

The Political Process: Plan A, Plan B, and What Lies Between Them

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In late July 2013, after nearly a five-year freeze, a new chapter was opened in the Israeli-Palestinian political process. Under the sponsorship of the US administration, the latest round of talks between Israel and the PLO was launched in Washington. The two sides returned to the negotiating table skeptical regarding the chances of formulating a permanent agreement, and with the idea that should the talks fail, they would be able to place the blame on the other side. And while both sides were pessimistic as to the outcome of the negotiations, the Palestinian delegation radiated confidence, reflecting their understanding of the advantages of the alternative strategy developed by the Palestinian Authority – enlistment of international support for the establishment of a Palestinian state even without an agreement with Israel. Israel, however, did not formulate an alternative concept to a negotiated settlement that would allow it to promote the idea of political-territorial separation from the Palestinians.

In order to maintain the political initiative, and especially to cope with the security, demographic, and international challenges entailed by the conflict, the Israeli government will need to formulate its own alternative plan. While attempting to reach an agreement with the Palestinians, if only a partial or gradual one, Israel must also plan independent steps with the objective of delineating a border and promoting a regional reality of two states for two peoples. An independent Israeli initiative toward separation, with the goal of accomplishing such separation through regional and international coordination, might – by itself – prod the PA into taking

more flexible positions around the negotiating table, if only to prevent Israel from setting the framework for such a separation independently. Coordination with the US administration will help Israel position an independent alternative plan on the international scene not as an obstacle to a future negotiated agreement, but as a complementary move aiming to lay the groundwork for such an agreement.

Here We Go Again

Since taking office in February 2013 as a member of President Barack Obama's second term cabinet, Secretary of State John Kerry has been hard at work in attempts to jumpstart the Israeli-Palestinian political process. Kerry was motivated by a sense of mission, driven by the assessment that given the widening gap between the parties, this might be the last chance to arrive at an agreement based on the idea of a two-state solution. A central difficulty that Kerry faced in attempting to create an atmosphere conducive to dialogue was formulation of terms of reference for the renewal of talks. The guiding principles that were established were: working toward a permanent settlement based on the principle of two states for two peoples, which would mean the end of the conflict and the end of any claims one party may have against the other, to be reached within nine months of talks; and tackling all core issues: borders – including Israeli settlements on the West Bank and certain Jewish neighborhoods in Jerusalem; security arrangements; Palestinian refugees; and allocation of water resources to Israel and the Palestinian state. It was also decided that the negotiations would be held in secret and be accompanied by an American facilitator who would occasionally participate in meetings, verify progress, and raise bridging proposals.

To launch any talks, Kerry had to bypass obstacles preventing renewal of the process in the form of preconditions issued by Israel and the Palestinian Authority. The refusal of both sides to meet demands presented as conditions for talks has blocked the way to the negotiating table since early 2009, when the negotiations conducted in the Annapolis framework came to an end. The Palestinians demanded that the reference line for territorial discussion be the June 4, 1967 borders (ceasefire lines that were never recognized as a border), and that construction in West Bank settlements

and East Jerusalem come to a complete halt. Israel demanded recognition as a Jewish state; this would allow the framework for a settlement based on the principle of “two states for two peoples.” In addressing Israeli demands, the administration clarified that from its perspective the borders of the Palestinian state do not need to overlap completely with the 1967 lines, but should take into account the changes that have occurred on the ground over the years, meaning: the creation of Israeli settlement blocs in the West Bank. Thus Kerry skirted the settlement issue, at least in its most basic context, and abstained from insisting that Israel immediately freeze construction in the settlements. Moreover, the letter of guarantees to the Israeli government stated that in the view of the US administration, Israel is a Jewish state. To the Palestinians, the administration emphasized its position that the borders of the independent Palestinian state would be based on the 1967 lines, with necessary adjustments.¹ At the same time, Kerry worked to strengthen the Palestinian economy through a generous initiative for investments in infrastructure.² The Secretary of State further emphasized the importance of the regional environment. US General (ret.) John Allen was instructed to devise a formula for regional security in the Middle East that would take into account the security needs of Israel and the Palestinians,³ and Kerry conveyed the US expectation to representatives of the Arab League that they would support the return of the Palestinians to the negotiating table and the political process itself, through – among other ideas – some flexibility regarding certain articles of the Arab Peace Initiative.⁴

Israel accepted a Palestinian demand communicated through Kerry, and committed to the gradual release of Palestinian prisoners convicted of the murder of Israelis before the Oslo era. Israel also promised to significantly slow down building in settlements in the West Bank for as long as talks were underway.⁵ For its part, the Palestinian Authority committed not to leave the negotiating table during the months allocated for the talks, and to freeze any unilateral moves in the international arena to promote the establishment of a Palestinian state without negotiations with Israel, and not to challenge Israel in international institutions. Both sides committed to discuss all issues at the core of the conflict, although there was no agreement regarding the order in which these issues would be tackled.

