



PERSPECTIVES

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The Sovereignty Debate Has Changed Israeli Discourse

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The moment the issue of extending Israeli sovereignty over the Jordan Valley and parts of the West Bank emerged, it took on a dynamic of its own. Not only did the opposing sides' positions grow sharper and more polarized, but the way claims are being made—accompanied by fear-mongering and threats—has changed the dynamic of the internal Israeli debate on the Israeli-Palestinian problem.

What is driving Israeli and worldwide opposition to the extension of Israeli sovereignty over parts of the West Bank? To understand this, we need to address a fundamental change brought about by President Trump's plan.

For the first time, a US administration has recognized how essential the Jordan Valley is to Israel's security. Israel is thus presented with an unprecedented—and possibly unrepeatable—opportunity to establish permanent control over lands beyond the 1967 lines. Permanent control would bolster Israel's overall security and assist it in protecting the West Bank's Jewish population.

Israel's post-1967 presence in the biblical lands of Judea and Samaria, known as the "West Bank" (of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan) since their 1948 occupation and subsequent annexation by Jordan, is widely viewed as temporary, and the intensity of the opposition to a permanent Jewish presence in this part of the ancestral homeland reflects the strategic-historical import of the change. On a more recent plane, it would break the precedent set by the uprooting of the town of Yamit (1982) and reinforced by the displacement of the Jewish communities of Gush Katif (2005).

The idea of the creation of a new precedent—a permanent Jewish presence in the West Bank—explains the vituperation of the threats coming from the Palestinians and Jordan. It also explains the panicked urgency of the efforts of the Israeli left, backed by the EU and “progressive” circles in the US, to stop Israel from taking this step.

The time is ripe for the Israeli defense establishment to clarify the direction of the Jewish state and its future in terms of both secure borders and national heritage.

Former PM Ehud Olmert wrote: “Those who claim that annexing the Jordan Valley is vital to Israel’s security are apparently living in the fears of 1967, or trying to sell us a fake story about a nonexistent danger.”

A quick look at the changes that have occurred in the nature of war—especially in the Middle East—would suffice to show how wrong Olmert is. Israel’s unilateral disengagement from the Gaza Strip made it perfectly clear that the threat of massive arms smuggling is very real. If anything was to be learned from that disengagement, it is that the demilitarization idea is a pipedream that alters the regional strategic balance for the worse, not for the better. Even the reaches of the Sinai, an isolated expanse held by Egypt, could not prevent the formidable military buildup in Gaza.

Amazingly enough, the statements by the large group of former general and security officials known as “Commanders for Israel’s Security” are close to Olmert’s stance. As the movement’s website trumpets: “Israel’s eastern border in a future final settlement will be based on the 1967 lines, with the necessary adjustments for security and demographic considerations... Israel has no claims to sovereignty in the lands east of the security fence.”

Taking a long-term view, the basic question is whether and how Israel will be able to protect its strategic assets in the coastal strip after a withdrawal to Highway 6—a stone’s throw from its sociopolitical and economic heartland.

In their public appearances, those representing the Commanders for Israel’s Security are evasive, acknowledging the Jordan Valley as “Israel’s security border” while sidestepping any explanation of how this can be reconciled with the official website’s commitment to a withdrawal to the 1967 lines. This could be deliberate ambiguity stemming from public-advocacy concerns, or it could indicate an unresolved issue within the ranks.

The decision is in PM Netanyahu’s hands. He might sidestep a decision for the time being, but the debate cannot be put off for another five years. The status quo that has prevailed so far has ceased to be a viable possibility. Even

if, for now, extending sovereignty takes the form of a partial and symbolic measure, the fight that has already been waged in the domestic and international arenas means Israel is facing the emergence of a new system.

This is an edited version of an article that appeared in Israel Hayom on July 3.

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