

A Plan to Start Disentangling Israel and the Palestinians

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December 1, 2017

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Updated Nov. 30, 2017 7:21 pm ET



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu attends the weekly cabinet meeting in Jerusalem, Nov. 19. Photo: ronenzvulun/Reuters

For two decades and stretching across the past three presidencies, the U.S. has sought a comprehensive solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. All attempts failed. All made matters worse. Yet the Trump administration is reportedly readying new ideas for what Jason D. Greenblatt, the president's chief negotiator, called a "lasting peace agreement."

It would be wiser to focus on proposals for partial measures that stand a reasonable chance of improving conditions for both sides. The detailed plan on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's desk for the division of the Jerusalem municipal area, presented by a team led by Likud legislator Anat Berko, is a good place to begin.

Bitter experience counsels incrementalism. Bill Clinton's quest for a conflict-ending deal culminated in 2000 with Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat's launching the second *intifada*. The breakdown in 2008 of George W. Bush's push for enduring peace was followed by escalating rocket and missile fire from Gaza on Israeli civilians, which compelled Israel to undertake three military incursions in six years into the Hamas-governed territory. The repeated diplomatic initiatives of Secretaries of State Hillary Clinton and John Kerry raised expectations, dashed hopes, and likely contributed to 2015's so-called knife intifada, which flared in Jerusalem after the collapse of the Obama administration's vain pursuit of a final settlement.

In the wake of these setbacks, Ms. Berko's plan reflects a pragmatic assessment of diplomacy's limits and the urgency of action. She proposes to shift substantial control over a cluster of Arab villages covering approximately 8.5 square miles in municipal Jerusalem to the Palestinian Authority. These East Jerusalem neighborhoods are now home to some 300,000 Palestinians—and no Jews. Israel incorporated them into municipal Jerusalem after the 1967 Six Day War, but they were never part of historic Jerusalem.

Ms. Berko, whom I met in Israel more than a decade ago, believes Israel can't wait for an all-embracing deal. Separation now from the East Jerusalem neighborhoods would significantly reduce the number of West Bank Palestinians—between two million and three million live beyond the Green Line, Israel's pre-1967 eastern boundary—subject to direct Israeli rule.

In moving Israel's security barrier rather than relocating people, the partial withdrawal Ms. Berko contemplates would benefit both sides. Israel would see a sizable increase in Jerusalem's Jewish majority, whose total population today is about 865,000. Withdrawal would reduce Israel's economic burden—on the order of \$570 million to \$850 million a year—to provide welfare and educational entitlements to Palestinian “permanent residents.” These Palestinians for the most part have chosen not to vote in municipal elections or become Israeli citizens, though they are eligible. On the whole they pay vastly less in taxes than they receive in benefits. Relocating the fence would also improve Israel's security by separating it from an often-hostile population that fosters terrorism.

Palestinians would benefit, too. The plan gives East Jerusalem Palestinians the opportunity to join the greater Ramallah and Bethlehem communities. It enlarges the amount of land under Palestinian Authority administration and improves its territorial contiguity.

Ms. Berko's proposal is not the first time someone has suggested separating East Jerusalem's Arab neighborhoods from Israel, but it is the first proposal to come from the Israeli right. She is a retired Israel Defense Forces lieutenant colonel, holds a doctorate in criminology, and is the author of a 2012 book on female and child suicide bombers. Mr. Netanyahu handpicked her in 2015 to join Likud's parliamentary list, and she serves on the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee. She has credibility on national security and an ability to see the big

picture thanks to her military background, her professional expertise in counterterrorism and Palestinian culture and politics, and her relative independence from intraparty power struggles.

Ms. Berko told me that her team of senior national-security figures, lawyers and cartographers worked on the plan for nine months. “Security,” she emphasized, “is our first consideration.”

Under the plan, Jerusalem would remain Israel’s capital. Israel would exercise sovereignty over the Old City, Temple Mount and other holy sites while scrupulously guaranteeing freedom of worship. It would annex the large settlement blocs around Jerusalem. And, mindful of the heightened exposure to rockets and missiles after completely withdrawing from southern Lebanon in 2000 and Gaza in 2005, Israel would retain ultimate security responsibility for the East Jerusalem villages.

The plan faces formidable obstacles. A significant segment of Mr. Netanyahu’s party and a good portion of his broader right-wing coalition government are likely to oppose it—at least initially. They are committed to a unified greater Jerusalem on nationalist grounds and competing security calculations.

Dividing greater Jerusalem also gives rise to a vexing legal issue: By what authority does Israel strip East Jerusalem Palestinians of entitlements and voting rights they have possessed for decades?

And West Bank Palestinians will be skeptical. They won’t object to the return of a small section of land they believe is theirs. But as former Palestinian diplomat Hasan Abdel Rahman told me recently, younger Palestinians increasingly despair of a two-state solution and instead set their sights on full citizenship in a single, binational state: “If all the land Israel now controls is not divided in the short run, it will not be divided in the long run.”

Still, all parties would be wise to examine seriously Ms. Berko’s proposal, and others in the same spirit, that would gradually reduce the entanglement of Israeli and Palestinian political destinies. It may be the Trump administration’s best prospect for simultaneously advancing Israel’s long-term interests as a liberal, democratic and Jewish state and the Palestinians’ interest in greater self-rule in preparation for a state of their own.

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Appeared in the December 1, 2017, print edition as 'A Plan to Start Disentangling Israel and the Palestinians'.