Although over the 20 years since the signing of the Oslo agreements a number of approaches to negotiations have been tried, and although the terms of reference for the current talks were agreed upon in advance, during the first several months of the talks the parties focused on issues of procedure rather than fundamental matters.⁶ In order to ensure uninterrupted and relevant talks, the leaders as well as the negotiators themselves were to decide whether to discuss all the core issues at once, or to proceed to understandings in a gradual manner, issue by issue; whether to take a top-down approach to the process, in other words, guided by understandings between the leaders and senior levels of decision makers on both sides, or to take a bottom-up approach based on understandings that are to be formed in issue-based work teams; or whether to combine both approaches – with the discussion taking place in small teams assisted by experts who are part of the full delegations.

Beyond Procedural Aspects

It is widely assumed that a well-managed process increases the chances of talks yielding results, while a poorly managed process tends to allow the sides to slip out of the negotiating room and avoid decisions. Therefore, understandings reached on questions of procedure directly impact on the outcome of the negotiations. Specifically, if the American mediator is careful to run a stable, continuous, clear, and binding process, with close tracking of progress and regular reports from the two sides, the ability of the parties to avoid the difficult issues should automatically be reduced. However, this alone cannot ensure progress in the desired direction, particularly due to three characteristics of the process that have intensified over the years. One, gaps in basic positions have deepened through the many failed attempts to create a breakthrough toward a settlement. Two, there is serious erosion in mutual trust between the two peoples and between their leaders, and serious doubts exist regarding their readiness to promote and fully implement an agreement that by its nature would be an historic compromise. Three is the lack of broad legitimacy within both Palestinian and Israeli society for the expected results of negotiations, should they succeed; in both, the moderate forces that would support an historic compromise have been significantly weakened. Consequently,

each of the two sides has returned to the negotiating table while harboring doubts as to the ability of the other side to be a serious partner in a political process.

The lack of optimism that accompanied the renewed talks was reflected in the lack of interest in the process registered on both the Israeli and Palestinian scenes: the public response was not characterized by enthusiasm for a possible breakthrough. At the same time, there was no sweeping criticism, apparently given the prevalent skepticism that tangible progress toward a compromise, which would exact ideological and territorial costs and entail security risks, was forthcoming.⁷

Why then have the sides chosen to return to the negotiating table? Both parties were “pushed into” the process out of a desire to avoid paying the price of refusing the American demand to renew the talks – from Israel’s perspective a diplomatic price, and from the PA’s perspective a diplomatic and economic one, as far as the American economic aid is concerned⁸ – and due to the US commitments conveyed to both parties in order to convince them to renew the talks. This dynamic, which underlies this round of negotiations, means that lack of progress in the talks or their total failure will result in each side attempting to avoid responsibility for the failure – especially in the eyes of the US administration – and seeking to place the blame on the other side. However, this contingency portends a potential serious problem for the Israeli leadership, not only because of the tension that will be emerge with the Obama administration, but also, and especially, because the balance of power between Israel and the PA on the international scene is not in Israel’s favor.

The Palestinians came to the talks’ opening ceremony with the assessment that time is on the side of Palestinian interests (though only in terms of the two-state solution – which Palestinian opposition elements, led by Hamas, persistently oppose⁹). The source of this feeling is the growing international criticism of Israel’s retaining control of the West Bank during a prolonged political freeze, interrupted from time to time by a failed attempt to promote an agreement. Against this background, the Palestinians are conducting a well-orchestrated campaign to isolate and delegitimize Israel, negate any political support it enjoys, and gather support for Palestinian independence as declared by the international community. Significant

achievements in this campaign have already been registered, including the General Assembly's acceptance of Palestine as a nonmember observer state in the UN (November 2012),¹⁰ and the European Union decision to freeze financing for Israeli projects that involve institutions operating in the West Bank (July 2013).¹¹ This decision by the EU, announced while Kerry was working hard at formulating understandings that would return Israel and the Palestinians to the negotiating table, was a significant milestone in casting the settlement project as a symbol of Israel's responsibility for the political freeze.¹²

Moreover, even without any fundamental change in the official Palestinian position and with no tangible Palestinian overtures toward Israel, the US administration has over the years moved consistently closer to the Palestinian positions on various issues. With time, the United States retreated from its initial opposition to the establishment of a Palestinian state. The Obama administration even adopted the 1967 lines as the basis for a territorial partition – though taking into consideration demographic developments since 1967 in the disputed territories. The administration's disapproval of the settlement project in the territories is not a new development, but during Obama's first term this disapproval was translated into an explicit demand to freeze construction in settlements in the West Bank, if only for a limited period of time, to make it easier for the Palestinians to return to negotiations.¹³ The United States also moved closer to the Palestinian position regarding security arrangements necessary in order to ensure the stability of an agreement, mainly the Palestinian rejection of a permanent Israeli military presence in the sovereign territory of the Palestinian state.

