

The Israeli-Palestinian Arena: Independent Moves, Little Coordination

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Both Israel and the Palestinian Authority have chosen policies that circumvent direct political dialogue. Adopting a pincer-like strategy that closes in on Israel, the PA has concentrated its efforts on building institutional and economic infrastructures and seeking international backing for the emerging state. The growing support for Palestinian independence has freed the PA from the immediate need to relax its conditions for engaging in dialogue and compromise on the parameters of an agreement. In addition, the extended political deadlock has allowed it to attempt to regulate relations with Hamas with little fear of significant damage to its image. For its part, the Israeli government has focused on attempting to curb the PA's diplomatic momentum; at the same time, it has been careful to continue its security cooperation with the PA and has supported the economic development underway in the West Bank. However, this policy has not diffused the criticism leveled against the Israeli government for positioning obstacles to revival of the dialogue. Indeed, as part of the intensified international effort to contain the instability in the Middle East, the pressure on Israel has only grown. Consequently, the threat of international isolation has become so palpable that it is doubtful that Israel can avoid measures to fundamentally change the political and territorial realities in the conflict arena.

The Diplomatic Front

Another attempt to revive the political process was launched by the American administration in September 2010, but the talks between Israel and the PA hit a snag already at the outset. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and PA President Mahmoud Abbas returned to the negotiating table with a common goal: to demonstrate to the administration and the other international parties involved in the effort to secure a political breakthrough that the other side was responsible for the deadlock. And in fact, the few meetings held between the parties in this forced setting revealed disagreements about the very purpose and agenda of the dialogue. The PA, backed by the administration, insisted that the talks focus on borders. In addition, it demanded that negotiations resume from the point where talks with the Olmert government concluded. The Israeli government refused, and insisted that the talks focus on the security aspect of the bilateral relations. In addition, Israel's rejection of the PA's demand – a demand supported by the US – for a full construction freeze in the West Bank foiled the latest American attempt to translate the US-mediated indirect talks, underway since May 2010, into a renewal of the direct dialogue.

The prevailing idea in Israel is that construction in the West Bank continues in settlements that according to any realistic agreement would remain under Israeli rule. Indeed, the assumption that Israel would not accept an agreement that entails a full evacuation of settlements underlies the land swap notion that has figured in a number of different initiatives over the years. By contrast, in the PA's view, questions regarding the scope of Israeli settlement in the West Bank are at the very heart of the issues that fundamentally divide the PA and Israel: the borders of the Palestinian state, the area to which the refugees will return, the future of Jerusalem, and security arrangements along and beyond the future border. Herein, therefore, lies the catch: Israel's construction freeze in the settlements, and conversely, the PA's retreat from the demand for a total construction freeze, are not cast as part of the agreement, rather as necessary steps to return to the negotiating table. However, the Israeli government and the PA will incur increased political and public criticism if they soften their stances without gaining political currency and solid security guarantees. Yet

without negotiations and the formulation of a comprehensive agreement, such political currency and guarantees cannot be ensured.

The Israeli government did not reject the idea of a construction freeze outright, and expressed its willingness to consider a second freeze beyond the freeze that enabled the start of the indirect dialogue, though again, for a limited time and in return for significant American security compensations.¹ As a precondition for the talks, Israel demanded what until then had been presented as a condition of a final agreement: in return for a temporary construction freeze, the PA would recognize Israel as a Jewish state.² The PA was thus asked to meet a condition that would allow Israel to respond to the US terms, even though it was clear that a temporary freeze would not bring the PA back to the negotiating table. In fact, when the American administration understood that a temporary freeze would not revive the talks, it abandoned the effort to persuade the Israeli government to halt construction, thereby conceding a failure in brokering a renewal of the negotiations.

