

Partial Unilateral Withdrawal: Israel's Next Step?

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By **Peter Berkowitz** - May 30, 2014

What's the next step?

That's the question again on the minds of those who care about Israel, the Palestinians—and America's interests in the Middle East—following the April collapse of Secretary of State John Kerry's well-intentioned if quixotic attempt to reach a final status agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

Since returning to the prime minister's office in March 2009, Benjamin Netanyahu has followed Washington's lead, first by muddling through until the U.S. ramped up a new round of negotiations and then seeking to advance them.

This time a new answer to the old question of "What next?" is taking shape in Israel. Distinguished voices on both sides of the political center there are increasingly calling for a partial, unilateral withdrawal from areas of the West Bank most densely populated by Palestinians.

In light of the debacles of the recent past, Netanyahu appears to be listening.

At Annapolis in 2007, then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice launched a well-intentioned if quixotic attempt to reach a final status agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. The effort fell apart the following year when Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas walked away from a generous offer from then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

Undeterred, in January 2009, President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton, in a well-intentioned if quixotic attempt to broker a final status agreement, named George Mitchell as a special envoy to the Arab-Israeli peace process.

In June 2009, to advance the process, Netanyahu gave a speech at Bar Ilan University declaring his support for a Palestinian state living side-by-side in peace and security with the Jewish state. President Abbas did not reciprocate in kind with a speech recognizing the rights of a Jewish state to coexist peacefully with a Palestinian state.

In 2010, at the request of the Obama administration and as a goodwill gesture to the Palestinians, Netanyahu imposed a 10-month freeze on settlement building. The Palestinians offered no gesture of goodwill in return. In May 2011, the moribund Mitchell talks ended with the special envoy's resignation.

In 2013, again at the request of the Obama administration and in the hopes of luring Palestinians to the negotiating table with John Kerry, Netanyahu made the excruciating decision to release more than 100 Palestinian terrorists, many of whom had been convicted of murdering Israeli civilians. No such good-faith gesture was made in response by Abbas.

Actually, Abbas's decision last month to form a unity government with Hamas convinced many Israelis of his hostile intentions—and it may have prompted Netanyahu to consider whether the time for muddling through should come to an end.

In an interview last week with Bloomberg journalist Jeffrey Goldberg, Netanyahu spoke respectfully of an “emerging consensus” in Israel. The consensus is complex. A substantial and growing number of Israelis affirm the need for a demilitarized Palestinian state that recognizes Israel as a Jewish state. Yet most of these same Israelis have concluded, according to Netanyahu, that the current Palestinian leadership is incapable of agreeing “to the minimal set of conditions any Israeli government would need.”

While insisting that “negotiations are always preferable,” Netanyahu also noted that “the idea of taking unilateral steps is gaining ground, from the center-left to the center-right.” Netanyahu did not himself embrace the idea of withdrawing from selected areas of the West Bank. Indeed, the prime minister stressed that “the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza didn't improve the situation or advance peace—it created Hamastan, from which thousands of rockets have been fired” at Israeli cities.

Nonetheless, since the beginning of this year, four prominent Israelis have advanced the idea of partial unilateral withdrawal. Three have either recently held, or presently serve in, major positions in Netanyahu's government.

First out of the gate was former Air Force general and former Chief of Military Intelligence Amos Yadlin, whose politics are the center-left. As prospects of a successful conclusion of the Kerry negotiations were growing increasingly dim, Yadlin told the Jerusalem Post in January that Israel should adopt as a Plan B the idea of “‘coordinated unilateral’ withdrawal to lines it deems suitable.”

In February, Michael Oren, who served under Netanyahu from 2009 to 2013 as Israel's ambassador to Washington, endorsed a similar Plan B. While Oren did not provide details, he told the Times of London that he had discussed the idea of unilateral withdrawal with “individuals from ‘various points on the Israeli political spectrum’ and with foreign officials.”

Earlier this month, Uzi Arad, national security adviser to Netanyahu from 2009 to 2011, proposed that in the aftermath of failed peace negotiations Israel should consider undertaking a “unilateral redeployment in the West Bank.” In exchange, Arad argued, Israel should demand from the Middle East Quartet (the United States, the United Nations, the

European Union, and Russia) an agreement to avoid all “hostile diplomatic, economic or legal action”; to oppose boycotts, sanctions and divestments against Israel; and to recognize that Israel has “made unilateral concessions beyond the call of duty.”

And just days before Netanyahu’s interview with Jeffrey Goldberg, Naftali Bennett, Israel’s minister of the economy and leader of the Jewish Home party, advocated in a Wall Street Journal op-ed his own version of partial unilateral withdrawal. Bennett’s “Stability Plan,” which he is promoting in the Knesset, calls for Israel to withdraw from so-called Areas A and B, where the vast majority of the 2.7 million West Bank Palestinians reside; annex Area C (approximately two-thirds of the West Bank); and offer the Palestinians who live there “full Israeli citizenship.”

Bennett’s plan is by far the most detailed, but all versions of partial, unilateral withdrawal are exposed to common criticisms.

For starters, some Israelis say that rather than turning her back on the Palestinians, the better response to the breakdown of negotiations would be for Israel to focus on social, political, and economic development in the West Bank. In theory, however, there is no direct contradiction between withdrawing the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) from limited areas in the West Bank and Israel’s continuing to cooperate with other nations to help build the physical, political, and cultural infrastructure of a future Palestinian state.

Skeptics will point out that international approval of unilateral Israeli action—specifically on the part of leftists in Europe and America—would be fleeting. This may be true, but the principal justification for such action is not to win favor in the eyes of the international community but to lessen Israel’s need to rule over a hostile population.

It will also be argued that evacuating even limited portions of the West Bank will reinforce Palestinian intransigence by rewarding them with something for nothing. Perhaps so, but granting Palestinians’ self-rule in a limited part of the land they claim is theirs leaves them with a considerable incentive to eventually return to the negotiating table.

Finally, as Netanyahu worries in his Bloomberg interview and as many Israelis fear, partial unilateral withdrawal will, as it did in Lebanon in 2000 and Gaza in 2005, create a vacuum into which Muslim extremists will flow. This time it would likely be even worse as Israel will be left with indefensible borders miles from the heart of the country. The greater Tel Aviv area, which is Israel’s commercial and cultural center, and Ben Gurion International Airport—its principal international entry and exit point—will be exposed to rocket and missile attacks capable of quickly shutting down the country.

The counter-argument here is that partial unilateral withdrawal from the West Bank is different. After leaving Lebanon in 2000, Israel was in no position to prevent Iran, with Syria’s help, from supplying weapons to Hezbollah. After Israel’s evacuation in 2005, Palestinians were able to smuggle Iranian rockets and missiles into the Gaza Strip through

tunnels under the border they shared with Egypt. But partial withdrawal from the West Bank would leave Israel with control over all West Bank borders as well as over the territory's high mountain ridges and the Jordan River Valley.

Undoubtedly, some weapons will get through to Hamas fighters in the West Bank. But this has been the case for years. In the event of an attack on Israel following unilateral withdrawal, the IDF will be able to roll in within a few hours to crush those responsible, and will have an unambiguous right of self-defense under the U.N. charter to persist in military operations until it eliminates the threat.

Partial unilateral withdrawal by Israel from the West Bank represents a highly imperfect response to the conflict with the Palestinians. It is all the more worth taking note, therefore, of the increasing number of eminent Israelis—left and right—who seem to think that it has emerged as the least imperfect answer to the question “What next?”

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