Palestinian confidence regarding the ability to progress toward independence under conditions likely to be acceptable to the Palestinian public was also based on the impression that changes in the Israeli position on several issues over time have shown implicit and explicit flexibility – all the more so as even right wing governments brought about some of these changes. These include: (1) Israeli willingness for territorial exchanges on a 1:1 basis, apparently attesting to Israeli readiness to accept the 1967 lines as the reference line; (2) the unilateral disengagement from the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2005, including the evacuation of Israeli settlements

in the area and the additional withdrawal from four settlements in the northern West Bank, even in the absence of absolute, guaranteed, long term security quiet; (3) Olmert's offer to Abu Mazen in late 2008, more far reaching than any previous official Israeli offer; (4) Benjamin Netanyahu's declaration in his "Bar Ilan speech" in June 2009 that Israel would agree to the establishment of a Palestinian state – though demilitarized, and subject to Palestinian recognition of Israel as a Jewish state, a unified Jerusalem, and the non-return of refugees to Israel. This declaration was accompanied by a demand for a long term Israeli military presence in the Jordan Valley, though Israel does not demand sovereignty over the territory.

What then is the fundamental Palestinian interest in progressing toward an agreement, especially in the relatively short term allocated by the US administration for the newest round of talks? In the immediate time frame, it does not appear that the PA is rushing to take responsibility for providing the daily needs of the Palestinian population, a responsibility that would result directly from independence and sovereignty. In principle, it does not appear that the PA would be ready to proceed to a permanent peace with Israel in the framework of an agreement granting it sovereignty over less than the entire territory of the West Bank (approximately 95 percent of West Bank territory has been offered to them in the past¹⁴), and requiring other fundamental compromises likely to arouse broad Palestinian and Arab opposition. Moreover, for ideological and electoral reasons the PA has not made a concentrated effort to explain to the Palestinian public why such concessions are vital for achieving independence, and has instead clung to the principle of "all or nothing" regarding agreements and their implementation.¹⁵

Rather, the Palestinians have formulated a political alternative in the form of progress toward international recognition of independence, without an agreement based on negotiations and compromise with Israel. And indeed, diplomatic activity conducted in this framework has achieved not insignificant results. It even appears that in the eyes of a growing share of Palestinian political elements, international diplomacy – launched as Plan B – has assumed the characteristics of Plan A, notwithstanding that close coordination with Israel will be necessary for a Palestinian state to achieve full sovereignty and sustainable security and economic infrastructures.

Moreover, the Palestinians boast of an additional alternative to an historic compromise resulting from negotiations with Israel: the gradual creation of one state, reflecting the political-territorial reality in the conflict arena. If peace talks fail and international recognition of Palestinian independence is delayed, public and political discourse in this matter will presumably broaden – not only in the Palestinian arena but in the international arena as well.¹⁶

In contrast, the government of Israel has no articulated and declared alternative to negotiated progress toward political and territorial separation as a basis for a two-state solution. In other words, as opposed to the Palestinians, Israel has not formulated an alternative concept and has not devised an alternate plan in case of failure of the current round of talks and/or the entire political process. Furthermore, in contravention of rhetoric endorsing the idea of “two states for two peoples,” actions and operative decisions, especially those related to continued construction in the settlements, attest to a preference for the current state of affairs – presumably based on the assumption that the status quo, where Israel controls most of the territory without limitations on freedom of action, is the best situation for Israel. The current relative security quiet in the West Bank, which is also the result of routine security cooperation between Israeli forces and the Palestinian security apparatuses, allows the government to avoid a determined search for a way to advance the idea of political-territorial separation. Accordingly, the moment of decision regarding a temporary or permanent construction freeze in the settlements, the future of settlements and outposts in the West Bank, and the transfer of part of Area C to PA control is postponed.

