

# A Route Leading to Separation and Peace

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## Sketching the Background

Two waves of Palestinian uprising during the 1990s have raised awareness among Israelis that the occupation of the Palestinian territories also includes a local indigenous population—the Palestinian people—and that they are determined to fight for independence and an end to the Occupation. At the same time, a set of global and regional changes, such as the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the risk of attack by the “Eastern Front” against Israel (Iraq, Syria, and Jordan), and the globalization of the Israeli economy, has led to the emergence of a new geopolitical agenda in Israel. The expansionist discourse of “Greater Israel” is being replaced by a new consensus, which attempts to conclude the unfinished project of determining the state’s borders in a way that will secure the future of Israel as a majoritarian Jewish and democratic nation-state.

To a large extent, the new consensus is returning to the more pragmatic and balanced traditional views of the Labor-led Zionist movement, which sought a balance between territorial and socio-demographic goals (Kellerman 1993). This pragmatic attitude manifested itself in the secularized concept of “redeeming the land,” which meant not only gaining ownership over the land by conquest but buying land at market prices, settling and cultivating it as a means to train a generation of farmers to sink roots in the land, as part of a national “rebirth” (Almog 1990; Schnell 2001). This discourse channelled the Zionist movement toward the strategy of “pure colonization,” leading to the development of a settlement system that was largely separated from the Palestinian population (Shafir 1993). It also drove the Zionists’ attempt to

control those territories where they were able to achieve a demographic majority, showing willingness to compromise in areas heavily populated by Palestinians or to accept some mode of power-sharing in one or another type of confederation (Gorny 1993; Newman 2001).

In contrast to the Labor-led Zionist ideology, the right-wing elite, led by Ze’ev Jabotinsky and later by Menachem Begin, believed in military conquest of the territories and including the Arabs in a Jewish-controlled liberal democratic state, which would grant full civil rights to Arabs as citizens (Galanty-Ben-Rafael et al. 2001). Underlying this vision was the colonialist assumption that the Palestinians would cooperate with the so-called progressive Jewish state. Unfortunately, with the rise of Likud government after 1977, the right-wing administration adopted the goals of the traditional rightist leadership, attempting to expand control over the territories of “Greater Israel.” They did this by the means used by the Labor party—settlement, creating facts on the ground—but this time by settling areas where Palestinians formed a dominant majority. This strategy led to aggressive colonization in the most densely populated Palestinian areas. In addition, the 1967 war created a platform for the National Religious Party to move from their marginalized status in the Israeli political spectrum to a more central position. They took the lead in the settlement process, trying to consolidate a neo-Zionist ethos embedded in messianic religious belief. The right-wing elite that led the settlement process never answered the question of how the Jewish majority in the highly populated areas of the West Bank and Gaza could best be consolidated in order to carry out the

national project, an enterprise in which ethnicity and sovereignty over territory are expected to match. Another key question left unanswered was how to ensure the democratic character of the Jewish-dominated political system when Palestinians become the majority.

### Current Geopolitical Visions

What, today, are the options debated concerning the future of Israel in the context of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict? Shlomo Hasson (2005) identifies four main geopolitical visions discussed within Israeli public and political discourse: annexation of the Occupied Territories; either a binational or a civil non-national state; or two states for two peoples and the necessity of separation. Each of these visions is promoted by different elites and is based on differing sets of values. Until the collapse of the Barak–Arafat negotiations and the Clinton plan in July 2000, the Israeli political system was split between adherence to two main visions: the two-state solution and the annexation option.

The first agenda was promoted by a Labor-led coalition that included Meretz and Liberals in the centre; it gained the support of about half the Israeli public. The second was promoted by a Likud-led coalition that also included the National Religious Party and the ultra-Orthodox and extreme right-wing parties. This bloc gained the support of the other half of the Israeli electorate. Both coalitions adopted nationalist-democratic views. While the leftist coalition tended to emphasize the importance of Western/humanist values to the Israeli identity, the rightist coalition led by Likud tended to stress particularistic Jewish values (Schnell 2001; Ram 2005).

Now we can see that this deadlock between the two coalitions is breaking down, to be replaced by a new consensus. The two extreme positions—annexation of the Occupied Territories and the binational state—have been further marginalized. It seems that non-nationalist visions, such as the civil/

secular democratic state, are not attractive to the Israeli public.

The annexation vision is motivated by two sets of ideologies. The first one is religious-messianic; it views the results of the War of Independence and the Six-Day War as part of a messianic process. In this view, that process will lead to the unification of the people of Israel, the territory of Biblical Israel, and the Torah into one organic whole. Therefore, Jews are not allowed to withdraw even an inch from the “whole land of Israel” (*Eretz Yisrael ha-shlema*), once that territory is under Jewish control. The second ideology is nationalistic; it blames the leadership for a lack of determination in exerting control over the “Biblical” territories, despite the fact that only from these territories can an authentic Jewish identity, culture, and strength develop and flourish (Galanti-Ben-Rafael, Aaronson, and Schnell 2001). The opposition to this geopolitical vision is founded on ideological and pragmatic reasoning. Ideologically, most Israelis want to imagine themselves as part of a progressive, humanistic society, and the ongoing occupation of millions of Palestinians contradicts their value system, though justified as a temporary necessity for security reasons. In their eyes, the settlers were never pioneers worthy of public support. In a battery of public surveys among a representative sample of the Israeli population between 2003 and 2005, only about 25 % reported believing that the settlers have the support of the majority of Israelis (Hopp, Schnell, Peres, and Jacobson 2003–2005). Pragmatically, most Israelis refuse to share with Palestinians a state in which they will become a minority in the near future. They expect that in such a situation, international pressure would force Israel to transfer power over the state to the Palestinian majority. The annexation vision now has the support of about 20 % of the population, according to several public polls carried out by various institutions in recent years.

