



Israel's Five Policy Options Regarding Judea and Samaria

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: When Mahmoud Abbas departs from his post as leader of the Palestinian Authority, Israel will have to make strategic choices. This paper discusses five possible policy approaches, none of which is ideal. They are caretaker conflict resolution, creative friction, constructive chaos, unilateral withdrawal, and unilateral annexation. The caretaker option is probably the most feasible; unilateral withdrawal is the least. In every case, however, Israel will have to maintain a military presence in Judea and Samaria.

Trying to craft a coherent Israeli policy toward a post-Abbas Palestinian Authority (PA) is like trying to build a house on quicksand. The situation is constantly buffeted by tremors and underground currents. These include a wave of terrorist violence against Israelis, albeit declining; a growing rift within Fatah between Abbas and his detractors that is very much linked to the battle over his succession; and the possibility that linkage between those two developments could degenerate into civil war (another arena in the proxy war waged between Iran and Saudi Arabia and their respective allies).

Israel cannot afford to be a passive observer of events as they unfold in the PA. The Palestinian village of Budros commands a strategic position a mere 11 kilometers from the major runway at Israel's only international airport. The edge of the Palestinian town of Tulkarem is several hundred yards from the Rabin highway, Israel's major north-south artery.

When Abbas departs the scene, Israeli decision-makers will have to consider five radically different policy approaches towards the PA.

First, Israel can engage in conflict resolution in a manner that maintains the possibility of creating a Palestinian state. Second, Israel can promote friction with the Palestinians by seizing opportunities for increased settlement and other forms of Israeli state-building. Third, Israel can desist from taking action to stabilize the PA should chaos break out over succession. The fourth and fifth options, proposed by opposite sides of the political spectrum, sanction unilateral moves. The Zionist Union seeks unilateral withdrawal, while Bayit Yehudi calls for selective annexation and settlement.

(A sixth option, to engage in immediate negotiations with the Palestinians toward rapid establishment of a Palestinian state, is considered feasible and advisable by only two marginal political actors—the Meretz and Unified Arab List political parties—and thus will not be considered in this article.)

The Conflict Management Option

The conflict management option holds that peace is not possible in the foreseeable future, but that Israel stands to gain from refraining from moves such as settlement-building that compromise the chances of an eventual two-state solution (2SS). The advantage of this option is that it conforms to the mores and expectations of the international community, including Israel's staunchest ally, the United States, and friendly states in Europe such as Germany, Great Britain and Italy.

These parties consider a two-state construct as the only solution on the table, though they acknowledge that it is not achievable in the immediate future. They view Israeli rule beyond the Green Line as occupation, and worry that the failure to resolve the problem on the basis of two states will lead to a dysfunctional binational state marred by considerable internal violence.

To maintain the viability of a 2SS for the future, it would be necessary to curtail settlement beyond the Gush Etzion bloc and all settlement that is not contiguous to the Green Line—in short, to maintain the status quo. The drawbacks of this approach are clear: the Palestinians have no incentive to come to the negotiating table, and settlers and Israeli citizens over the Green Line are turned into victims of political passivity. Yet proponents of this option argue that these drawbacks are minor relative to the international isolation Israel would suffer if it abandoned the 2SS. The price for such a deviation from commitment to the 2SS would include alienation of a majority of the Jewish Diaspora, especially in the US.

The conflict management approach believes in maintaining full military control over Judea and Samaria while at the same time promoting economic ties with the Palestinians across the Green Line. Those ties serve two

purposes. To some degree, they pacify the Arab population of Judea and Samaria; and they guarantee access to Israel's second-largest market. Increasing the number of Palestinian workers in Israel also increases the wherewithal to buy Israeli goods. This strategy has worked so far, in terms of both lowering terrorism and increasing Palestinian buying power.

Should the government maintain this policy, it would likely meet with little opposition, either domestically or among Israel's international allies.

The "Friction" Option

Detractors of the conflict management option argue that Israel has lost the initiative in its conflict with the Palestinians. They contend that Israel should not absorb the costs of Palestinian initiatives to change the status quo, such as terrorist attacks or intensive illegal building in Area C (which is under exclusive Israeli control). Rather, Israel should match Palestinian initiatives with even bolder initiatives, as it did so successfully during the Mandate and in the early years of statehood. Israel should promote Israeli state-building in Judea and Samaria, at least until the Palestinians sue for peace.

In the recent wave of Palestinian attacks, for example, the encouragement by the PA and Hamas of violence in the Hebron and Jerusalem areas should be matched by Israeli offensive moves, including settlement. Settlements, so it is argued, promote security.

At the very least, Israel should curtail or demolish large-scale Palestinian construction designed to change strategic realities on the ground. This construction is most in evidence in area E-1, extending from French Hill through Issawiyeh, al-Zaim, and the eastern section of A-Tur along the Jerusalem-Jericho highway. In this area, the Palestinians are making a concerted effort to create a continuous Palestinian urban expanse from the south of Jerusalem to the north, despite the security wall.