In light of the political deadlock, the PA has waged a campaign to enlist support for a vote in the UN General Assembly – which it will propose by itself or by proxy – on recognition of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders. The well orchestrated diplomatic campaign has gathered momentum in advance of the General Assembly meeting scheduled for September 2011. The move is meant to spur Israel – and spur the United States to exert pressure on Israel – to soften its stance on the parameters of the agreement.³ The move also presumes that the General Assembly will weigh the question of Palestinian self-determination with the same norms and political logic that in 1947 acknowledged Israel's independence. This was stated explicitly, albeit with a blatant omission of the Arab rejection of the partition plan more than 60 years ago, in an article published in May 2011 as a preemptive response to policy statements by President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu delivered over the following week.⁴

The diplomatic campaign has achieved impressive results. The list of South American countries that one by one have already recognized the Palestinian state is substantial. Some European officials hoped that international recognition of a Palestinian state would bring Israel and the PA back to negotiations, and in a number of European capitals, PA

representation has been granted diplomatic status.⁵ The support of Arab states for the General Assembly resolution is self-evident, and Egypt has even pressured Hamas and Fatah to prepare to establish a joint government in order to present the UN with a united Palestinian front. It appears that what began as a move to bring Israel back to the negotiating table has with time become a guiding political directive with its own clear advantages. The support for Palestinian independence has given the PA a sense of achievement and even compensation, if only symbolic and temporary, for the lack of concrete progress towards ending Israel's control of the West Bank.⁶ International recognition of a Palestinian state within 1967 borders would also help the PA in subsequent stages deal with Palestinian opposition to concede any part of Mandatory Palestine.

Another achievement of the PA's diplomatic momentum has been the added tension between the Israeli government and the American administration in advance of the UN vote. The administration has sought to ensure that UN recognition of a Palestinian state, even if it does not render Israeli-Palestinian negotiations superfluous, does not loosen America's control of the political process. The veto that the United States cast in February 2011 on the Security Council resolution denouncing Israeli construction in the West Bank was not an approval to continue building, rather a clear expression of commitment to direct talks. By means of the veto, the US administration prevented the consistent European opposition to the settlement enterprise from becoming officially binding. The administration also foiled the intention of the three leading EU nations – Germany, France, and Great Britain – to propose their own version of an agreement within the Quartet and coordinate their recognition of Palestinian independence.⁷ To remove any doubt, President Obama, in a May 19, 2011 speech on American policy in the Middle East, emphasized the administration's opposition to jumpstarting an Israeli-Palestinian political process under UN auspices. The President repeated the traditional American stance that any arrangement that grants Israel and a Palestinian state recognized and secure borders must be the result of negotiations on the basis of the 1967 lines, including agreed-upon land swaps.⁸

The announcement that the US administration would veto a Security Council resolution to recognize an independent Palestinian state has led

the PA to consider foregoing the Security Council vote and the proposal for full membership in the United Nations, turning instead to the General Assembly with a request to upgrade its observer status.⁹ Meantime, differences of opinion on recognition of a Palestinian state between the administration and the other Quartet members prevented joint formulation of guidelines for renewing the political process. Indeed, Obama himself has refrained from presenting a concrete plan for renewing the dialogue, and will probably continue this stance as long as there is no assurance of a breakthrough. An outstanding achievement in the Middle East, especially an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, is likely to help him in his bid for reelection. By contrast, an ambitious plan with little chance of success would only add to his list of failures and damage his record.

The PA's plan to turn to the UN, and no less so, the American administration's opposition to this plan, have pinned Israel in a corner. Israel will not be able to escape from this bind unless it presents a plan that would help the administration remove the vote initiative from the UN agenda or, at the very least, postpone it. As a response to the challenge of the Palestinian diplomatic onslaught, which in Israel has come to be called "the soft intifada," Netanyahu has repeatedly stated his support for direct talks.¹⁰ However, Netanyahu has rejected the American proposal to negotiate on the basis of the 1967 lines. Despite his ambiguous declaration that Israel would be generous vis-à-vis the territory of the Palestinian state, and alongside his statement that as part of the final arrangement some Jewish settlements would remain outside the State of Israel, Netanyahu has remained steadfast on a united Jerusalem, opposition to the return of Palestinian refugees to Israel under any circumstances, and the Jordan Valley as Israel's eastern security border.¹¹ In response, Abbas declared that negotiations are the best way to establish an independent Palestinian state, but Netanyahu's principles do not allow for the renewal of talks.¹² Thus against its own interests and with evident disagreements with the American administration, Israel has eased the way for the PA, now en route to a festive session of the General Assembly.

