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The Escalation in the West Bank:
The Need for a Change in Israeli Strategy and Policy
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Even if Israel succeeds in arresting further terrorism in the West Bank, recent events underscore that it must adopt a new paradigm that provides a relevant response to greater strategic interests, and not just to immediate concerns each time escalation occurs. Conflict management in the name of an illusory status quo is leading Israel toward a one-state reality, even if there is no official Israeli declaration of support for a one-state solution. To avoid sliding into this reality, a “strategic road map” is proposed, based on four elements: (a) Israel’s ongoing operational security freedom of action throughout the entire territory, but with a significant reduction of the potential for friction with the Palestinian population; (b) continued cooperation with the Palestinian security apparatuses and assistance toward improved PA governance in the West Bank; (c) a political horizon by means of a willingness to enter into negotiations with the PA regarding transitional arrangements, focusing initially on issues that can be solved and implemented immediately; and (d) Israeli assistance to international and regional efforts to reconstruct the Gaza Strip, on the condition that they be carried out by the PA upon the renewal of its control in this region. A stable PA functioning as a responsible party is in Israel’s interest, and it is a mistake for Israel to allow Hamas to consolidate its control over the Gaza Strip and at the same time launch terrorist attacks in the West Bank - while it enjoys the benefits of security calm and the possibility for military buildup in Gaza.

A recent wave of terrorist attacks in the West Bank and East Jerusalem featured modes of action familiar from the past: shooting from passing vehicles, infiltration of a Jewish settlement, stabbing, and car-ramming. These latest incidents brought the number of Israelis killed in terror attacks in the past year to 13. Shooting attacks on the roads, particularly from passing vehicles, have proven to be the most effective in terms of causing casualties, and also provide the assailant the greatest chances of survival. The two shooting incidents, which were the most serious attacks in this wave, are attributed to the Hamas infrastructure in the Ramallah area.

These attacks reflect Hamas’s priorities at the present time: attacks in the West Bank and security calm in the Gaza Strip. Yahya Sinwar, Hamas’s leader in the Gaza Strip, has

stated that understandings reached with Israel in November on a ceasefire in Gaza do not apply to the West Bank. The recent attacks confirmed this policy, as well as the improved skills and greater daring of local Hamas operatives. Hamas's success in carrying out attacks in the Ramallah area, which is the center and symbol of Palestinian Authority (PA) rule, is aimed at provoking an IDF operation near the regime center to humiliate the PA and undermine its status. This is an important goal for Hamas as part of its effort to seize control of the West Bank. Indeed, the Israeli military response has involved a closure of the Ramallah area and offensive modes of action, including entry into Palestinian city centers, particularly Ramallah, and increased friction with the Palestinian population.

These events challenge - for the first time since October 2015 (the outbreak of the "Intifada of knives") - the Israeli strategic approach of managing the conflict on two separate Palestinian fronts: the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The recent events, and the potential for escalation they present, challenge the effectiveness of both sanctifying security calm without complementary political action and relying on an illusory status quo; under a conflict management approach entailed by ostensible preservation of the status quo, settlements are expanded, legal conditions for annexing territory from Area C in the West Bank are formed, and the option of promoting a two-state solution is blocked. At the same time, the PA's governing system is weakening to the point that it is in danger of dissolution. The presumption of an ability to perpetuate the differentiation between the two Palestinian entities, alongside the assessment of an ability to neutralize Hamas's influence in the West Bank, does not pass the test of the events of the past week.

The strategic notion currently driving Israeli policy contends that it is possible to achieve calm in the West Bank by improving the daily life conditions of the Palestinian population and easing restrictions on the freedom of movement. The relative stability in the West Bank over time has strengthened this assumption. In the Gaza Strip, on the other hand, and particularly as a result of the last round of hostilities between Israel and Hamas, there has been an erosion of Israeli deterrence, after Israel was perceived as surrendering to Hamas's blackmail and, in order to achieve security calm, as agreeing to ease restrictions in the humanitarian realm and provide necessary goods in the Gaza Strip, in part by means of Qatari funds. However, in contrast to Israel's policy of separating between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the connections between the two regions are impossible to sever. Moreover, the eased restrictions in the Gaza Strip in effect reflected an acceptance of Hamas rule in the area and the legitimacy of negotiations (even if only indirect) with it. At the same time, the political stalemate with the PA remains unchanged, weakening the PA and eroding its status and its public legitimacy, which are already subject to widespread public criticism.

The recent events are linked with three contexts. The first is the struggle between the PA / Fatah movement and Hamas over Palestinian leadership. PA President Mahmoud Abbas has imposed economic sanctions on the Gaza Strip and on Hamas's rule in the area. Hamas, in turn, prevents Palestinian reconciliation due to its unwillingness to cede its military infrastructure and its monopoly on the use of force in the Strip; at the same time, it strives to undermine PA rule in the West Bank through an escalation of the security situation. The second context is Iran's and Turkey's involvement and their influence on the developments in the Palestinian arena. Third is the need for systemic thinking regarding the significance of contending simultaneously with three fronts: the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and southern Lebanon.