The abstention from taking steps toward separation reflects an assessment that at this time it is not possible to reach a fundamental permanent or interim agreement that would meet Israeli demands and that the Palestinians could implement. This would not only be due to the institutional split in the Palestinian arena and the fact that the Gaza Strip is under Hamas control. In order to ensure that the Palestinian state would not be a hothouse for radical Islamic elements and that it would not be susceptible to Iranian influence, tough and comprehensive security arrangements are required. It is doubtful that the PA would accept or be able to function in accordance

with these arrangements, given the PA's stance and the positions of the Palestinian public itself. Thus while most of the Israeli public supports the two-state principle, it will not be simple to bridge between Israel's specific positions regarding compromise on core issues and the positions of the Palestinian public.¹⁷ Moreover, the vast majority of the Israeli public will likely expect an agreement to include security terms that have little chance of acceptance by the PA.

Joining these assessments, which focus on the Israeli-Palestinian arena, is the concern regarding the security threats caused by the volatility in the Middle East, including: Iranian progress toward nuclear capabilities; the rise of the voice of political Islam in the Arab street, the fear that the regional wave of upheavals will also reach Jordan, and the possibility that in Jordan, as in the Sinai Peninsula and in Syria, a stronghold of radical Islamic forces will be created. These factors and trends, individually and together, significantly constrain Israel's room to negotiate, and are expected to make progress in the political process difficult to achieve.

The political and practical relevance of the alternative Palestinian strategy will likely grow stronger if the negotiations continue without real progress, or if they fail completely, especially if blame is placed on Israel. Already at the outset of the new round of talks, tension arose between Israel and the PA and the US administration due to new permits that were issued for construction in the West Bank – timed close to the first stage of Israel's release of Palestinian prisoners.¹⁸ The prisoner release, carried out despite public protest in Israel, will help Israel argue that it is not responsible for the freeze in talks, should such a freeze develop. However, it is doubtful whether this argument will spare Israel any criticism, especially in light of the continued construction in the West Bank, and it is quite doubtful whether this will deter the PA from renewed acceleration of its international diplomatic campaign. However, Israel's long term national interest – the assurance of its future as the democratic nation state of the Jewish people in secure borders – demands that the government retain the political initiative. This means the preparation of a credible, responsible, and executable political alternative that consists mainly of cautious and gradual progress toward separation from the Palestinians and the shaping of the state's borders.

Plan B: Alternate and Complementary

Achievement of Israel's long term national objectives requires a territorial division that splits the territory between Jordan and the Mediterranean into two nation states. In other words, Israel must separate from the West Bank Palestinians and set borders that ensure a democratic state with a Jewish majority, while creating a reality of two states for two peoples – whether through negotiations or independently.

On the path to a long term political settlement, partial, interim, and transitional agreements will be necessary, along with coordinated independent actions by the parties – all of which should be linked to any permanent agreement. This will allow improvement in relations between the two leaderships, and no less important, these steps may help build trust between the two societies and expand the public support for the two leaderships vital to the achievement of legitimacy for a permanent settlement. The proposed formula for progress is separate implementation of each step, which will contribute gradually to the shaping of a reality of two states, and the execution of every agreed issue without waiting for simultaneous agreement on all the core issues and the formulation of a comprehensive settlement.

In parallel, Israel must prepare a clear and coherent alternative to an agreement achieved through negotiations, in case the current and/or future rounds of talks do not yield an agreement securing its national interests. This alternative must be prepared so that Israel does not remain hostage to the conflict. Moreover, a gradual alternative presented by the government of Israel would weaken the weight of the Palestinian unilateral campaign in the international arena, while simultaneously delaying any action toward an internationally coerced settlement.

According to this alternative, Israel's independent steps would be taken at a point in time decided upon by the government, after exhausting to the greatest extent possible the negotiations process and after suitably preparing for the independent moves. The independent initiative would in the long term serve the political process toward an agreement, and would assist Israel in escaping a dead end or failure in the talks. In any scenario, Israel will require advance strategic and practical planning, civil and defense planning, and planning for intra-Israel dialogue to prepare both the

public and the national infrastructure for the process of separation from the Palestinians, which would necessarily require the evacuation of settlements. It is therefore proposed that Israel begin to implement independent steps in a gradual, controlled, and astute manner, while examining the effect of each step before moving on to the next one. So, for example, a gradual evacuation of outposts can be followed by the evacuation of isolated communities, measures that would assist in preparing Israeli public opinion for an independent delineation of borders.