Anticipation that the PA would reject any interim agreement led Israel to suspend any proposals in this vein reportedly considered by the Israeli government. Rumors of an intention to propose an initiative of this kind

spread in face of the political upheavals that swept the Middle East in late 2010 and early 2011.¹³ Indeed, Israel became the focus of growing international pressure to do its share in reducing the profile of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, even though the Palestinian issue was hardly at the top of the agenda of the masses who took to the streets calling for changes in the social order and in the regimes. Still, reports about a potential Israeli initiative have not aroused much optimism among international actors involved in the effort to revive the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue. The notion of an interim agreement has been taken – internationally and in the Palestinian arena in particular – to mean Israel's creation of an easily containable political and security reality within the current situation. From the PA's perspective, the interim formula at the core of the second stage of the Roadmap for Peace in the Middle East is passé. Arguments to this effect build on a progress report regarding the first stage of the Roadmap. While the PA boasts achievements in institution building and security stability in the West Bank, Israel has delayed fulfilling its obligations, primarily in terms of freezing settlement construction. Ironically, the Palestinian faction that might not reject an interim agreement outright is Hamas. After all, the logic of an interim agreement was at the basis of Hamas' desire for a ten year ceasefire (*hudna*) in return for a full Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 lines.

The wide gaps between Israel and the PA and the slim chances of bridging them given the political circumstances in both the Israeli and Palestinian arenas have left the Israeli government and the American administration with no practical plan to jumpstart the political process. By contrast, the PA has formulated an alternative and has moved the locus of political activity to the international arena. At the same time, it has focused on building the infrastructures necessary for a state. Its achievements have earned the PA the image of an authority capable of managing an orderly state and thus an appropriate candidate for inclusion in the international community.

Towards a Palestinian State

A UN report presented in April 2011 at a meeting of the PA donor nations substantiated the data collected in recent years regarding development in

the Palestinian arena, particularly the West Bank.¹⁴ The report detailed the improvement and growth in the PA-controlled West Bank in government systems and public administration, law, security, finances, healthcare, education, and infrastructures. The report also spoke of the critical value of unifying the two Palestinian areas and stressed the need to include the Gaza Strip in the general development.

Another issue emphasized by the report was the decisive dependence of the state building project on external help. The impressive progress of the program first announced in the summer of 2009 by Prime Minister Salaam Fayyad would not have been possible without international support. Backing of special importance was given to the security and the economic sectors: structural and functional reorganization of the security forces was promoted under American, Egyptian, Jordanian, and Israeli supervision, and according to the World Bank the economic assistance kept many Palestinians, especially in the Gaza Strip, above the poverty line.¹⁵ Nonetheless, the impressive improvements in the PA's performance, particularly the responsible management of economic aid, brought the authors of the report to conclude that the PA merits recognition as a state authority.

The Israeli contribution to the Palestinian economy was cast as either positive or negative, depending on the regional context and the perspective of the analysis, which was not without political bias. Steps to ease the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip taken since the summer of 2010 in the wake of massive international pressure were assessed as the primary factor in the growth in the region in 2010 – approximately 15 percent. This development was stressed by the report, presented by Israel at the meeting of the donor nations. Economic coordination between Israel and the PA was also emphasized in the sections on the West Bank economy. By contrast, the UN report cited Israel's control of the West Bank as responsible for the area recording – according to World Bank data – a mere 7.6 percent growth rate and preventing the full realization of additional development potential. For their part, PA spokespeople, who touted the PA's qualifications for the leadership of a state, have entirely ignored Israeli support for building the West Bank infrastructure.¹⁶ Even the value of mundane daily interaction

between Israel and the PA in the guise of a tacit interim agreement was entirely denied by the spokespeople.

The gap between the growth rates in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip is but one aspect, though not the most important, of the split in the Palestinian arena. The political divide between the West Bank, controlled by the PA, and the Gaza Strip, controlled by Hamas, has overshadowed the PA's achievements because it reflects the limits of the PA's territorial control and political influence. It has been impossible to translate the support for Fatah and the PA, which relies on Fatah, as well as the improved efficiency of the PA security services, into diminished Hamas control of the Gaza Strip. As for the political process, the divide has fundamentally limited the PA's ability to commit to a comprehensive settlement, not to mention guarantee its implementation. On the other hand, activity against Hamas operatives in the West Bank has essentially confined Hamas' power to within the borders of the Gaza Strip, with the movement shunned both politically and economically. In other words, Hamas too has realized the full potential of its influence given the geographical and political split.

