

INSS Insight No. 1490, June 20, 2021

**Operation Guardian of the Walls:
Moving the Conflict from the Periphery to Jerusalem and the Heart of
the Country?**

Menachem Klein and Yohanan Tzoreff

Operation Guardian of the Walls, or by its Palestinian name, Sword of Jerusalem, reflected the maturation of processes that began at the end of the 20th century and were followed by developments that originated after 2000 in the second Intifada. Now, the Jewish and Arab populations living between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea find themselves in a new reality, where the focus of the Israel-Palestinian conflict has shifted from the periphery, including the Gaza Strip, to Jerusalem and the heart of the country. Therefore, if the political process resumes, discussions will not center on the transition from the military government to a political border, but from a situation of one regime to a situation of two states; dismantlement of Israeli control must precede any debate on the location and nature of the border. The distinction between narrative issues that are hard to resolve (refugees and Jerusalem) and relatively easier issues of a more technical nature (Palestinian sovereignty and the settlements) is no longer valid. All are now material issues, and both sides must prepare for a new trade-off in talks. Moreover, the difficulty of formulating a settlement is greater today than in the 1990s, within each of the parties no less than between them. Consequently, before starting talks, each side must reach an internal consensus on the rules governing a decision.

During the years of the Oslo process and the attempts to achieve a breakthrough toward a political and territorial settlement between Israel and the Palestinians, the gaps between the parties emerged and even widened, until the dialogue reached an ongoing impasse. Moreover, a significant gulf appeared between the political talks and the reality on the ground. In the rounds of talks in Camp David (2000) and Annapolis (2007-8), possible borders for a final settlement were discussed, but in reality, the difference between the area of Israel sovereignty within the 1967 lines and its control beyond these lines became increasingly blurred. Be this a negotiating tactic or an intention to stop the political process – partly in response to pressure from the Israeli right – since the Oslo Accords Israel has expanded the area of the settlements and their population. As individuals and as organized communities in municipalities and local councils, they are governed by Israeli law and institutions.

At the same time, the severe Palestinian violence in the second intifada increased IDF and ISA (GSS/Shin Bet) forces in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Operation Defensive Shield (2002) caused the collapse of the Palestinian Authority under Arafat, and Israel permitted reconstruction of the PA only when Abu Mazen was elected President and forged close security cooperation with Israel. The distinctions between Areas A, B, and C as defined in the Oslo Accords grew blurred. Israeli sovereignty agents operate throughout the area between the Jordan and the Mediterranean and implement effective control practices. The decline of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in general, and of the discussion on the border in particular since 2014 (the initiative of US Secretary of State John Kerry), strengthened the single regime, in which the Palestinian Authority is actually a “sub-contractor” for Israel. This regime is built around the principle of separation between Palestinian groups – citizens of Israel, permanent residents in East Jerusalem, residents of the West Bank, and residents of the Gaza Strip. Each group was given a different basket of rights and political status. Moreover, the disengagement from the Gaza Strip (2005) did not end Israeli control there, but moved it outside the area. As such, Gaza differs from the West Bank, where there are two population groups on the same piece of land, with different legal status.

Jerusalem has always been the symbolic heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and currently it is also its practical center. Jews praying on the Temple Mount, sovereignty over the site, and the division of Jerusalem were at the heart of the dispute at Camp David, while subsequently, Jews praying privately on the Temple Mount, once a minor phenomenon, became more common, and Jewish visitors to the site increased, encouraged by rabbis from the central stream in Orthodoxy. For their part, civilian Palestinian organizations resist any change in the status quo on the Temple Mount. Moreover, in order to forestall the division of Jerusalem along the lines proposed by President Clinton in late 2000, the number of Jews moving to Palestinian neighborhoods increased, along with groups that operate tourism and antiquities sites in Silwan, which attract large numbers of visitors. In tandem, Israel has taken steps to prevent any nucleus of urban Palestinian leadership in Jerusalem and any activity relating to the Palestinian Authority. The leadership vacuum spawned spontaneous groupings for non-violent struggle, which succeeded in effecting changes in Israeli conduct: removal of the magnetometers at the entrance to the Temple Mount (2017) and the removal of police barriers around the Damascus Gate before fighting erupted last May.

