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Response to: "What Now for Israel?"

# The Case for Unilateral Action

## Why Israel needs to move now toward a division of the land—even in the absence of a peace deal.

**By Amos Yadlin**

**Elliott Abrams' analysis** of Israel's strategic environment is almost entirely on point. He is right that Israel's status quo is much more sustainable than is commonly argued, and right again on the absurdity of claims that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict constitutes the "epicenter of global politics." Indeed, it would be equally farfetched to claim that Germany's 500,000 Jews were the epicenter of World War II. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, itself a subset of the Israeli-Arab conflict, is but one in a long list of the Middle East's entrenched rivalries and fault lines. Even on Israel's own national-security agenda, the Palestinian threat no longer figures as high as the much more severe and urgent challenges presented by Iran's nuclear ambitions and Hizballah's ever-growing arsenals.

Still, sustainable as the status quo may be, sustainable is not coterminous with desirable. Yes, the warnings of alarmists at home and abroad are misguided if not hysterical; and yes, Israel should not forget the price of failures brought upon it by hastily concluded schemes for "comprehensive" peace agreements. But that is not the end of the matter. Since its inception, modern Zionism has been centered more on creating new realities than on enduring imperfect ones, however sustainable they may turn out to be.

"A republic, if you can keep it," Abrams quotes Benjamin Franklin saying about the fledgling United States in 18th-century Philadelphia. But modern-day Israel does not have the luxury of standing by as a mere spectator to the Palestinian leadership's misgovernance. Even if the Palestinian Authority, for its part, persists in refusing any reasonable peace proposal, practical and moral reasons argue against the resigned acceptance of any such reality. Practical—because of the risk of yet another failed state on Israel's doorstep. And moral—because, even while defending itself from recurrent violence and aggression, and even while conscious of the limits of its own power, Israeli society has always taken upon itself the obligation to relieve human suffering where it can. If skeptical, one need only have observed the many truckers shuttling food and medical supplies to Gaza's civilians during the recent campaign there, or the doctors at Israel's top-tier hospitals who deliver medical care to Syrian and West Bank Arabs.

More pointedly, even if, from the security perspective, a continued Israeli presence in areas populated by Palestinians is for now a positive, sustainable necessity, one cannot ignore the fact that the lion's share of Israelis no longer want to be involved in those areas. As Abrams observes, one of Hamas's only victories in 2014 consisted in putting paid to what remained of Israel's old "peace camp." Many prominent figures of the Israeli left, including politicians, journalists, and novelists, came out strongly against Hamas's brutality and decried the intentional targeting of civilians whether Israeli, Israeli-Arab, or Gazan. But even though Gaza presented Israelis with a sharp reminder of the perils involved in ceding control of land to Palestinians—perils that may recur in the West Bank if Israel were to relinquish its security role there—the vast majority remain opposed to a re-occupation of Gaza and would likewise want to see a reduced Israeli involvement in the governance of other Palestinian populations.

**As an American**, Elliott Abrams exercises admirable restraint when it comes to advising Israelis what he thinks they ought to do. But I like to think he would agree with me that a positive Israeli agenda vis-à-vis the Palestinians is a pressing desideratum—an agenda undertaken not out of necessity, but out of activism and aspiration. The core of such an agenda is easily stated: an Israeli-driven partition of the land. When I say "Israeli-driven," I mean simply this. A generous offer should be made to Palestinians, the outlines of which are by now quite familiar, having been repeatedly put on the table by successive Israeli prime ministers. If, once again, the offer is rejected out of hand or meets with impossible and non-negotiable demands like the wholesale return of Palestinian refugees and their descendants, or sovereignty over the Temple Mount, Israel on its own should continue to pursue a two-state reality.

In that latter scenario, acting on principles formulated in consultation with its global allies and friends, Israel would shape its own borders, maintaining full control over Jerusalem, the settlement blocks, and the Jordan River. As for other areas under Israeli control, they would include for the time being all territories west of the security fence; the eventual disposition of these territories would be decided when the Palestinians are ready to negotiate seriously. Meanwhile, Israel would renounce its formal claims to political sovereignty in areas where very few Israelis reside—areas that happen to constitute some 85 percent of the West Bank. By taking such a unilateral initiative, Israel would wrest from the current Palestinian leadership its crippling veto power over partition, while simultaneously acting to secure its own future as a Jewish, democratic, secure, and just state.

The current Israeli government has proved itself to be risk-averse both in making war and in seeking peace. But modern Zionism, again from its inception, has always represented a high-risk strategy—one that, over the long run, has not only proved to be well founded but has paid off magnificently. Creating an old-new Jewish commonwealth in the violent Middle East was an immense challenge; and yet, decade after decade, even while managing to sustain the "unsustainable," Israel has also striven with remarkable success to fulfill its founders' dream of a society that would lead, thrive, and act as a light unto

the nations. With the support of the United States, another city on a hill, as both John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan defined it, Israel can continue to forge its own future in the same spirit, not out of fear but out of will and determination.

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***Amos Yadlin** is the director of the **Institute for National Security Studies (INSS)** in Tel Aviv. He formerly served as chief of military intelligence for the Israel Defense Forces.*

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