The independent alternative for separation into two nation states would be based on voluntary Israeli concession of territories outside of the large settlement blocs, as they will be defined, while maintaining these major blocs as part and parcel of the State of Israel. The deployment line would serve as a temporary border, while the Palestinians are urged to negotiate with Israel on the route of a permanent border on the basis of agreed-upon land swaps. In the event that negotiations are not renewed, the temporary border will become permanent. As long as there is no agreement, the IDF will remain in areas defined according to security needs, such as the Jordan Valley, and Israel would retain control of the outer borders and surrounding areas of the territories to be evacuated by Israelis who would be resettled within the state's temporary borders.

With the experience of the disengagement from Gaza and northern Samaria in 2005 in mind,¹⁹ preparations must be made for the day that residents of settlements outside the large blocs are called upon to return to the borders of the State of Israel.²⁰ In order to avoid an internal conflagration, the government must seriously consider how to change the discourse with the settlers regarding the reality that will be created when there are two nation states in the area. This is necessary in order to expand public support for the two-state solution, to formulate the evacuation as a unifying step and not as a repudiation of an important sector that for decades has seen the settlement of Judea and Samaria as a national mission, and to justify enforcement and evacuation by force, should such be necessary. Preparation for absorbing this population should include a voluntary evacuation law, compensation and absorption plans for residents of settlements outside the large blocs, and extensive domestic discourse during the process of the physical evacuation and afterward. In this context, as preparation for

demarcation of the permanent border, creative territorial ideas should be encouraged that may be able to reduce the number of Israelis living beyond the State of Israel's final border who would need to be evacuated. An option should also be considered whereby Israeli settlements would remain within the borders of a Palestinian state, should one be established, as autonomous Israeli territorial enclaves, as well as even the possibility of granting Palestinian citizenship to Israeli residents, as long as this would be under terms of a final and end-of-conflict agreement.²¹

A complementary economic plan mainly involving an expansion of the Paris agreement through tangible benefits to the Palestinians would be vital in order to build trust in an independent Israeli alternative. Israeli investment along with significant international investment is necessary to improve infrastructure in the West Bank – including in Area C – and the Gaza Strip, in areas including: transportation, sewage treatment, electricity supply, exploitation of natural gas in the continental shelf off of Gaza, a water accord between Israel and the PA, and the establishment of a Palestinian national water carrier system. Israel should grant priority to the PA regarding supply of agricultural produce and labor in Israel. At the same time, it is vital to prod the Palestinians to improve their independent ability to collect taxes, instead of relying on Israeli tax collection.²² There must also be consideration of the socioeconomic processes underway in Palestinian society, with a focus on enhancing the trend of middle class growth and expansion of the circle of intellectuals to increase the variety of options open to them.

The founding of independent economic projects, and a solidification of physical capabilities, would help improve the Palestinian public mood, which is expected to have positive effects in the Israeli-Palestinian arena. Nevertheless, each gradual step of progress would almost certainly be accompanied by deep Palestinian suspicion of temporary agreements that might provide Israel legitimacy and opportunity to establish additional residential-territorial facts on the ground. The task of persuasion in this context would be complex and difficult.²³ However, it is possible that Israeli steps toward separation would bring the PA to realize that cooperation with the process on its part, and perhaps even its contribution of viable ideas toward the resolution of fundamental issues of conflict, could help

it present the Israeli redeployment as a result of its own policy. It is also possible that such an approach would reinforce Fatah's position among its traditional supporters on the domestic scene against opposition forces led by Hamas.

Hamas, the right wing element in Palestinian politics whose positions emerge at the negotiating table only indirectly, remains a key factor. It is essentially the elephant in the room. The very existence of a parallel authority in the Gaza Strip headed by Hamas calls into question the ability to implement understandings reached between Israel and the PLO – should such be reached. Hamas is also likely to realize its potential as “spoiler,” should Israel take unilateral steps toward separation in the West Bank. The weakened state of Hamas due to the military blow inflicted by Israel in November 2012, especially on the backdrop of increased tension between the organization and the Egyptian government following the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood government, has lowered motivation within the organization to take on Israel directly. This is especially so as long as there is no progress in negotiations, and as long as no interest has been created for it to challenge Israel's military deterrent effect. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that any Israeli unilateral action toward separation in the West Bank would change Hamas's balance sheet of considerations. The economic hardship in the Gaza Strip, despite the regular transfer of civilian goods to the region with the coordination of Israel and Egypt, will then add fuel to the fire of political protest. In order to limit the possibility of an attempt by Hamas to ignite a military conflict, which would demonstrate the ominous consequences of a retreat and thus make it difficult to realize the intention of withdrawing from the West Bank, Israel must make sure to continue the ongoing alleviation of its policy of isolation against the Gaza Strip, and thus create among the Gaza population and leadership alike an interest in maintaining calm. Security quiet in the Gaza Strip is a clear Israeli interest. The context of a political process alongside an independent political territorial initiative in the West Bank only makes this interest clearer.

