

Predictable Reactions After the Abduction of Three Israeli Students

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By **Peter Berkowitz** - June 17, 2014

TEL AVIV—Israel has been riveted in recent days by the abduction of three Jewish religious students who were hitchhiking in the West Bank region of Gush Etzion. On Sunday Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that he had information that the kidnapping was carried out by Hamas—adding ominously that it was “the same Hamas” Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas had formed a unity government with earlier this month.

As Israeli security forces fanned out looking for the young men, all of the predictable reactions have occurred: Israel arrested some 40 Palestinian Arabs, including several Hamas operatives and the speaker of the PA parliament; during the operation, one Palestinian was killed; Abbas denounced the kidnapping—but also the Israeli response, as if they were morally equivalent.

Many readers of the European and American press—and some sectors of the Israeli press—will tacitly concur with Abbas’ logic by blaming the kidnappings on oppressive conditions that Israel imposes on West Bank Palestinians. But this is a perception rooted in legend or, at the most, rooted in the past.

The truth on the ground is that since the second intifada wound down in the mid-2000s, Israel has done much to improve conditions for West Bank Palestinians. Whatever the results of Israel’s massive operation to rescue the three teenage abductees, the Netanyahu government would be wise to continue those efforts.

Among the most significant and least-reported measures implemented by Israel over the last six years is a major easing of restrictions on travel within the West Bank. Most of the time Israelis and Palestinians alike can drive from Nablus in the north to Hebron in the south without ever stopping at a checkpoint.

Movement within the West Bank, a territory smaller than Delaware, is shaped by the 1995 Oslo II Accord, which divides it into three areas. In Area A, the Palestinian Authority controls civil and security matters. In Area B, Israel and the Palestinians share responsibility. And in Area C, Israel controls civil and security matters.

Although Areas A and B constitute about one-third of the West Bank, approximately 90 percent of the 2.7 million West Bank Palestinians live in them.

The principal restriction on movement within the West Bank stemming from Oslo II applies to Israelis and not Palestinians: Palestinians may travel to all areas of the West Bank; Israeli civilians are prohibited from entering Area A. And while Israel civilians are excluded from some West Bank roads reserved exclusively for Palestinians, all West Bank roads are open to Palestinians.

After the outbreak in the autumn of 2000 of the second intifada, Israel established a system of West Bank checkpoints. These internal roadblocks were a direct response to the devastating wave of suicide bombing attacks Palestinian terrorists launched against Israeli buses, discotheques, restaurants, cafes, and hotels—approximately 1,100 Israelis were killed and 8,300 wounded during the second intifada. The checkpoints were designed to disrupt terrorists' ability to organize, and to intercept suicide bombers before they crossed over into Israel.

Since 2008, Israel has significantly reduced the number of roadblocks within the West Bank from about 40 to about 10, thanks to several factors. Blocking entry into Israel with a much-maligned security fence has enabled the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to allow goods and people to move inside the West Bank with considerably less hindrance.

Increased cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority following Hamas's 2007 takeover of the Gaza Strip permitted the IDF to step up operations in the West Bank against Hamas and other jihadist organization. Advanced intelligence capabilities enhanced by years of experience in the West Bank have given the IDF along with the Israel Security Agency—better known as the Shabak—the ability to intervene earlier and more effectively to disrupt terrorists' planning.

As a result, today the relatively few remaining West Bank checkpoints are normally open. Most of the time traffic flows through them as if they were not there. When the IDF acquires intelligence that terrorists are on the road—or, as it present, when security forces are combing the West Bank in pursuit of kidnappers and their victims—checkpoints are activated.

The principal roadblock operated on a daily basis is Checkpoint Kiosk. It is located several miles southeast of Jerusalem on the main north-south West Bank route, a nondescript two-lane road that winds through the Judean Mountains. On a sleepy, hot afternoon last week, I traveled there with the IDF from a military base close to where the kidnapping would take place two days later. On the way we passed prosperous Israeli settlements and distinctly less prosperous Arab villages. At the checkpoint, a few young, deeply tanned, armed soldiers stood on the side of the road casually watching cars pass through in either direction. The two-lane road widens into four lanes at the checkpoint so that when necessary cars can be pulled over without interfering with traffic. Still, on a typical day the checkpoint's military significance would be barely noticeable but for the menacing, fortified watchtower on the hillside above.

Israel has done more over the last several years to improve the quality of Palestinians' lives than lift travel restrictions. It has worked with the Palestinian Energy Authority to build electricity substations; advanced cash to the PA to help it meet its budgetary requirements; increased permits for Palestinians to work in Israel; adopted numerous measures in the West Bank to increase the export and import of goods; and approved special measures to facilitate West Bank tourism during holiday season.

Sources sowing enmity persist. PA schools teach hatred of Jews and Israel. Hamas still plots acts of violence, as does Islamic Jihad. A small number of Israeli West Bank residents are lawless. Occasionally IDF soldiers act stupidly or viciously. And even under the best of circumstances, points of friction between the IDF and Palestinian population are inevitable

Yet the larger tendency is striking. Over the last several years, Israel has not only given the Palestinians substantial room to build the infrastructure of a state but has directly assisted in its construction. The latest round of Palestinian terrorism should not reverse the tendency. The risks of enlarging Palestinian self-rule are outweighed by the costs of the alternative.

Also, one should not be distracted—as the Obama administration and European diplomats continually seem to be—by Israeli building beyond the Green Line. Most of that construction occurs within areas that under any conceivable final status agreement will remain in Israel's hands. Nor should one misinterpret Netanyahu's remark in an interview last month with Bloomberg columnist Jeffrey Goldberg that Israeli support for unilateral steps to separate Israelis and Palestinians in the West Bank “is gaining ground, from the center-left to the center-right.”

Partial, unilateral withdrawal is more than an idea winning greater attention in Israel. In light of Abbas's negotiations-ending decision in April to unite with Hamas and last week's kidnapping of three Israeli teenagers, the question is what additional steps should Israel take to advance its interests by *furthering* the partial and unilateral separation from West Bank Palestinians that has been already underway for several years.

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