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Disengaging from the West Bank Short of a Permanent Agreement: Tenable Security-Wise?

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During his visit to Washington earlier this month, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke about possible Israeli unilateral action vis-à-vis the Palestinians, stressing that such action “would have to meet Israeli security criteria” and “would also require broader international understandings than exists.” Subsequently, the Prime Minister retracted his statement and issued explanations. Either way, however, it is important to consider whether it is possible to ensure security in the context of an independent Israeli disengagement from the West Bank without a permanent status agreement in place. The underlying condition is that any withdrawal from all or part of the West Bank and any separation from the Palestinians would not compromise the personal safety of Israel’s citizens and national security as a whole. These would have to be ensured for such a move to be possible.

Any withdrawal from the West Bank could occur in the absence of a permanent agreement and would represent an alternative to a situation in which it became patently clear that a full two-state agreement with the Palestinians is impossible to achieve in the foreseeable future. The purpose of such a withdrawal would be to implement a temporary border that would create a reality of two nation states without undermining the possibility of continuing negotiations, while also improving the daily lives of the Palestinians until an agreement is reached. An independent withdrawal, as well as a partial or an interim agreement, would in all probability involve the evacuation of some 100,000 people from the Jewish settlements located beyond the security fence or on the eastern mountain ridges, out of a total of some 380,000 Israelis living east of the Green Line, and would preserve the large settlement blocs that are home to the vast majority of this population.

Given the short distance between the West Bank and Israel’s large population centers and its strategic rear, the country is very vulnerable to fire and other attempted attacks from the West Bank. Therefore, as long as there is no bilateral security arrangement with the

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Palestinians, the IDF would remain responsible for security in the West Bank. Unlike the Gaza Strip, the model for maintaining security must be constructed for the most part on preventing terrorism before it happens and fighting terrorism as needed rather than on deterrence. It must prevent terrorist infrastructures from being built and prevent the development of manufacturing and/or smuggling capabilities of weapons, munitions, and/or dual-purpose materials as well as assistance from outside advisors. To that end, the IDF must continue to isolate the West Bank envelope, i.e., maintain security control of the Jordan Valley, the Jordan crossings, West Bank crossings to Israel, and the aerial space above the West Bank. In this framework, Israel maintains intelligence capabilities for foiling terrorism and freedom of movement in the West Bank needed by the IDF and the general Security Services. At the same time, the IDF would be prepared to combat terrorism and violence whenever necessary. Should the security situation deteriorate and Hamas attempts to seize control of the West Bank, Israel would be able to stop such a takeover; Israel would have to make its intentions clear ahead of time.

Beyond the imperative of preventing West Bank terrorism, Israel would have to place the political instability in the Middle East and the security challenges liable to develop in the future from Jordan at center of its strategic security considerations. Strategic security requires maintaining Israeli control of the Jordan Valley and operational flexibility, as long as no appropriate security arrangements with the Palestinians and/or satisfactory regional security arrangements have been achieved, and as long as there is no fundamental change in the region's level of stability.

An inseparable part of the required security outline consists of non-military moves necessary to help the Palestinian Authority establish a stable government and effective control, weaken the roots of terrorism and the security threat *emanating* from the West Bank, and thereby help promote negotiations for a permanent settlement. The main moves include reducing army and Civil Administration involvement in the fabric of Palestinian life, transferring most authority for civilian matters still in Israel's hands to the PA in coordination with it, preventing an economic crisis in the West Bank by providing maximal economic freedom of action and movement to the Palestinians, encouraging economic initiatives involving Palestinians and partners abroad, and offering Israeli partnership and help in constructing economic infrastructures for the future Palestinian state.

As long as there is effective security coordination with the PA and there are no renewed waves of terrorism from the West Bank, the IDF would have to develop, gradually and in a controlled fashion, greater flexibility in the methods it uses to ensure routine security in the West Bank; this, in order to strengthen the PA's legitimacy vis-à-vis its own public. The IDF in the West Bank must gradually and carefully adopt a lower profile, especially in Palestinian populated areas. According to an operational program to be developed by

the IDF, it would be necessary to concentrate to the extent possible the deployment of army bases near central traffic arteries and the security envelope and to transition, in a controlled manner, to long distance command and control. These steps must be taken while considering all the elements involved in disengagement, such as the stages for the evacuation of the civilians and the conditions of routine security, while retaining the operational ability to return and operate deep in the heart of the West Bank should it prove necessary.

If, despite Israel's wishes, the PA ceases security cooperation in response to a withdrawal, implementation of the move would be more difficult and require the security outline to be stricter. To the extent the security framework proceeds well, it would be possible to incorporate other steps, such as transferring security responsibility in Areas B and Areas C to the PA where there are no more Israeli settlements, restoring some civilian supervision at the Jordan border crossings to the Palestinians, and incorporating foreign supervisors in security checks at the crossings, while leaving highest security control of the crossings in Israel's hands.

An internal security challenge lies in confronting the deep rift in Israeli society over the division of the land and the future of the West Bank. There is a not unfounded concern that some Israelis would react violently to a withdrawal or the evacuation of land and/or settlements, especially if this comes as a unilateral step rather than *as* part of a bilateral permanent agreement. Such actions could be expected to occur from the moment there is talk of a withdrawal or the initiation of a partial agreement in the public sphere or in the government, and continue until the start, during, or even after an actual evacuation. Violence might be aimed at Jews or Arabs, occur in Jerusalem, within the *Green Line*, or in the West Bank, and target public figures, individuals, public groups, or the IDF. Building the right response to such a danger requires preliminary planning with comprehensive staff work *by* all the security establishments involved.

From a security perspective, in the security framework described above, any disengagement from the West Bank and the Palestinians is feasible; an appropriate, balanced response to the security issue is doable, and is relevant as well to scenarios of partial or interim agreements that do not amount to a full and comprehensive resolution of the conflict. In addition, it would be highly desirable to try to include an effort to achieve a long term period of calm in the Gaza Strip by taking steps to attain a long term ceasefire and a controlled reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, two aims that are in Israel's best political and security interests.

This security framework does not refer to a comprehensive and overall security arrangement that would be required in a permanent status agreement, which, by its very nature, requires completely different types of arrangements. However, in this plan, a

withdrawal from the West Bank would be fundamentally different from the disengagement from the Gaza Strip. On the civilian level, the evacuation from the West Bank would be partial and the main settlement blocs where most of the population lives would stay in place. On the political level, the PA would continue to be a partner and the negotiations with it for a bilateral agreement could continue, if the PA is interested, but would have to exclude Hamas. Regional dialogue with actors such as Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the other Gulf states would likewise not be negated by this option. On the security level, the IDF would remain in the West Bank and continue to be responsible for security, despite the political cost this entails in the international arena, especially the expected refusal of many to recognize the fact that Israel will in fact have withdrawn from much of the West Bank and the occupation in those areas will have ended.