Coordination of the plan with the US administration will encourage Palestinian recognition of Israeli determination to progress toward a two-state reality – if not by mutual agreement, then independently. Progress

toward such a reality as a response to the political dead end is a strategy that does not contradict the American interest in removing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the top of its Middle East agenda. For this reason, and especially for reasons directly connected with relations between Israel and the United States, Israeli diplomacy must build on such coordination.

A Look Ahead

The wave of political-military upheavals in the Middle East, which perhaps has not yet peaked, has intensified the challenges confronting Israel as it comes to negotiate a permanent agreement with the Palestinians. In Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon centralized state control has weakened, and radical Islamic strongholds have formed in border areas. Alongside these developments, which threaten to spread to Jordan – and should Israel leave the West Bank, to this area as well – Iran continues in its race to achieve military nuclear capability. These developments have augmented the constant concern in Israel regarding security threats inherent in redeployment in the West Bank, and in the loss of military assets as a result of the establishment of a Palestinian state.

The US administration has taken upon itself to create an inter-Arab environment that would support Israeli-Palestinian progress toward an agreement, and perhaps even provide Israel with security guarantees. This will not be an easy task, especially if renewed talks are characterized by a constant search by the parties for an exit strategy while pointing a finger at the other side. In addition, in order to fully exhaust the round of renewed talks, which it initiated, the administration must assist the parties should they encounter – as they certainly will – a lack of agreement on procedural and fundamental issues. This must be done, furthermore, while attempting to maintain an image as a fair and unbiased mediator. If this is not enough, in the background there is a growing intra-American debate regarding the role played by the United States in the Middle East, which holds significant potential for military involvement, and which has consequences for the power struggle among superpowers. It is possible that this role, which brought the administration to the threshold of involvement in the Syrian civil war, will distract the administration's attention from its efforts to

bring peace between Israel and the Palestinians, and make progress toward an agreement more difficult.

Moreover, Secretary of State Kerry embarked on the path leading to renewed negotiations with the assumption that the principles of an agreement are known, as detailed in the parameters proposed by former President Clinton, in proposals that Israel has placed in the past on the negotiating table (Ehud Barak at Camp David in 2000; Ehud Olmert during the Annapolis talks in 2008), and in the Arab Peace Initiative. However, as talks continue, it will presumably be evident, as in the past, that the devil is in the details, and that placing these details on the agenda does not close gaps, but rather highlights and expands them. A strategy of transitional agreements on the way to a permanent agreement to be formed by the American mediator would help avoid a repetition of the familiar dynamic of the collapse of talks and the shutdown of the political process for another prolonged freeze.

The complexity of the core issues and their political, diplomatic, and psychological sensitivity is relevant not only to the gaps in positions between Israel and the Palestinians, but also to the domestic arenas. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will have difficulty placing a map on the negotiating table to serve as the basis for continued talks without this step shaking up his coalition and arousing broad public protest. For his part, PA President Mahmoud Abbas arrived at negotiations with severe concerns of widespread domestic protest that might be led by opposition elements – inspired in part by the popular uprisings in Arab countries – as a response to willingness to compromise. It is doubtful whether either leadership will be able to muster the political power necessary to together arrive at a breakthrough in negotiations.

Nevertheless, the regional threats actually highlight for Israel the necessity of separation from the Palestinians. Israel's path to a safe and acceptable strategic environment is long and winding, and there are many factors beyond its control in the greater regional framework. In this context, one should not discount the possibility of dialogue between Israel and the heads of leading Arab League countries regarding willingness in principle to renew the multilateral format, with the recognition of the Arab Peace Initiative as the basis for a regional political process. The main

advantage of such an approach is in its chances of bringing about improved management of the conflict at the first phase, parallel to bilateral talks, and in the second phase, to be a basis for negotiations with the Palestinians for a permanent agreement along with dialogue with additional Middle East countries with stable central governments.

A change in the political-territorial reality in the conflict arena is the goal; a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians is the means to achieve this goal. The path to this objective is paved with difficulties and obstacles, but these must not deter the government of Israel from its pursuit of fortification of the state's Jewish democratic character along with solidification of its regional and international status. In order to progress toward the objective, initiative must return to Israel's hands through efforts at separating from the Palestinians, whether through negotiations – as it is now doing – or in independent fashion. Preparation on a national level for the day that residents of the settlements will be called upon to return to the borders of the State of Israel, as they will be defined, requires a comprehensive alternative plan, in other words, Plan B.