The drawbacks to this policy option are clear. There would be domestic opposition from the Left, but the government could overcome it. The greater danger is the considerable hostility that would be generated toward Israel among both the US and the European Community if Israel built settlements in reaction to terrorism and engaged in massive dismantling of illegal building, some of which was fostered by the EU.

Constructive Chaos

Several contenders within the PA have already begun to compete over who is to inherit the leadership after the departure or demise of Muhammad Abbas, who is 83 years old. This competition has prompted a debate over whether

Israel should support a suitable candidate for the sake of stability, or sit on the sidelines even though the conflict might degenerate into chaos. Proponents of the latter view believe that chaos and the possible dissolution of the PA, and the subsequent focus by international actors on pacifying the area, could alleviate pressure on Israel to enter unrealistic peace processes.

A Palestinian side weakened by prolonged instability might well be amenable to a peace settlement more favorable to Israeli interests and concerns. It is more probable, however, that the Palestinians would remain fragmented, with the PA becoming two or more authorities in Judea and Samaria.

In either case, it is less likely that the international community would think it can resolve the Palestinian problem at Israel's expense. Should the PA fragment, Israel's allies might be more inclined to think of the Palestinian problem the way Israelis do—as a conflict management problem rather than a problem that is soluble through the creation of a state whose construction stands in stark contrast to realities on the ground.

With that said, the drawbacks to the constructive chaos option are equally stark. Chaos might mean the end, at least initially, of the security cooperation that has reduced terrorism leveled at Israelis in general and settlers in particular. Chaos might also increase the grassroots drive to delegitimize the Jewish state by those who will blame Israel for the miserable state of affairs in Judea and Samaria.

The economic costs of chaos are also considerable. The PA is Israel's second-biggest trading partner and possibly the largest market for Israeli non-high-tech goods and services, a market segment that employs the overwhelming share of Israel's labor force. Chaos usually brings an economic downturn in its wake, which would likely dampen demand for Israeli products.

The chaos option is likely to be opposed by the political Left and by powerful lobbies such as the Manufacturers Association and the Histadrut (Israel's Federation of Labor). However, if the government elects to pursue this option, domestic opposition is unlikely to be sufficiently strong to prevent it.

Unilateral Withdrawal from Judea and Samaria

Isaac Herzog, leader of the Zionist Union, is formally promoting unilateral Israeli withdrawal from 85 percent of Judea and Samaria, including 28 Palestinian localities within Jerusalem's municipal boundaries, as a means of separating from the Palestinians. His plan envisions maintaining complete and exclusive military control over the settlement blocs of Gush Etzion and

Ariel and the Jordan Valley, and an active military presence elsewhere in the PA.

Unilateral withdrawal would supposedly ensure Israel's character as a Jewish state by withdrawing to the contours of the security barrier, which conforms closely to permanent future borders as envisioned by the US, Israel's key ally. By transferring responsibility for most of Judea and Samaria's territory and practically all of its Palestinian inhabitants to the PA, Israel would (again, supposedly) no longer be seen as an occupier; its image would be enhanced; and the clout of the BDS movement would be dulled.

Once again, it is relatively easy to identify drawbacks in this plan. Removing tens of thousands of Israeli settlers would be a difficult and expensive task. Moreover, the move would likely aggravate the security situation considerably, given that many forces and terrorist groups in the PA would interpret the move as an act of weakness and would be encouraged to heighten attacks in order to bring about total withdrawal.

Unilateral withdrawal offers little incentive to leaders of the PA to enter a peace process, and would likely harden Palestinian stances on the thorny issues of sovereignty over Jerusalem and the so-called "right of return" for refugees. In all likelihood, this option would lead to the fall of the government. Any unity government created in its wake would probably desist from the option.

Unilateral Annexation of Area C

Bayit Yehudi calls on the government to annex areas designated in the Oslo peace process agreements as Area C. This territory is under exclusive Israeli administrative and political control and is, for the most part, sparsely populated by Arabs. This area consists of the southern Hebron hills, most of the eastern parts of Judea and Samaria, and the area between Maale Adumim and Jericho down to the Jordan River.

Annexation implies settlement activity in the areas annexed. The drawbacks are evident. International opposition would be vociferous, perhaps to the point of sanctions imposed on Israel. Domestic opposition would be intense as well, though probably not to the point of preventing the move if the incumbent government were to select it. There would be little domestic economic effects from such a move, but Israel's international trade and the flow of investment might be significantly affected.

None of these options is ideal, which is probably why the debate is both so lively and so indecisive. All five confirm the necessity of maintaining a

military presence in Judea and Samaria, but for different purposes. The “caretaker” option is probably the most feasible, and the unilateral withdrawal option the least. Unilateral withdrawal would in any case probably prove to be domestically impossible. The chaos option is not entirely in Israel’s hands, contingent as it is on developments within the PA. Both the friction and annexation options would encounter stiff international opposition, which might result in domestic opposition by a public unwilling to bear the long-term economic costs of such policies.

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