



INSS Insight No. 849, August 25, 2016

The Defense Minister's Plan: One Hand Gives, the Other Topples

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On August 17, 2016, Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman unveiled his “carrot and stick” plan as a response to the wave of terrorism in the West Bank. The plan, which reflects the outline of a new policy he seeks to implement, rests on four pillars: (a) a distinction between the population involved and the population not involved in terrorism; (b) positive reinforcement for the latter population through infrastructure and economic development and a generous attitude to work permits in Israel; (c) sanctions and restrictions in areas from which terrorists set out and where violent incidents occur; and (d) an appeal to the Palestinian public in the West Bank, which bypasses the Palestinian Authority, instead of using the existing coordination channels – the mechanism for civilian coordination and the PA Ministry of Civil Affairs. Liberman also declared his intention of conducting a dialogue with academics, artists, and other powerful and influential parties in the territories, and of establishing a special website for dialogue with Palestinian society in general.

The underlying logic in the plan, namely, the distinction between different population groups and measures to improve the Palestinian economy, is not new; it is based on the defense establishment's policy, as designed and formulated during the term of former Defense Minister Moshe (Bogie) Ya'alon. It appears that Liberman has likewise accepted the defense establishment's policy on the importance of increasing the number of work permits in Israel and avoiding harm to the daily life of the population not involved in terrorism and violence, as these measures help restrain violence. At the same time, Liberman's plan is new in two respects: Israeli willingness to allocate land in Area C for economic and infrastructure development for the Palestinians, and the intention to bypass the PA for the purpose of dialogue with other powerful and influential parties in the territories, including through the designated website.

Israeli willingness to allocate land in Area C for Palestinian development is an important precedent that also establishes a possible basis for progress in the political process or continuation of Israeli measures that will maintain the possibility of a two-state solution once the conditions are ripe. Steps toward development can contribute to the emergence of a new regional dynamic if players from the Arab world and the international

community can be persuaded to lend a hand. It is likely, however, that the regional and international parties will not cooperate with measures by the Israeli government designed to bypass the PA and signal that Israel is preparing for a period of stagnation in the political process.

In fact, refining the idea to include a distinction between different development sections of Area C adjacent to Area A is likely to hasten substantial PA economic and infrastructure development, materially improve quality of life in the territories and the welfare of the Palestinian population, and strengthen the factors restraining terrorism and violence. For example, development areas can be defined – for tourism (e.g., the Jericho area), agricultural ventures, water and energy infrastructure (solar thermal collectors farms, for example), and industrial zones. It is preferable to consult with the PA in this regard concerning its economic initiatives and priorities. Moreover, a systematic approach and allocation of land in Area C for Palestinian development is likely to be interpreted by the international community as a positive signal from Israel, and reduce disputes between Israel and the international community in relation to project initiatives in these areas. It is not clear whether Israel considered the consequences of the move vis-à-vis pressure to return to the political process with the Palestinians.

On the other hand, Minister Liberman's public statement concerning his intention to conduct a dialogue with Palestinian groups that are not part of the PA, and not through the PA, constitutes a direct challenge to the PA and its leadership. This intention reflects the Defense Minister's absolute loss of hope in the PA, and especially its leader, and perhaps also skepticism as to its long term survival. Furthermore, it reflects Liberman's previous statements citing PA President Mahmoud Abbas as an obstacle and as part of the problem, not the solution.

Anticipating this criticism, Liberman cited the Facebook page of the IDF Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories as an example of queries by Palestinian residents addressed to the Israeli authorities that bypass the PA. Indeed, a query by Palestinian residents, and by economic entities, addressed directly to the civil administration in the West Bank is a common occurrence, particularly among businessmen and heads of local authorities having daily needs in this context, and occurs with the PA's knowledge. At the same time, President Abbas and senior parties on the Palestinian side are worried about channels of political dialogue that bypass the PA, and do not intend to allow independent initiatives that skirt the PA mandate. Indeed, Abbas's senior advisers responded immediately to Minister Liberman's statements by warning against deviation by Palestinian individuals or groups from the national line, and against coordination with Israel other than through the PA.

Against the background, there are increasing reports of the PA's difficulty in enforcing its control over violent groups, criminal gangs, and Tanzim groups in municipal centers,

refugee camps, and rural areas in the West Bank. At the same time, the influence of prominent Palestinian clans and families in making decisions pertaining to the management of the local communities has grown, coupled with less dependence on the PA and the PA's reduced influence on daily life. These trends weaken the PA and undermine any proper foundation for convening a responsible, stable, and functional Palestinian government, which is an Israeli interest as well. It follows that Minister Liberman's plan to introduce channels of dialogue that bypass the PA reinforces the current trend of undermining PA governance. Therefore, even if it is desirable to develop channels of communication with influential parties in the PA other than through the PA, from Israel's perspective, it is not correct to declare this publicly, because such a declaration in effect prevents any real possibility of dialogue with influential parties; such a dialogue will be considered subversion of the PA. In addition, Israel is liable to arouse opposition from the international community, which regards the PA as the sole legitimate address, and suspects that Israel has no real intention of achieving a two-state solution. In this context, if Israel acts to undermine the PA and its influence on the Palestinian population, it will simply play into the hands of those seeking to delegitimize Israel.

Furthermore, the declared intention to bypass the PA is liable to strengthen groups in the PA opposed to coexistence with Israel, and is liable to complicate the implementation of Israel's other intentions involving economic and infrastructure development. A declaration concerning allocation of land in Area C for Palestinian development is liable to be interpreted as one more element in a grand design aimed at causing the collapse of the PA. It also invites criticism of Israel by those who regard its policy as aiming to create a situation in which it can proclaim publicly that there is no Palestinian partner, because it is difficult to believe that such a declaration will promote dialogue with parties outside the PA. Such parties will be perceived as traitors, certainly by the PA. It is therefore unclear what benefit Minister Liberman seeks to achieve through this declaration.

The Liberman plan can be interpreted as a reflection of the intention by the Israeli government, or parts of it, to cause the collapse of the PA, without Israel being directly blamed for this process. Since the declaration has already been made, the Israeli government needs to make it clear, mainly to the Israeli public, whether it is indeed acting, even if indirectly, to cause the PA's collapse, or whether it regards the PA as the Palestinian partner for settling or managing the conflict.

In any event, it is best for the Israeli government to develop the other components of Minister Liberman's "carrot and stick" plan in order to leverage its economic and infrastructure logic, and translate it into a plan of action likely to lead to a positive change, including in the social sphere in the Palestinian arena, and hope for the resumption of political negotiations.