Gradual independent, steps toward a political-territorial separation that Israel would undertake unilaterally following a political freeze would certainly encounter Palestinian opposition, as well as protest from Arab and European countries. However, it can be assumed that the criticism would die down with time, if the moves are executed in coordination with the US administration, communicate a clear message of intent to reduce the relative weight of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within the broader Arab-Israeli conflict, and include repeated calls for the Palestinian Authority to join the process.

Notes

- 1 Assaf Gibor, "Senior Fatah Officials: Return to Negotiations Only on the Basis of the '67 Borders," *Maariv NRG*, July 18, 2013; Ariel Kehana, "Netanyahu Counters: There Will be No Peace Agreement Based on the '67 Borders," *Maariv NRG*, July 18, 2013; Barak Ravid, "Peace Talks: The Americans Presented the Sides with Guarantees to Enable Resumption of Negotiations," *Haaretz*, July 30, 2013.
- 2 "Kerry Pushes \$4 billion West Bank Development Plan," www.cnn.com/2013/05/26/world/meast/west-bank-investment.

- 3 David Ignatius, "John Kerry Goes on a Persistent Quest for Middle East Peace," http://www.oregonlive.com/opinion/index.ssf/2013/07/john_kerry_goes_on_a_captain_a.html.
- 4 "Arab League Backs Kerry's Israeli-Palestinian Plan," *BBC News*, July 17, 2013, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-23346255; Herb Keinon, "Kerry Pushes Israel to Consider Arab League Peace Plan," *Jerusalem Post*, July 17, 2013, <http://www.jpost.com/Diplomacy-and-Politics/Kerry-pushes-Israel-to-consider-Arab-League-peace-plan-in-Amman-320157>.
- 5 Barak Ravid, "Behind the Scenes of the Contact to Renew Negotiations: Kerry Pressured, Abu Mazen Relented," *Haaretz*, June 25, 2013.
- 6 Appointed as heads of the delegations were veteran personalities of the peace process, who took part in previous negotiations. The Palestinian delegation was headed by Saeb Erekat, who has guided the process since the talks before the Oslo agreement. Opposite him was Justice Minister Tzipi Livni, who served as head of the negotiating team during the Annapolis process (2007-8), during Ehud Olmert's term as prime minister, and the attorney Yitzhak Molcho, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's representative in secret talks between Israel and the PA conducted in the years since Annapolis. Former US ambassador to Israel Martin Indyk was appointed as mediator.
- 7 Udi Dekel and Orit Perlov, "The Great Divide: The Political Process and Palestinian Discourse on the Social Networks," *INSS Insight No. 453*, August 11, 2013; regarding the Israeli arena, it can be assumed that seeds of opposition to renewal of the political process were calmed on the backdrop of Netanyahu's commitment that an agreed-upon accord, should one be reached, would be put to a referendum. See Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu: Any Political Agreement Reached will be Brought to the People for a Decision," *Haaretz*, June 30, 2013.
- 8 Daniel Kurtzer and Gilead Sher, "Kerry's Next Move in the Middle East," *Los Angeles Times*, July 30, 2013.
- 9 Regarding Hamas opposition to renewal of the peace process, see "Haniyeh: Palestinians will not Recognize Israel," *Ma'an News Agency*, June 26, 2013; Asman al-Ghoul, "Hamas Warns Abu Mazen on Peace Talks with Israel," *al-Monitor Palestine Pulse*, July 26, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/hamas-abbas-israel-kerry-peace-talks.html#>; Ehud Yaari, "Hamas in Crisis: Isolation and Internal Strife," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 30, 2013, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hamas-in-crisis-isolation-and-internal-strife>.
- 10 "General Assembly Votes Overwhelmingly to Accord Palestine 'Non-Member Observer State' Status in United Nations," General Assembly GA/11317, November 29, 2012, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2012/ga11317.doc.htm>.