In response to the domestic and international challenges presented by the split, the respective leaderships have sought to regulate relations between the movements. In May 2011 in Cairo, Fatah and Hamas signed an agreement of principles for institutional coordination. The agreement stipulated the intention to establish a temporary government of technocrats, prepare jointly for presidential and Legislative Council elections, and revise the structure of the PLO in order to allow Hamas' integration into the organization. This agreement was another link in the chain of attempts to tame the rivalry between the camps. Over the years, similar attempts yielded cooperation that ultimately proved to be little more than temporary pauses in the organizations' ongoing struggle. The signing of the Cairo agreement concluded a four-year period of efforts under Egyptian auspices to mend the inter-movement rift.

The attempt by Fatah and Hamas to demonstrate progress toward national unity, as expressed in the agreement of principles, was largely an outcome of public pressure. The sustained development in the West Bank is the self-evident explanation why complaints against the PA did not ignite mass disturbances similar to those in neighboring countries.

Even the media and political storm that erupted on the West Bank with al-Jazeera's publication of leaked documents on the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue died down in short order. No uprising took place in the Gaza Strip either, though for an entirely different reason: hints of support for the demonstrators in Egypt were quashed by Hamas security services lest they turn into protests against Hamas. Still, the West Bank and Gaza Strip saw rallies calling for elections and an end to the split. The call for unity has been presented as a national goal for its own sake and as a means for ending the Israeli occupation.

The PA was already engaged in efforts to curb complaints by those disappointed with the political process and those opposed to it. For its part, the call for national unity included complaints against the PA on how the conflict with Hamas was managed and how the security coordination with Israel escalated the tension between the two movements. This coordinated activity, designed first and foremost to limit Hamas' room to maneuver in the security sphere, was also exploited by the PA to undermine Hamas' civilian infrastructures in the West Bank and therefore was clearly politically motivated. Protest over not separating Fatah party interests from institution building in the West Bank was also voiced with regard to reforms in the legal system, which were formulated and applied in a way that made it easier for the PA to suppress Hamas' military and political infrastructures.¹⁷ It was also said, and justifiably so, that the security calm in the West Bank (resulting from the improved efficiency of the security services) and the economic improvements made it easier for Israel to maintain its control of the region.

For the Hamas leadership, consolidation of its control and its military infrastructure lay at the top of its organizational priorities, and thus it did not tap enough of its resources to ease the daily burden of the Gaza population. In addition, its devotion to rigid ideological dictates, headed by the refusal to recognize Israel officially and the ongoing rocket fire on the western Negev, gave Israel the justification it needed to continue the blockade of the Gaza Strip. As such, Hamas, with Israel, has been cast as responsible for the sense of siege and hopelessness in the area. Hamas has also lost public sympathy due to its suppression of political opponents.¹⁸ At the same time, Hamas was quick to exploit the security tension on

the Gaza Strip border in service of its struggle with the PA. The familiar dynamics of military provocation and response between Hamas and Israel escalated during the contacts preceding the announcement of the Cairo agreement. Increasing the intensity and frequency of rocket fire from the Gaza Strip towards Israel was Hamas' way of sending a message both to Israel and to the PA that it intends to maintain its military strength at all costs. Hamas herein successfully walked a tightrope: Israel avoided a widespread military response, which would have exacerbated international criticism, and understandings signed between Hamas and Fatah do not so much as hint at a call for Hamas to relinquish its weapons.

The PA has preferred to postpone the sensitive discussion of a monopoly on weapons until after the presidential and Legislative Council elections. In advance of the UN vote, the PA has sought to add a pinch of democracy to its international image. In addition, it has had to address the charge of its questionable legal status: Abbas' term in office expired in early 2009 and the Legislative Council stopped functioning when Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2007. Against this backdrop, the plan to hold general elections has been revived, but the divide has continued to threaten the elections and deny their validity should they be held without Hamas. For its part, the Hamas leadership has hinged its participation in the elections on the renewal of the inter-party dialogue. In addition to its inclusion in the PLO and the PA, Hamas has tried to prevent the PA from presenting international recognition of Palestinian independence as an exclusive PA/Fatah accomplishment.

