



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Jewish West Bank Communities: The Kernel of a Tolerant Palestinian State

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Just as Israel is a Jewish state of nearly 9 million citizens, where some 2 million non-Jews live in peace and security, there is no reason why a Palestinian Arab state should not host a sizable Jewish minority living in peace and security with the Arab majority.

It is a historical irony that what was internationally recognized as an indisputable Jewish right nearly a century ago has become a foremost denigration of this very right.

In 1922 the League of Nations, the UN's predecessor, endorsed the 1917 Balfour Declaration on the creation of a Jewish national home in Palestine and tasked Britain with facilitating this goal. It was taken for granted that the biblical areas of Judea and Samaria, the bedrock of Jewish statehood from time immemorial, would be part of that prospective national home (or, rather, state). Indeed, the mandate given to Britain even included the vast territory east of the Jordan River, or Transjordan as it was known at the time (it is now the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan).

This was not to be. Transjordan's emir-turned-king Abdullah I conquered these territories during his 1948 attack on the nascent state of Israel and made them the West Bank (of his kingdom) two years later, only to have their future become an internationally contested issue after their capture by Israel during the June 1967 war. With the passage of time, and in contravention of the November 1967 Security Council Resolution 242, which established the land-for-peace principle and envisaged Israel's retention of some of the territories captured in the war, the perception of the West Bank as "occupied Palestinian territory" has become a widely accepted axiom, with Israeli communities

established in this area (or settlements as they are commonly known) derided as flagrant violation of international law.

Given the impregnability of the Jewish ancestral attachment to these territories, let alone their vitality for Israel's security needs, Jerusalem urgently needs a new argument to counter today's dominant paradigm whereby the Jewish West Bank communities are the harbingers of either a binational state – something Israeli Jews wouldn't accept – or one-sided Jewish rule in the West Bank, which Palestinians, the international community, and many Israelis cannot accept. In order to accomplish this, a third option attractive to both Israel and the international community must be devised, one that defends Jewish communities in the West Bank as the kernel of a tolerant and pluralistic Palestinian state.

Israel is a Jewish state of nearly 9 million citizens, 2 million of whom are non-Jews who live in peace and security with their Jewish neighbors. There is no reason why a Palestinian Arab state should not host a sizable Jewish minority. It is certainly true that at present the prospects for a Jewish minority to live in peace and security in an independent Palestine are virtually nil. Yet it is precisely the huge chasm between the woeful situation in the present and the desirable outcome to be sought in the future that must be fully leveraged by Israel to advance its interests.

If Jewish communities in the West Bank are internationally recognized as kernels of a democratic and tolerant Palestine, they will no longer need to be built stealthily, as occurs nowadays. Were Israel to advocate that these communities are essential for any future Palestinian state to be as tolerant and pluralistic as Israel, Mahmoud Abbas will eventually need to give up his plans to cleanse the West Bank of Jews. Once this happens, Israel could more effectively pressure the Palestinian leadership to demonstrate its seriousness and commitment to peace by teaching coexistence in Palestinian schools and abrogating all Palestinian laws imposing the death penalty on Palestinians who sell land to Jews.

These demands are so fair and progressive that not even Israel-bashing European social democrats would be in a position to criticize them. And once the Palestinian Authority accepts them, these reforms could finally trigger a process that might eventually lead to the emergence of a tolerant and pluralistic Palestinian state.

Many Israelis will understandably argue that this is a chimera and that under no circumstances must an independent Palestinian state emerge in the West Bank. They must, however, present a credible case for building more Jewish communities in Judea and Samaria that is not vulnerable to the charge of advancing a binational or apartheid state. So far none of the champions of a

solid Jewish presence in this area have presented a vision or plan that justifies Jewish residential rights in the name of the enlightened and democratic values that Israel endorses.

Without a case for Jewish residential rights in Judea and Samaria based on values that Western public opinion can identify with, the Jewish presence in the area will be vulnerable to constant international criticism and condemnation. Israel must therefore adamantly defend this Jewish presence in the name of peace and coexistence between Jews and Palestinians, then leave the ball in the PA's court.

As long as democratic values are openly spurned by the Palestinian leadership, Israel will be in a far stronger position to reject the establishment of a Judenrein Palestinian state. The reason for this is simple: Israel would move from arguing that Jewish communities in the West Bank are not a hindrance to peace to defending those communities as catalysts for genuine peace and coexistence. As such, the settlement enterprise would evolve from a serious liability into a valuable asset for Israel's international diplomacy.

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