The situation can be summed up as follows: the center of gravity of hostilities has gradually moved from the periphery to the core of the conflict in Jerusalem and central Israel, and from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank to the heart of the country. The first evidence of this came in October 2000, when Israeli Palestinians played a violent part in

the second intifada. Today there is two-way movement, from Israeli territory before the Six Day War to areas that were captured in 1967, and from them to the heart of the country. Religious groups settle as a collective in mixed towns in order to “Judaize” them. These are not individuals who come to live there out of identification with the nature of the place, but groups who want to change the identity of these places. During Guardian of the Walls, armed Jewish groups came to the mixed towns from settlements in order to defend their friends. Meanwhile groups of Israeli Palestinians arrived from other towns to defend their brothers; in effect, this was a kind of small-scale civil war. Following these hostilities, the police and the ISA implemented practices in these towns that until then were evident only in the West Bank. They used electronic monitoring devices and arrested over two hundred Israeli Palestinians and a few dozen Jews for investigation and deterrence purposes. The new frontier of the conflict is no longer the geographical frontier of Jewish expansion, namely the West Bank, but the metropolitan ethnic frontier: in Silwan, Sheikh Jarrah, Isawiya, Acre, Lod, Ramla, Haifa, Beer Sheva, Wadi Ara. The Palestinians refer to this as a process of Hebronization.

In the current situation, the demographic problem of the Jewish portion of the population between the Jordan and the Mediterranean is not in the future but in the present. The Israeli right has intensified the discourse regarding the Jewish state and the preeminence of Jewish citizens over Israeli Palestinians. The rise of ethnic-national awareness reinforces the religious motifs on both sides. The clashes on the Temple Mount were an expression of this, as were the arson attacks on synagogues in Lod and the mosques in the West Bank.

The move from clashes on the border to ethnic hostilities under one regime affects the Israeli Palestinians. There is a new generation among them that is more educated, proud, and involved in Israeli society than its predecessors. At the same time, since the Oslo Accords there has been a perceptible increase in the commercial, academic, and political ties between them and the West Bank population, and in their national ties to the Palestinian collective. Israelization and Palestinization are expressions of the same process, causing tension and rising expectations of civic equality and allegiance to the ethnic Palestinian identity. As the Israeli Jewish side highlights the ethnic factor at the expense of civil equality, so the Israeli Palestinians intensify their ethnic identity.

The growing strength of the ethnic basis of the conflict and the existence of a single regime affects the infrastructure of government in Jerusalem and Ramallah. Israel’s lack of political stability and democratic deficit and the authoritarian regime in Ramallah are not just the product of personal ambitions and the political practices of leaders in Israel and the Palestinian Authority, but are also linked to the reinforcement of the single regime and relations between the two opposing ethnic groups.

Since 2008 the international system has not tried to mediate between the sides and reach a permanent agreement; in 2014 John Kerry only sought to ensure that the way to a two-state solution is not obstructed. Today there is not even a similar attempt. The Abraham Accords reflected a change in the Israeli-Palestinian issue from the subject of pan-Arab consensus to a marginal matter for Arab states, if not solely a bilateral issue for the two parties involved. Many people in Israel and the world reached the conclusion that the single regime is irreversible. What is reversible, they believe, is Jewish pre-eminence.

The failure of talks with Israel deprived the Abu Mazen government of public support, and instead it rests on the mechanisms of force at its disposal and those of Israel. Cooperation with Israel and Abu Mazen's authoritarian rule have undermined the West Bank political community. The announcement of Palestinian Authority elections aroused expectations for a re-organization of the political system, increasing the disappointment when they were cancelled. The political vacuum was filled by Hamas, which since 2006 has undergone a politicization process, from a religious fundamentalist movement to a national-religious movement that is unwilling to recognize the State of Israel formally but accepts a Palestinian state in the 1967 lines.

The political agenda that characterized the Oslo period has changed. If the political process resumes, the debate will not focus on the change from a military government to a political border, but from the reality of a single regime to a reality of two states. Therefore, discussions on dismantling Israeli control and security arrangements should precede discussions on the location and demarcation of the border. The distinction between narrative issues that are difficult to resolve (refugees and Jerusalem) and relatively easier issues of a more technical nature (Palestinian sovereignty and the settlements) is also no longer valid. All are now material and narrative-related issues, and both sides must prepare for a new trade-off in talks. Today, the difficulty of formulating a settlement is greater than in the 1990s, within each of the parties no less than between them.

For that reason, before starting talks, each side must reach an internal consensus on the rules governing a decision: how a permanent agreement should be approved, and the fate of those who refuse to accept the majority decision.