



## PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

# Between the Iranian Threat and the Palestinian State Threat

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** In his recent visit to Washington and speech to the UN, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu focused his diplomatic efforts on the Iranian threat. Meanwhile, as President Trump looks for a breakthrough on the Palestinian issue, a linkage – tacitly if not explicitly expressed – has again been created between the White House’s support for Israel’s demands in the Iranian-Syrian arena and what is required of Israel in the Palestinian arena. This linkage is dangerous for Israel.

The greatest threat to Israel’s existence is neither Shiite militias on the Golan border nor the Iranian nuclear threat, which are of physical and military nature. It is instead the threat of a Palestinian state within the Clinton parameters, which would entail dividing Jerusalem and withdrawing to the 1967 lines. The Netanyahu government’s reluctance to build in key parts of Jerusalem such as Givat Hamatos, which is on the seam line between east Jerusalem and the Beit Safafa neighborhood, shows how much – despite the change in the White House – the division of Jerusalem is still seen as essential to reaching an Israeli-Palestinian settlement.

### **A dynamic of change**

A critical look at recent developments in Syria reveals how unpredictably reality can change. Only two years ago, the Israeli defense establishment assessed that the collapse of the Syrian army, which eliminated the scenario of a Syrian attack on Israel’s northern border, meant the IDF could scale back its order of battle. Yet today, with new threats emerging, Defense Minister Lieberman is asking for a budget supplement.

Taking the dynamic of change into account also means reconsidering the premises of Israel's security concept regarding the threat of a Palestinian state. For years, security experts have claimed that in the new era, territorial strategic depth is no longer needed to defend the population centers in Israel's coastal plain. But media reports about the IDF's recent large-scale exercise in the north, which was aimed at the threat of Hezbollah forces invading Israeli communities, puts that premise in doubt.

The new challenge posed by Hezbollah and Hamas, together with the advent of Shiite militias in the Syrian arena with no promise of their removal through superpower intervention, requires a rethinking of the potential risk of a Palestinian state. If, in the reality that is developing, Israel should find itself no longer in control of the Jordan Valley, militia forces could slip under the radar of international monitors and reach as far as the urban seam lines of Jerusalem, Kfar Saba, and Netanya.

### **A conception for 2017**

The Agranat Commission attributed the surprise of the Yom Kippur War to a faulty conception. But a conception is indispensable to grasping reality and functioning within it. The lesson, therefore, is not to eschew a conception entirely, but to be aware of the need to subject it to critical scrutiny.

The experts who support a withdrawal from the West Bank in the context of a two-state solution maintain an almost unshakable conception based on three assumptions:

- (1) If Israel withdraws from the territories and the international community agrees to recognize this move as the end of the occupation, Israel will be granted legitimacy to act in self-defense;
- (2) in the face of a serious threat, the Israeli leadership will be able to make the requisite decision at the right time – an IDF offensive in the West Bank; and
- (3) given their operational and technological superiority, IDF forces will be able to achieve victory in a few days.

It is not only changes in the phenomenon of warfare that put this conception in doubt. Its validity must also be questioned in a reality that may well force Israel to fight on more than one front.

### **A change in the international arena**

Since the Oslo process began in the fall of 1993, dramatic changes have occurred in the international arena as well. For Prime Minister Rabin, Oslo was based on the superpower status of the US. The Soviet Union, and with it the Warsaw

Pact, had collapsed. The Cold War threat had ended in Europe. The world appeared to be moving towards stability and prosperity – a global order under American hegemony.

At the time, the Arabs were in a state of crisis and aware of their weakness – all the more so after the US vanquished Iraq in the First Gulf War in the winter of 1991. American superiority was evident in terms of technology and also in terms of its ability to lead the coalition army, which included Arab expeditionary forces from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. It was that awareness of weakness, along with the PLO leadership's state of strategic inadequacy, that paved the way to the Oslo process.

Meanwhile, over the years, the US's hegemonic power has declined while Russia has returned to play an active and very influential role. A phenomenon has emerged of small, protracted wars with a new logic. Western Europe is now threatened by the Russian intervention in Ukraine. From Afghanistan to Yemen, Syria, and Libya, radical Islamic forces have learned how, despite their inferiority and in fact by virtue of it, they can engage in warfare that constantly undermines the stability so needed by the West.

Something essential has changed, too, with regard to expectations in the Israeli-Palestinian sphere. At first, in the early days of Oslo, the expectations were of mutual goodwill and reconciliation. Over the years, however, as the cycle of blood has continued, the belief in Palestinian acceptance of Israel in return for Israeli concessions has been transformed in the Israeli discourse into nothing more than the need to separate from the Palestinians – “They're there, we're here” – only on our own behalf.

The more the proponents of separation have honed their efforts to explain to Israeli society that separation is mandated by reality, enabling Israel to preserve its identity as Jewish and democratic, the more the Palestinians' bargaining power has grown. If a withdrawal from the West Bank and the establishment of a Palestinian state is a clear-cut Israeli interest, if the Israelis must retreat in any case for the sake of their own future, why should the Palestinians give something in return? From their standpoint, there is no need for reciprocity. They are only getting what is coming to them in terms of their national right to self-determination.

Hence the risk is increasing that a withdrawal from the West Bank will not only fail to end the conflict but will in fact lead to its intensification. Here it is important to reconsider whether, if Israel goes back to the 1967 borders with minor adjustments for the settlement blocs (which constitute no more than 3% of the West Bank), it will still retain the conditions necessary for self-defense.

Beyond the physical aspects of security, it is worth heeding the words of senior Fatah official Abbas Zaki on why he supports the two-state solution:

In my opinion, the two-state solution will bring about Israel's collapse. If they leave Jerusalem, what will all the talk about the Promised Land and the Chosen People be worth? What will the sacrifices they have made be worth? They accord a spiritual status to Jerusalem. The Jews see Judea and Samaria as their historic dream. If the Jews leave those places, the Zionist idea will begin to collapse...to implode. Then we will be able to go forward.... (ANB/TV, May 7, 2009)

Abbas Zaki well understands – better than many Israelis – the significance of the Jewish spiritual dimension as a condition for the state of Israel's continued existence. The potential for implosion entailed by this threat is far more dangerous than the Iranian threat, even including its nuclear aspects. Given the changes in the region, the Israeli national order of priorities now mandates rethinking and revising the logic of the security discourse.

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