prosperity.

The Zionist Union, the principal opponent of Netanyahu’s Likud party, focused mostly on domestic issues like housing, the high cost of living, and growing economic inequality. Netanyahu emphasized the threat Israel faces from Iran, the Islamic State, and Hamas. He even added a racist dimension to the fear mongering on Election Day, warning that, “Arab voters are coming out in droves to the polls.”

During the campaign, Netanyahu also renounced any possibility under his government of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. An interviewer with an Israeli news site asked, “Are you saying that if you are Prime Minister, a Palestinian state will not be created.” Netanyahu answered: “Correct.”

Once secure in his victory, Netanyahu immediately retracted the statement. He claimed that he meant only that a two-state solution was not achievable under current conditions, as long as the Palestinian Authority is in a coalition with Hamas and as long as vacated territories bring the “rise of militant Islam.”

But it is too late for clarifications. Palestinians heard clearly and explicitly what they have long assumed: the Israeli government has no interest in reaching a peace deal. It would prefer to keep building settlements and to hunker down behind security walls. That is a tragedy, because it drives both sides into a cycle of action and reaction that ultimately will make impossible a negotiated two-state solution – the kind of solution in which each side gives up something it wants in order to gain something that both sides want more.

Israel now faces three scenarios, all of them bad. One is increasing international isolation and the politicization of support for Israel in the US, traditionally its staunchest military and diplomatic
ally. Younger US voters, generations removed from the Holocaust, do not share most of their elders’ reflexive habit of support for Israel. They do not see Israel the way Israel sees itself, as a nation under threat; instead, they see a government that has explicitly aligned itself with the Republican Party. They will also begin to question why the US stands with Israel in the United Nations when even America’s closest allies in Europe and elsewhere have begun to peel away.

Though Netanyahu received many rounds of applause when he addressed Congress, more than 60 Democrats boycotted his speech. Losing the support of Europeans and a significant number of Americans cannot be good for Israel’s security and prosperity.

The Palestinians will now pursue with renewed determination and vigor a path to statehood through unilateral recognition. If they succeed, Israel will face a Palestinian state with borders to which it did not agree and a continuing conflict that will become a formal inter-state war, subject to international law.

If the Palestinians fail, they will most likely turn again to violence: a third intifada, bigger and with greater international support than the first two. Israel will have no option but to repeat the horrors of recent Gaza wars on a much larger scale, filling the world’s media with images of dead children, destroyed schools and hospitals, and heavily armed Israeli troops taking on rock-throwing teenagers. That is not an experience that Israel or its friends could possibly want.

Netanyahu thinks that he can build a fence and let the problem simply fester forever. But one should heed the words of Langston Hughes’ famous poem, which became a refrain of the US civil rights movement. In a slightly abridged version, it reads:

“What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?”

Successive Israeli governments have shown that they can meet and contain explosions of Palestinian frustration and rage. But each time they do, Israel loses a little more of its soul.

Israel is a special and vibrant country, filled with talented, hard-working, and committed people who have much to contribute to the world. But right now its leaders, by ignoring Palestinian dreams, are courting a nightmare.