The regime change in Egypt gave Hamas a further boost. The Supreme Military Council, which has assumed at least temporary control of the country, sought to limit the potential for a flare-up in Gaza by reconstructing the civilian infrastructure in the Strip and including Hamas in the PA. These goals, along with the desire to establish unified Palestinian representation for talks with Israel, likewise drove the Mubarak regime to try to forge understandings between Fatah and Hamas. However, unlike Mubarak, the Military Council – reflecting changes in Egypt's regional policy – has resisted cooperating with Israel in undercutting Hamas and has shown openness towards the movement.¹⁹ The draft of the inter-organizational agreement drawn up by Egyptian intelligence in October 2009 – signed by

Fatah but rejected at the time by Hamas due to Iranian and Syrian opposition and in protest of Abbas' withdrawing the demand to discuss the Goldstone Report in the UN Human Rights Council – was again placed on the table. In order to spur Hamas into signing, Egypt promised increased economic aid to the Gaza Strip (donated by Qatar) and defense against an Israeli attack on the Strip.²⁰ Furthermore, Egypt removed the ban on border crossings to and from the Gaza Strip. The positive response by Hamas to the Egyptian initiative, at least as much as it was meant to strengthen Hamas' status in the Palestinian arena, was steered by the need to bolster its regional status and its hold over the Gaza Strip. The challenge to Bashar Asad's regime has threatened to deny Hamas its Damascus stronghold. Tentative contacts between Cairo and Tehran meant to forge closer relations, which have the potential to reduce Iranian support for Hamas as a result of an Egyptian demand to stop interfering in the Gaza Strip, are also at the forefront of the organization's awareness.

The deadlocked political process has likewise been a convenient background for narrowing the gap between the camps. For the PA, it has even served as a catalyst. The failure of the Annapolis process and the futile attempts at dialogue since then have dashed the PA's hopes of reducing the influence of Hamas through achievements produced through negotiations. Therefore, the PA has yet again pinned its hopes on strengthening its status at home by mending the rift with Hamas. For its part, the Hamas leadership has seen this development as an opportunity to breach the borders of the geographical and political enclave in which it finds itself. The political impasse has freed the leadership from the need to tackle ideological dilemmas relating to Israel and has freed both Hamas and the PA from the immediate need to formulate a joint political platform. Thus, an elemental obstacle has been removed from easing the inter-organizational tension, and in fact, the agreement signed in Cairo does not include a political plan. Declarations made by Mahmoud Abbas in advance of the signing ceremony stressed his institutional responsibility for and his personal commitment to negotiations. A member of Hamas' political leadership, Mahmoud a-Zahar, declared that the transition government would not take part in the political process, though he did not rule out Abbas' involvement.²¹

There is also a changed approach to the inter-Palestinian rift in the international arena. The split was initially seen as an opportunity for political progress, but in light of the sustained deadlock the sense that it is a hindrance to the establishment of national Palestinian representation has grown. Thinking in this vein steered the American administration's restrained response to the Cairo agreement. A State Department spokesperson expressed hope that the inter-organizational thaw would improve the chances for renewing the political process, should Hamas fulfill the demands posed by the Quartet as preconditions for dialogue.²² In light of the familiar Israeli claim that a split in the Palestinian arena does not allow progress towards an arrangement, one might have expected Israel to respond in the same spirit. However, Israeli spokespeople heaped severe criticism on the attempted rapprochement, and blocked the transfer of tax funds to the PA. When the EU, however, hurried to promise the PA financial compensation, it both threatened to rob the Israeli step of any effect and evinced its steadfast support for the PA. In any case, international pressure quickly prompted Israel – and with much embarrassment – to revoke its sanction.

It is eminently possible that similar to previous attempts to bridge the ideological/political gaps that divide Fatah and Hamas, the Cairo agreement will also be a fleeting episode in the ongoing inter-organizational rivalry. After all, the understandings signed in Cairo are nothing but new rules of the game by which Hamas and the PA will continue to conduct their power struggle. Hamas will hold onto the Gaza Strip and try to exploit its coordination with the PA to expand its influence in the West Bank, while the PA will seek to restore the control of the Gaza Strip to its own hands. On the other hand, the agreement also reflects the intent to institutionalize the balance of power created in recent years. It may be that only recognition of this division of power will allow the establishment of an authority in the Palestinian arena that enjoys widespread national legitimacy, though not necessarily sweeping international legitimacy.

