

Achieve More for Israel and Palestinians by Seeking Less

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COMMENTARY



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TEL AVIV — Despite no shortage of foreign policy challenges, President Trump appears intent — like the last three occupants of the Oval Office — on mediating the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. His administration has proceeded with laudable circumspection, insisting that the aim is not to impose a settlement but to assist the sides in reaching a mutually satisfactory agreement. By seeking still less than that, Trump may be able to achieve much more than his predecessors.

Last week the White House hosted representatives of 20 countries — including Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates as well as Israel — to develop policies to ameliorate the humanitarian crisis faced by Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, which Hamas has ruled despotically since 2007. The Palestinian Authority, however, boycotted the meeting. PA President Mahmoud Abbas is in a huff because the Trump

administration acknowledged reality last December by formally recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital. By forging ahead on Gaza, the White House showed its willingness to improve conditions for Palestinians with or without the PA.

Palestinian Authority resentment also does not leave the United States bereft of options for dealing with the West Bank, or as the Israeli right prefers, Judea and Samaria — home to around 3 million Palestinians — which Israel has controlled since its victory in the 1967 Six Day War. A recent exchange in the Israeli newspaper Haaretz suggests growing support in the country, after decades of deadlock, for a better approach. Therein lies an opportunity for the United States.

In mid-February, Micah Goodman restated the case for pragmatism he outlined last year in his Israeli bestseller, “Catch-67: The Ideas Underlying the Conflict Tearing Israel Apart” (Yale University Press will publish a translation this summer). Director of a West Bank religious academy that stresses pluralism, Goodman argues that the harsh, protracted struggle has disabused the Israeli left and the right of their dreams. The left no longer believes that relinquishing the West Bank will yield a flourishing and full peace; the right has lost faith that placing settlements in the heart of the Jewish people's ancient homeland will bring redemption.

Their hopes dashed, both sides now proceed from fear. The left maintains that continued rule over West Bank Palestinians will further degrade and demoralize Israelis and will deepen the country's international isolation. Eventually, it will produce demographic catastrophe: Either Israel will be compelled to grant citizenship to West Bank Palestinians, which will erode its Jewish character; or, by refusing to, it will subvert its democracy.

Meanwhile, the right argues that withdrawal from Judea and Samaria poses grave security threats. The 2011 Arab Spring unleashed waves of violence in the region: Iraq is in disarray; Libya and Syria have collapsed into civil war; and, already fragile, Lebanon and Jordan each struggle to absorb more than a million Syrian refugees. There is little reason to suppose, maintains the right, that a Palestinian state would survive amid the tumult. In the event of its demise, they assert, jihadists will flood into the West Bank and establish on the doorsteps of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv a theocracy — or warring theocracies — sworn to Israel's destruction.

Both sets of arguments, Goodman writes, “possess tremendous weight.” And an increasing number of Israelis realize it. Emancipated from the dreams of left and right, they are forming a new consensus consisting of “Israeli Jews who fear that remaining in the territories will endanger Israel's national majority but leaving them will endanger Israel's national security.”

Goodman concludes that the conflict cannot be ended as the left long hoped, and the status quo should not be perpetuated as many on the right still maintain. But he does not despair. That's because resolving the conflict and managing it do not exhaust Israel's options. The

wiser way, he contends, is “minimizing the conflict.” That calls for fashioning discrete and incremental initiatives that provide for Israeli security while reducing Israeli rule over Palestinians.

In his recent Haaretz article, Goodman proposes four minimizing measures that, though not widely discussed in Israel, have been examined by government officials. First, Israel should increase Palestinian Authority breathing room by transferring to it some of the approximately 60 percent of the West Bank under complete Israeli administrative and military control. Second, Israel should help construct a network of bridges, tunnels, and roads connecting PA-governed areas and over which the PA would exercise control. Third, Israel should cease expansion of settlements situated outside of the Jerusalem neighborhoods and the large blocs that will remain part of Israel under any conceivable agreement. And fourth, Israel should advocate changes to the Paris Protocol (a part of the Oslo Accords signed in 1995 that regulates economic relations between Israel and the PA) that promote Palestinian economic independence.

None of these steps, Goodman observes, requires a peace treaty. Moreover, “there would be little consequence for Israeli security, because the Israel Defense Forces would retain a presence on the ground and the work of the Shin Bet security service would remain unaffected.” At the same time, “such actions would indeed shrink the Palestinians’ dependence on Israel and vastly minimize their sense of humiliation.” Implementation of these initiatives would also reorient thinking about the conflict by demonstrating “that it is possible to minimize Israel’s rule over the Palestinians without also minimizing security for Israel’s citizens.” Abandoning the delusive quest for a comprehensive solution would enable Israel to advance its interests as well as those of the Palestinians.

In a response in Haaretz to Goodman from the left, Ami Ayalon (former director of the Israeli Security Agency), Gilead Sher (a former peace negotiator), and Orni Petruschka (a high-tech entrepreneur and former fighter pilot) reject “shrinking the occupation” as a goal. They seek to end the occupation. And they find Goodman’s “interim measures” insufficient. But, tellingly, they endorse them insofar as they go.

To make Goodman’s proposals effective, Ayalon, Sher, and Petruschka would go considerably further. They back legislation providing financial incentives to encourage Israelis living in the territories outside of the Jerusalem neighborhoods and large settlement blocs to relocate. They also want Israel to formally renounce all claims to Judea and Samaria beyond the existing major Israeli population centers. While disputing important policy details, the three authors nonetheless agree with Goodman that partial reforms are available in the here and now that advance both sides’ short-term interests.

Former Prime Minister Ehud Barak entered the fray, or returned to it, last week. In May 2017, he published in Haaretz a sharp critique of “Catch-67,” contending that Goodman created a false symmetry between left and right because he was captive to right-wing

ideology. In Barak's view, remaining in the West Bank, as the left maintains, does present an existential threat to Israel but, contrary to the right, withdrawing—though raising tricky security challenges—does not. In his new contribution in Haaretz to the debate, Barak congratulates Goodman on abandoning the notion of symmetry while advancing the sorts of measures that, asserts Barak, have long been advocated by the “responsible left.”

One could wonder whether it is Goodman who has moderated his position or Barak who has tempered his rhetoric. Either way, the burgeoning debate about minimizing the conflict and the appropriate measures is a promising development.

And it is an Israeli debate, drawing together a wide swath of the country stretching from the center left to the center right, of which the Trump administration should take notice. Particularly in the face of persistent PA defiance, the president's team should assist Israel — and the Palestinian people — in achieving more by seeking less.

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