The recent developments in the West Bank occurred against the background of ongoing efforts by the Israel Security Agency and the IDF to thwart terrorist attacks. In 2018, 480 terrorist attacks were thwarted, including attacks by the Hamas military infrastructure. The scope of the preventive efforts is indicative of the current potential for escalation and the high motivation for terrorism, particularly in Hamas. The stalemate in the political process, in addition to the deep despair of the Palestinian population with the PA, translates into radicalization. These feelings are also reflected in a series of recently conducted surveys among West Bank Palestinians. For example, according to a survey conducted by the Washington Institute, 57 percent of West Bank Palestinians support giving Hamas a chance to renew its military activity there; support for a resumption of the armed struggle against Israel is estimated at 25 percent – with only 25 percent support for a renewal of the political process; 63 percent of the inhabitants of the West Bank have expressed their reservations about security cooperation with Israel. The findings were also indicative of increased support for the idea of one state, stemming from an erosion of support for a two-state solution.

At the current juncture, Israel must address a number of questions that lie at the heart of its strategic approach. The first is whether it is possible to continue to separate between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The events of recent months prove that a large scale international reconstruction effort for the Gaza Strip cannot be launched without the involvement of the PA. Moreover, understandings with Hamas cannot be reached without considering their implications on the status of the PA in the West Bank. Most of all is whether Israel will come to terms with the erosion of its deterrence against Hamas, whereby Hamas is able to enjoy the benefits of the security calm in the Gaza Strip and at the same time initiate terror attacks in the West Bank. This has also resulted in the resurgence and reinforced motivation for attacks on the part of additional terrorist forces.

The second question has to do with Israel's strategic objective in the Palestinian arena. Should Israel continue to worship the status quo, and who is Israel's desired partner – the

PA or Hamas? If Israel has no choice but to work vis-à-vis both entities, how should it do so? In reaching understandings with Hamas formulated in November, Israel signaled that it would prefer to settle matters with the party that uses force against it.

The third question concerns the connection between the Palestinian arena and the northern arena. As made clear by the Israeli government, the northern arena is the primary focus of Israel's security establishment and the Palestinian arena is secondary (Israel therefore imposes limitations on itself on the use of force in this arena). Iran and Hezbollah, for their part, urge the terrorist groups in the Palestinian arena to escalate the operations against Israel, based on the assessment that undermining the stability in this arena will make it difficult for Israel to operate in the northern arena. Iran therefore helps strengthen Hamas's military infrastructure with funds and knowledge. It also lends assistance to Salah el-Aroui, the Hamas leader who commands the Hamas cells in the West Bank from Turkey and Lebanon.

Finally, the wave of terrorist attacks is also fueled by a psychological infrastructure shaped by systemic and ongoing incitement. Fatah and PA elements in the West Bank portray the terrorists as martyrs (shahids) fighting for the sake of the Palestinian people. The Fatah movement has called on the Palestinians to escalate confrontations across the West Bank in protest of the death of the three Palestinian terrorists; to prevent Israel from acquiring any information by means of surveillance cameras; and to refrain from publicizing any information on the social networks. At the same time, the PA President has expressed its opposition to the use of violence, but also to "the terrorism of the settlers," and has maintained that the incitement must stop. It is important for Israel to conduct a dialogue with the PA regarding ways of reducing the incitement and are not limited only to political messages that "present the real face of the PA."

Recommendations for Israel

The answers to the questions posed above highlight the need to effect a paradigm shift and shape a new paradigm that provides a relevant response to Israel's strategic interests and not just to its immediate concerns each time escalation occurs.

Against the background of the most recent developments, it is clear that Israel can no longer attempt to preserve the status quo, which in practice is not static. It must also cease relying on the notion that by improving the daily life conditions of the Palestinian population in the West Bank and allow the passage of goods and basic products into the Gaza Strip, it will be able to maintain the security calm and buy time and thereby evade necessary decisions regarding the Palestinian issue, without defining clear political aims or taking part in negotiations. The political vacuum also allows the settlement leaders to pressure the Israeli government to take measures to expand settlement construction and

change the legal status of illegal outposts, which damage the Palestinian fabric of life in the region and the quality of Israel's cooperation with the PA security apparatuses, which have unquestionably contributed to relative stability over time. They have also proven themselves to be extremely effective in recent days, in dispersing demonstrations in the West Bank cities in support of violence and Hamas.

From a strategic perspective, it is inadvisable for Israel to continue to adhere to a reactive policy rather than launch a proactive initiative to create a more stable reality. Even without an official Israeli declaration of support for a one-state solution, and in the absence of concrete measures toward annexing territory in the West Bank, in practice, a one-state reality is taking shape. To avoid sliding into this reality, a "strategic road map" is proposed, based on four elements: (a) Israel's ongoing operational security freedom of action throughout the entire territory, but with a significant reduction of the potential for friction with the Palestinian population; (b) continued cooperation with the Palestinian security apparatuses and assistance toward improved of PA governance in the West Bank; (c) a political horizon by means of a willingness to enter into negotiations with the PA regarding transitional arrangements, focusing initially on issues that can be solved and implemented immediately; and (d) Israeli assistance to the international and regional efforts to reconstruct the Gaza Strip, on the condition that they be carried out by the PA upon the renewal of its control in this region. A stable PA functioning as a responsible party is in Israel's interest, and it is a mistake for Israel to allow Hamas to consolidate its control over the Gaza Strip and at the same time launch terrorist attacks in the West Bank - while it enjoy the benefits of security calm and the possibility for military buildup in Gaza.