The Next Chapter

The gaps between Israel and the PA have been fully illuminated during the rounds of negotiations over the last two decades. To be sure, the talks

conducted to date have not been without their achievements. From time to time, the sides have arrived at understandings, though these have tended to focus on the day-to-day management of the conflict and the formulation of shared intentions to continue the dialogue. At the same time, the costs involved in formulating a settlement – ideological frustration, domestic criticism, and strategic challenges – have become evident. An outgrowth of the string of failures to promote a settlement has been the mutual erosion of trust in the other side's willingness to lower its expectations and demands in order to promote a compromise. This dynamic has perforce created an impasse in the Israeli-PA dialogue.

The wave of upheavals that swept across the Middle East has increased international interest in regional stability, and thus has heightened pressure on the PA and even more so on Israel to return to the negotiating table. However, those very upheavals have narrowed the chance to revive the political process, as they have highlighted familiar components of the stalemate with new intensity. The concern about widespread public protests, inspired by the masses in neighboring countries, will make it hard for the PA to relax its rigid bargaining stances. The concern about a worsening of security threats as the result of regional radicalization will only increase Israel's reluctance for new territorial deployment in the West Bank. The already minimal willingness of the Israeli leadership to take an electoral risk by evacuating Jewish settlements in the West Bank will decline even further. Furthermore, the focus of Arab regimes on stabilizing their rule will limit their ability, if not their desire, to take a clear stance in favor of an historic compromise with Israel and support negotiations between Israel and the PA. All these factors will limit the ability of international actors, headed by the American administration, to persuade Israel and the PA to evince flexibility and renew a dialogue. Alternatively, the sides are likely to continue to focus on managing the conflict, i.e., taking interim steps, rather than resolving it.

The PA has already sketched its future path. It will continue to direct most of its resources towards constructing and improving the institutional and economic infrastructures of the West Bank as preparation for sovereignty in the region and proof of its capability to function as a state entity. The sympathy it has garnered internationally, particularly the understanding

for its attempt to generate a political breakthrough under UN auspices, has even allowed the PA to focus on bolstering its status on the home front. The rapprochement with Hamas was meant to serve this end, though it is not without its risks. From here on, the PA will have to take care lest its declared commitment to the political process undercut the effort to regulate its inter-organizational relations. It will have to work hard to prevent Hamas from dictating the political agenda or from escalating the conflict with Israel, which would force it to choose between standing shoulder to shoulder with Hamas and being committed to the political path, because ultimately, the process of establishing a Palestinian state cannot be fully completed without specific negotiations and comprehensive coordination with Israel.

The need for coordination with Israel in order to realize the potential inherent in UN recognition of a Palestinian state has not given Israel any essential advantage. A UN vote on recognition of the Palestinian state will earn the support of a large multilateral forum; Israel will not be a part of this forum. A General Assembly decision itself comes with no means of enforcement, and the Palestinian state's legal and executive validity depends on the UN Security Council. The PA will earn the right, reserved to states, to lodge complaints with the International Court of Justice in The Hague only subject to the UN Security Council's adopting the results of a General Assembly vote. Still, the widespread show of support for Palestinian independence, even if it ends with a symbolic vote in the General Assembly, will create a favorable setting for intensified international pressure on Israel and strengthening the PA's territorial demands. The support for the idea of Palestinian independence has already stressed Israel's international isolation, and this picture will not change substantially even if the administration's efforts bear fruit and the vote is postponed.

For its part, Israel can take advantage of the PA's need for coordination to improve its bargaining position. Joining the ranks of those supporting Palestinian independence, through an effort to formulate a basis for renewed negotiations, will slow down Israel's skid towards international isolation and help it enlist support for its positions and strategic preferences, especially among its traditional friends. Similarly, an effort to promote a settlement might well erode the attractiveness and relevance of the response

offered by Hamas and its supporters in the region to the Israeli-Palestinian question. Moreover, progress towards the establishment of a Palestinian state will help Israel fulfill its vision as a Jewish state with democratic foundations.