- 11 "On June 30 European Commission adopted a Notice containing guidelines on the eligibility of Israeli entities and their activities in the territories occupied by Israel since June 1967 for grants, prizes and financial instruments funded by the EU from 2014 onwards. These guidelines set out the territorial limitations under which the Commission will award EU support to Israeli entities," in Statement by the Delegation of the European Union to the State of Israel on the European Commission Notice (16/07/2013), http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/israel/press_corner/all_news/news/2013/20131607; Guidelines on the eligibility of Israeli entities and their activities in the territories occupied by Israel since June 1967 for grants, prizes and financial instruments funded by the EU from 2014 Onwards (2013/C 205/05), *Official Journal of the European Union*, C205, vol. 56, July 19, 2013, <http://unipsal.un.org/UNIPSAL.NSF/O/88584262AOAOE3E485257BAD00414464>. See also "Palestine Joins Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe," *Wafa*, July 4, 2013, englihs.wafa.ps/index.php?action=detail&id=22758.
- 12 It seemed that the European Union decision prodded Israel's government to respond positively to the efforts of the Secretary of State to revive the peace process. See, for example, Barak Ravid, "European Sanctions Made Netanyahu Bend; the US Threats Made Abbas Concede," *Haaretz*, July 21, 2013; Shlomo Brom, "Resumption of Negotiations with the Palestinians: Illusion or Reality?" *INSS Insight* No. 450, July 24, 2013.
- 13 See Daniel Kurtzer, "Behind the Settlements," *American Interest*, March/April 2010, www.the-american-interest.com/article.cfm?piece=781.
- 14 See "Olmert Proposes that Israel Annex 7% of the West Bank; Palestinians will Receive 5.5% in Return," *Haaretz*, August 12, 2008; Nahum Barnea and Shimon Shiffer, "Interview with Ehud Olmert," *Yediot Ahronot*, September 28, 2009.
- 15 Statements reflecting a readiness to concede on traditional positions were directed over the years mainly to a non-Palestinian audience, although it is difficult to imagine that their significance was lost on the Palestinian audience itself. See, for example, the statement of Mahmoud Abbas at a meeting with Israelis against the backdrop of the latest round of talks: Barak Ravid, "Peace Agreement Will Mean the End of the Conflict; We Will not Demand Haifa and Acre," *Haaretz*, August 22, 2013. It was also reported that Abbas expressed recognition of the fact that the Palestinian state would be demilitarized.
- 16 "Why is there Talk of a 'One-State Solution' for Israelis and Palestinians?" *The Economist*, March 20, 2013, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/newsbook/2013/03/economist-explains-one-state-solution-israel-palestine>; Yolande Knell, "Reconsidering the Two-State Solution," *BBC News Middle East*, March 21, 2013, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-21850739; Ghada al-Karmi, "A One State Solution: Pros and Cons," *al-Monitor*, June 16, 2013.

- 17 The results of a public opinion survey conducted among the Palestinian public in the West Bank revealed that 42 percent of respondents thought that the most important objective is the ending of the Israeli occupation and the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with East Jerusalem as its capital. Thirty-four percent of respondents held that the primary objective should be the right of return for 1948 refugees to their cities and towns; 10 percent answered that the main objective should be the building of a democratic political system. See “Palestinian Public Opinion Poll No. 48, PSR – Survey Research Unit, Press Release,” June 17, 2013, <http://www.popsr.org/survey/polls/2013/p48epressrelease.html>. The findings of the Peace Index, which examines public opinion in Israel, published July 28, 2013, showed that 77 percent of respondents expressed opposition to the right of return, 62.5 percent expressed opposition to a retreat to the 1967 borders with land swaps, 58 percent expressed opposition to evacuation of settlements (there was no question regarding the future of Ariel, Maale Adumim, and the large settlement blocs), and 50 percent opposed transfer of the Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem to Palestinian control along with a special agreement about the city’s holy sites. See “The Peace Index, Survey Release,” <http://peaceindex.org/indexMonthEng.aspx?num=254>.
- 18 According to the Secretary of State, Mahmoud Abbas knew that the Israeli government intended to permit limited further building in East Jerusalem and the West Bank in areas that according to Netanyahu would not harm a peace accord. See Michel Wilner, “Kerry: Netanyahu Told Me, Abbas more Settlements were Coming,” *Jerusalem Post*, August 13, 2013.
- 19 Report of the State Investigatory Commission [headed by Vice President of the Supreme Court A. Matza] on the Topic of the Treatment by the Authorized Authorities of Evacuees from Gush Katif and Northern Shomron, http://elyon1.court.gov.il/heb/hitnatkut/doc/final_report.pdf.
- 20 Approximately 100,000 people live in settlements in the West Bank outside of the large settlement blocs.
- 21 See Gidon Biger and Gilead Sher, “Jewish Enclaves in a Palestinian State,” *INSS Insight* No. 416, April 8, 2013.
- 22 In this framework, it is appropriate to promote the Steinitz-Fayyad agreement. See “Steinitz and Fayyad Signed Agreements on Trade between Israel and the PA,” *The Marker*, July 31, 2012.
- 23 A sign of readiness to consider a multi-stage process, if not for solutions to the core issues then at least for implementation of understandings, can be seen in the words of Mahmoud Abbas that he would be willing to accept implementation “of the [entire] agreement in stages.” See Ravid, “Peace Agreement will Mean the End of the Conflict.”