



## Ehud Barak: Blatantly Ignoring Danger

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Former PM Ehud Barak's arguments in favor of withdrawal from Judea and Samaria undercut Israel's security and are a departure from the Oslo Accords' security vision. Israel would be wise to present President Trump with actual facts on this issue.**

US President Donald Trump's visit to Israel seems to have triggered a new campaign over the future of the Jewish people in the land of its forefathers, and former Prime Minister Ehud Barak has joined the ranks of those whose hopes for Israeli concessions in Judea and Samaria and Jerusalem have been rekindled.

In a piece recently published in *Haaretz* that sharply criticized author Micah Goodman's book *Catch 67: The Ideologies behind the Disagreements Tearing Israel Apart*, Barak sought to weigh in on the question of whether Israel can properly defend itself in the event it withdraws from Judea and Samaria.

Barak's answer was decisive: Israel's refusal to separate from the Palestinians and withdraw to the 1967 lines – with certain exceptions for the big settlement blocs – is "a definite threat to the future of the Zionist project," while the threats that may arise following a withdrawal are "military technical risks." He was dismissive of the Right's premise that such territorial concessions are potentially extremely dangerous, arguing that "Israel is the strongest country in the region militarily, strategically and economically and – if we craft our relations with the United States skillfully – also diplomatically."

According to Barak, if Israel succeeds in navigating the moves it is expected to pursue, it would be able to deal with any military threat that may rear its head.

But history has proven that even superpowers can fail. One needs to look no further than the Russians and the Americans in Afghanistan.

Since the 2005 disengagement from the Gaza Strip, Israel has a clear point of reference as to the nature of the potential threat a Palestinian state may constitute. By similar logic, one can argue that what happened in the Gaza Strip – i.e., the terrorist threat it poses to the border-adjacent communities – could happen in Judea and Samaria, only this time, it would be the majority of the cities in Israel's center and coastal plain that would be targeted.

Barak and his supporters promise that the future Palestinian state will be demilitarized. It is worth exploring whether this objective is attainable and to what extent, especially in an age when global arms proliferation is available to the highest bidder, as seen by the unabated arms smuggling to Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon, and given both groups' increasing domestic weapons production capabilities.

The other approach, which Barak utterly dismisses as an unfounded right-wing view, argues that establishing and maintaining Palestinian demilitarization is essential if Israel is to maintain its ongoing security efforts and a thriving civilian presence throughout Judea and Samaria.

Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that rightists have a mixed set of ideologies, as Barak claims. That does not change the fact that the need for strategic depth on Israel's narrow coastline was not the Right's brainchild.

In his 1978 book *And Now Tomorrow*, then-Labor party leader Shimon Peres wrote, "If a separate Palestinian state is established, it will be armed to the teeth. It will also have bases for the most extreme terrorist forces and they will be equipped with anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles that will endanger not only passersby but every plane and helicopter flying in Israel's skies and every vehicle traveling on the main highways of the coastal plain. ... The main problem is not agreeing on demilitarization, but upholding such an agreement in practice."

### **Know thy place**

Like many of those supporting the notion of withdrawal, Barak has based his arguments on the fact that many in the defense establishment share his views. While the numbers may be in his favor, what does it really mean? Galileo taught us that progress depends on open and critical scientific thinking. Arguing that one's view is akin to scientific truth simply because it is the majority opinion belongs in a church or the rabbinical establishment. Neither Albert Einstein nor Nobel laureate Dan Shechtman had the support of the scientific community in the early days of their research.

We now have the opportunity to validate the expertise professed by these defense officials when they address strategic questions. Early in the 1948 War of Independence, during a situation assessment with the IDF's General Staff, then-Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion stated that "we will adhere to the experts' advice on the technical issues, but the experts will not have the final say on everything – that is up to the people's representatives. It is not up to the experts to decide whether to wage war or not, and whether to defend the Negev or not."

The same is true of the question of Israel's future in Judea and Samaria. Experts are welcome to express their opinion, but one must remember that when it comes to this issue they are not politically impartial professionals, and unlike on technical matters, the experts are not familiar with the ins and outs of strategic issues.

In his *Haaretz* piece, Barak defends his support as prime minister in 2000 for a two-state solution as outlined by then-US President Bill Clinton. But there is a fundamental difference between what Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin agreed to in the 1993 Oslo Accords and the Clinton plan.

In his last Knesset speech, delivered on Oct. 5, 1995, Rabin underscored four guiding principles: (1) "We aspire to establish the State of Israel as a Jewish state with at least 80% of its population Jewish"; (2) "first and foremost, a united Jerusalem, including [the suburbs of] Maaleh Adumim and Givat Ze'ev, as the capital of Israel, under Israeli sovereignty"; (3) "for Israel's security, the border will be drawn in the Jordan Valley, in the broadest interpretation of this term"; (4) touching on the Palestinian political entity that will be established alongside Israel, west of the Jordan River, "This entity will be less than a state and will independently manage the lives of the Palestinians under its rule."

In contrast, Clinton's plan, which both Barak and former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert agreed to, leads to the division of Jerusalem and to Israel's abandoning its broad hold on the Jordan Valley, which is a true departure from Rabin's views that demanded the latter be interpreted in the broadest possible way.

In his pattern of binary thinking, Barak described Israel's decision-making junctures as requiring the leadership to choose one of two paths: withdrawal from Judea and Samaria or deterioration into an apartheid state. But as the main articles of the Oslo Accords have been implemented, how can anyone seriously suggest that our continued control of another people is akin to apartheid? The completion of the Israeli withdrawal from areas A and B in Judea and Samaria in 1996 and the 2005 disengagement from Gaza are proof that our rule over another people has ended.

About 90% of the Palestinian population in Judea and Samaria has been under the Palestinian Authority's rule since the mid-1990s and Gaza's population has been

under Hamas rule since 2007. Therefore, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict currently focuses on the Jerusalem area and Area C in Judea and Samaria. Rabin argued that Israeli control in these areas – all the settlements, military bases, main highways, and the vital area leading to the Jordan Valley – was the minimum necessary to preserve defensible Israeli borders.

In view of Trump's aspiration to "reach a deal" between Israel and the Palestinians, Israel would be wise to express a position that enjoys broad national consensus: yes to the Rabin outline as based on the principles of his last speech, and no to the Clinton-Barak plan.

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