Nonetheless, the Israeli government has shunned any concrete measure that might extricate it from the political labyrinth in which it finds itself. A trial balloon was launched to test the international and Palestinian response to a possible interim agreement or establishment of a Palestinian state within temporary borders. For these notions to be taken seriously and not be seen as a way to preserve the status quo, however, they will have to be part of an ordered regimen linked to a timetable towards a permanent settlement, yet it is doubtful that the Israeli government is willing or capable to design them as such. In response to the initiative of international recognition of a Palestinian state, Netanyahu warned about possible Israeli unilateral measures. The range of unilateral steps in Israel's repertoire is extensive, but not one is capable of removing Palestinian independence from the international agenda. It may be that in response to the declaration of a state within the 1967 borders the dust will be shaken off the plan for disengagement from the West Bank. However, even a step in this direction will push Israel to the margins of the international consensus unless it is accompanied by a clear message about the willingness to realize the two-state solution.

Despite the proven difficulty, Israel and the PA will have to increase their efforts at coordination in order to cope with the challenge in the making that is threatening to draw them into a new maelstrom. The wave of popular uprisings that has swept across the Middle East has already been the source of inspiration for popular protest against Israel, seen in mass demonstrations on Israel's borders with Syria and Lebanon. This phenomenon could potentially gather momentum and spill over into the West Bank and Gaza Strip, presenting a concrete danger of renewed violent confrontation between Israel and the Palestinian population in the territories. The immediate catalyst for renewed violence could be frustration once the UN vote to recognize the Palestinian state, absent a political dialogue, is not translated into concrete sovereignty.

Threats made by PA spokespeople about a future uprising were intended to pressure Israel to return to the negotiating table, and like the

PA, the population in the West Bank and Gaza Strip does not welcome another confrontation. However, it is enough for one local demonstration to become a violent confrontation to ignite the tension already present. Escalation would only harden Israel's policy regarding the terms of a settlement and would certainly end the growth experienced in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in recent years. The international criticism against Israel because of steps it would take in response to outbreaks of violence would not compensate the Palestinians for the damage to infrastructures that would be incurred in case of a confrontation.

Preventing a sweeping confrontation is in fact itself enough of a convincing reason for the Israeli government to come up with a political formula that would serve as a counterweight to militant motives. At the same time, responsibility for preventing escalation and thus for renewing the dialogue must also be laid at the PA's doorstep. Lacking a comprehensive settlement, the PA must consider the risk that a renewed confrontation would stop the diplomatic momentum – whether by undermining its hold on the West Bank and generating anarchy, or paving the way for Hamas to take the premier role in the Palestinian arena as a whole.

Notes

- 1 International criticism affected Israel's unofficial policy on construction in the West Bank and slowed additional growth there. See, e.g., "Netanyahu Demanded, Construction Permits in Jerusalem Rejected," *Ynet*, April 11, 2011.
- 2 "Netanyahu: If the Palestinians Recognize the Jewish State, We will Agree to Another Freeze," *Haaretz.co.il*, October 11, 2010.
- 3 "PA: Most Nations to Recognize Us in 2011," Ma'an News Agency, January 9, 2011; "Pressuring Israel – an Interview with Riad Malki," in *Bitterlemons.org*, January 10, 2011; "PA Chair: Palestinian State will be Established only with Israeli Agreement," *Haaretz online*, January 22, 2011.
- 4 Mahmoud Abbas, "The Long Overdue Palestinian State," *New York Times*, May 16, 2011.
- 5 Argentina, Bolivia, Peru, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay, Guyana, Ecuador, and Suriname followed Brazil in recognizing a Palestinian state. Spain, France, Greece, Ireland, Cyprus, and Norway have granted diplomatic status to PA delegations.

