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Back to the Idea of Administered Territories

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It is hard to argue that the past few governments of Israel had a clearly articulated policy with regard to the conflict with the Palestinians, especially its territorial aspect. Both the rhetorical and operational steps were notably inconsistent, challenging any attempt to “reverse engineer” and formulate the policy from statements and steps on the ground.

Rolling along without clear objectives may be possible for a while, perhaps under the rationale of conflict management (as opposed to conflict resolution), but it is unclear how sustainable it is in the long run. Events such as Operation Protective Edge underscore the need to articulate a final objective with regard to the Palestinian Authority: were such a final objective in place, operations such as Protective Edge would have had a clear policy heading and guidance. Moreover, measures by Palestinians and actors in the international community to internationalize the conflict could force Israel to decide on its policy. Continued Israeli settlement in the West Bank on the basis of current parameters establishes facts on the ground and exacts an increasingly steep international toll. Accordingly, it may be that the time is approaching that Israel will have to announce a clear policy on the Palestinian question.

This analysis seeks to propose such a policy, driven by what is achievable and feasible rather than dictated by any particular ideology. Indeed, given international diplomatic constraints on the one hand and strategic security constraints on the other, Israel’s consequent feasible policy spectrum is very narrow.

International Diplomatic Constraints

The international community is increasingly adamant in its demand for the establishment of a Palestinian state, and the cost Israel is paying for the lack of a negotiated settlement toward a Palestinian state is rising steadily. Of all of Israel’s positions on the conflict and its potential resolution, the one that is most difficult to defend and that arouses the most international opposition is continued settlement in the West Bank on the basis of current parameters. Israel’s allies around the world can accept Israeli actions that are inconsistent with their own worldview (such as preemptive military operations or collateral damage

resulting from military actions) as long as it seems that Israel estimates they are necessary for its vital national security interests. But even Israel's closest friends balk at the expansion of settlements that undermines the feasibility of a future negotiated settlement with the Palestinians. Indeed, such expansion threatens to turn the political conflict between Israel and the Palestinians into a religious one.

One of the chief reasons for the downfall of nations is overstretching – the attempt to defend interests, territories, or positions despite their high cost. The settlement enterprise, at least its ideological component, is liable to become Israel's overstretching point. Should Israel have to pay dearly for its relations with its partners around the world, it could be justified on the basis of defense of vital security interests, but not on the basis of defending an ideology plagued by questions of legitimacy.

This leads to the next assertion, namely, that while the final resolution of the conflict must be concluded bilaterally with the Palestinians, for the time being Israel must deal with the Palestinian issue in such a way as to remove the obstacles in its relations with its strategic and economic partners around the world. If there is difficulty in arriving at an actual negotiated solution with the Palestinians, Israel's positions must at least sound reasonable and credible to Israel's international partners. The introduction of an Israeli initiative for an interim agreement or final resolution may not necessarily change the bilateral reality on the ground, but it could perhaps give Israel breathing room and an opportunity to improve its relations with its global partners.

Strategic Security Constraints

An opposing set of constraints stems from Israel's strategic security considerations. At present, one of the main features of the regional arena is the challenge to the notion of the Arab nation state by sub-state, super-state, and anti-state entities, and the collapse or at least challenge to most Arab nation states, especially those created following the Sykes-Picot Agreement.

The most notable characteristic of the Palestinian arena is the fact that the Palestinian Authority, led by Fatah, suffers from a growing legitimacy problem among the Palestinians themselves, partly due to its corrupt image. Another key feature is the deep-seated enmity dividing Fatah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other elements. If Israel ends its military presence in the West Bank, Hamas, enjoying military superiority over Fatah, is liable to seize the reins of government. Ironically, Fatah's rule of the West Bank is enabled in no small part by the IDF's apparatus in that territory. The notion that one can ignore the storms of the "Arab winter" that have dismantled Arab nation states throughout the region, from Iraq to Libya and from Yemen to Syria, and "package" Fatah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad into a new, coherent, stable, peace-seeking state framework is more wishful thinking than the result of any realpolitik and strategic analysis.

Moreover, past experience lends weight to the assertion that even in peacetime Israel must maintain its self-defense capabilities, including a military presence in the Jordan Valley and military freedom in the West Bank to foil and preempt the emergence of threats. The experience of Operation Protective Edge (with regard to the tunnels and high trajectory weapons) validates previous analyses that there are military threats that, once emerged, cannot be uprooted at a reasonable price. Indeed, the absence of an Israeli military presence in the Gaza Strip to foil hostile activity allowed the buildup of a military threat that contradicted Israel's traditional security doctrine (prevention of the emergence of a threatening military force between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River). During the last three military operations in the Gaza Strip between December 2008 and August 2014, Israel gave up the attempt to uproot the threat because of the cost entailed, and de facto yielded to living under an otherwise acceptable threat. Therefore, Israel's future strategy must be based on preventing (unilaterally if necessary) the emergence of threats between the Mediterranean and the Jordan, rather than on risking the possible emergence a military threat and having to deal with it afterwards. The idea that Israel can give up its military presence in the Jordan Valley and its military freedom in the West Bank to foil hostile activity, and then – should a military threat materialize – deal with the consequences at a reasonable cost is more wishful thinking than the result of any experience-based analysis.

Since the Oslo process started 21 years ago, Israel has been led by governments of varying worldviews under Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, Ehud Barak, Ariel Sharon, Ehud Olmert, and Benjamin Netanyahu, but neither the large military operations (from Operation Defensive Shield to Operation Protective Edge) nor the far-reaching peace proposals (Camp David, Taba, and Annapolis) managed to bring it any closer to the conditions for a stable end state. It is hard to ignore the experience accumulated and therefore also hard to claim with any degree of credibility that a new political move, no matter what it consists of, will stabilize the political system vis-à-vis the Palestinians and protect Israel's long term strategic interests.

Proposed Policy

Accordingly, at this stage, any practical Israeli policy must include five components:

- a. Presentation of the long term political objective for a sustainable Palestinian state in significant portions of the West Bank and all of the Gaza Strip;
- b. Provision of credibility to the presentation of that political objective by a unilateral halt to ideological settlement liable to thwart the possibility of reaching that objective;
- c. Recognition that the objective of the long term policy cannot be realized immediately in the current reality of the Palestinian and regional arenas;
- d. Insistence that for several decades to come, even in peacetime, Israel must maintain its military presence in the Jordan Valley and preserve its military

- freedom in the entire expanse between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River to foil the emergence of threats;
- e. Attempts to formulate various interim agreements together with Israel's partners in the international community, no matter their chances of success, as long as the cost of the initiative and the results of its possible failure to realize are tolerable.

To a large extent, the proposed policy brings us back to the idea of the administered territories presented immediately after the Six Day War. The meaning of this idea is that Israel holds the territories in temporary but long term belligerent occupation until the security and political reality allows otherwise, and without operating according to any type of ideological basis liable to undermine future agreements.