- 6 On the meaning of a recommendation for the declaration of a Palestinian state at the UN General Assembly, see Robbie Sabel, "UN General Assembly 'Uniting for Palestine,'" *INSS Insight* No. 251, April 11, 2011.
- 7 Instead of a discussion in the EU, the administration proposed discussing the issue in the Quartet forum – the United States, France, Great Britain, Germany, and Italy – that had already served as the setting for consultations on the crisis in the Balkans (*Ynet*, April 12, 2011). German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, as well as the Netherlands, subsequently announced they would not support the declaration of a Palestinian state that had not been coordinated with Israel.
- 8 Full transcript of Obama's Middle East speech, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa>.
- 9 "Security Council Debate Offers Preview of Palestinian Bid," *New York Times*, July 26, 2011.
- 10 "Stop the Domino Effect: Diplomats Versus 'The Soft Intifada,'" *Ynet*, December 21, 2010. From PM Netanyahu's Channel 10 News interview, December 12, 2010: "[An interim agreement] could be the result of a diplomatic process; I am not certain that it should be its primary goal." Netanyahu told the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee: "I told Obama that I could approve [the freeze] in the Cabinet, and then the Americans backed down...The United States has decided not to go in this direction, and rightly so, and instead has started talking about an outline of talks to minimize the gaps in order to discuss the core issues," *Ynet*, January 3, 2011.
- 11 Speech by PM Netanyahu to the Joint Meeting of the US Congress, May 24, 2011, http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Speeches+by+Israeli+leaders/2011/Speech_PM_Netanyahu_US_Congress_24-May-2011.htm.
- 12 "Abu Mazen: Without Renewing Negotiations we will Seek Recognition in the UN," *Ynet*, May 27, 2011.
- 13 "Lieberman Formulating Program for Interim Agreement with Palestinians," *Haaretz online*, February 18, 2011; "Instead of Permanent Settlement: PM Binyamin Netanyahu Considers Immediate Interim Agreement," *Haaretz online*, March 3, 2011; "Netanyahu: Bi-national state would be a disaster; I will present political plan soon," *Haaretz online*, March 4, 2011; Aluf Benn, "Netanyahu Proposes to the USA: Palestinian State in Temporary Borders," *Haaretz online*, April 23, 2011.
- 14 The West Bank saw the launch of some 1,700 development projects; 120 schools and three hospitals were established, and some 1,000 miles of road were paved; see "Good News from the Middle East (Really)," *New York Times*, January 25, 2011. See also Robert M. Danin, "A Third Way to Palestine: Fayyadism and

- Its Discontents,” *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 1 (2011): 94-111; *Palestinian State-Building: A Decisive Period*, Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Ad Hoc Liaison Committee Meeting, Brussels, April 13, 2011.
- 15 *Building the Palestinian State: Sustaining Growth, Institutions, and Service Delivery*, Economic Monitoring Report to the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, The World Bank, April 13, 2011.
 - 16 For more on Israel’s policy on economic development in the Palestinian arena, see *Measures Taken by Israel in Support of Developing the Palestinian Economy and Socio-Economic Structure*, Report of the Government of Israel to the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC), Brussels, April 13, 2011.
 - 17 Nathan J. Brown, “Are Palestinians Building a State?” *Carnegie Commentary*, 2010.
 - 18 A public opinion survey (*PSR Poll* No. 39, March 2011) indicated 40 percent support for Fatah and 26 percent for Hamas; another survey showed 34 percent support for Fatah and 15 percent for Hamas (*Jerusalem Media & Communication Center – JMCC Poll* No. 73, April 2011).
 - 19 David D. Kirkpatrick, “In Shift, Egypt Warms to Iran and Hamas, Israel’s Foes,” *New York Times*, April 28, 2011.
 - 20 Alex Fishman, “A New Low,” *Yediot Ahronot*, May 5, 2011.
 - 21 Hamas’ willingness to accept an agreement that would win a majority of the Palestinian people (“Mashal Surprises: Hamas will Accept any Arrangement that Wins a Majority,” *Ynet News*, October 21, 2010) was qualified by a plan for the only agreement that would be acceptable to the organization (while it is clear that Israel would reject it outright). This plan, excepting the agreement in principle to land swaps, is identical to the one demanded by the PA. See, e.g., the statement by Khaled Mashal, the head of Hamas’ political bureau: “There is a position and program that all Palestinians share. To accept a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders with Jerusalem as its capital. With the right of return. And this state would have sovereignty on the land and on the borders. And with no settlements...when this program is implemented...we would respect the will of the people.” See Babak Dehghanpisheh and Ranya Kadri, “Hamas Sticks to the Hard Line,” *Newsweek*, October 14, 2010.
 - 22 “U.S. to Palestinians: Unity Deal Must Advance Prospects of Peace with Israel,” *Haaretz.com*, May 4, 2011.