The binational or civil state vision is championed in former Marxist and post-

Zionist circles who view the nation-state as a racist and oppressive entity. Proponents of this viewpoint believe that the settlements and the Wall of Separation have created an irreversible situation of two populations closely intertwined and dependent on common resources. The opposition to this vision comes from the nationalist Zionist ideology, which is founded on the belief that the only way for Jews to play an active role in their own history after the Holocaust and vis-à-vis Arab world enmity is through a strong nation-state. The binational option has the support of only a small percentage of the Israeli public, somewhat less than 5 %.

The two-state vision is rooted in a more national-humanist ideology that recognizes the parallel right of the Palestinians to aspire to their own nation. This vision adopts a pragmatic view that suggests compromising on the conflicting territorial ambitions of the two peoples, proposing the 1967 ceasefire boundaries as the basis for determining the boundaries between the Palestinian and Jewish national states. Jerusalem should be the capital of both states, and only marginal reciprocal adaptations to the new geopolitical situation should be made in determining the boundaries between the two states. The two states are expected to develop good mutual relations and economic cooperation, for the benefit of both and also in order to close the economic gaps between the two societies as a precondition for the establishment of solid peace. The Geneva plan exemplifies the implementation of these principles.

The opposition to this position is based mainly on Israeli mistrust of the Palestinians. Steeped in Western colonial discourse, many Zionists adopted "Orientalist" attitudes toward Arabs and Palestinians. The collapse of the Barak–Arafat talks was interpreted in Israeli public opinion as the ultimate proof that even when Barak offered the Palestinian an independent state covering all of the Occupied Territories, Arafat refused this generous offer, thus exposing his real, uncompromising intentions. A decade of two uprisings, the

second extremely violent, has deepened the dehumanization of the Palestinian people in the Israeli mind. Therefore, many Israelis who once believed in a two-state solution have changed their minds, shifting to the new consensus crystallizing around the vision of the necessity of separation. The percentage of support for the idea of a two-state solution has dropped to about 20 % of the population, according to various public surveys in recent years.

Recent opinion surveys consistently show the confusion that led to the emergence of the new consensus around the idea of the necessity of unilateral withdrawal. For example, a set of polls for Peace Now between 2003 and 2005 shows that between 70 % and 80 % of the Israeli public consistently believes that, in principle, Israel must seek a compromise and peace with the Palestinian people; but only 20–30 % believes that this is possible in the current generation (Hopp et al. 2003–2005). Therefore, while the uprising demonstrated the narrow perspective of the expansionist view, its violent and terrorist character also eroded Israeli belief in the possibility of achieving any reliable peace with the Palestinians. The conclusion of 50 % to 60 % of the Israeli public, based on Hopp et al.'s surveys, is that Israel must unilaterally withdraw from highly populated Palestinian areas. Only a complete separation between the two peoples can secure the future of the state as a Jewish and democratic one and provide security to Israelis in their nation's alien environment. The determination of former hard-liner Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to transform this new geopolitical vision into a separation plan, including the Wall of Separation and the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and, presumably, parts of the West Bank, helped to manoeuvre the public into this new consensus.

A key question at this point is this: What are the deeper reasons for the adoption of the unilateral withdrawal plan? Several factors may be behind the changes in strategic thinking in Israel.

First is the decline of territorial considerations in the national security strategy. Since the 1970s, Arab countries have failed to modernize their military forces because of low economic growth rates and the collapse of the Soviet Union as a supplier of weapons. During the 1990s and since the Iraq War, the collapse of Iraq as a main force behind the “Eastern Front” against Israel and the peace agreement with Jordan have changed the strategic situation along the eastern borders of Israel, making a direct military conflict almost impossible. With a sharp decline in the risk of a military invasion from the east, the importance of the Jordan valley and strongholds on hill crests in the West Bank has been significantly reduced.

Second, the Iraq War has proved that the effectiveness of mass attacks on the ground is now substantially less and that sophisticated military devices and accurate ammunition can prove decisive in winning such engagements.

Third, in the reality of the new types of war—missiles, on the one hand, and terrorism, on the other—wide buffer territories do not have any advantage. In this context, the evaluation of the Israeli security elite is that a separation policy between the Palestinians and Israelis will make it easier to reduce terrorism to a minimum, since it is impossible to put an end to it, with minimal military effort.

These three factors have reduced the importance of territorial considerations in the strategic thinking of the Israeli security elite, opening eyes to the implications of socio-demographic considerations.

Fourth, the Palestinian uprising, which reminded Israelis that control of the Occupied Territories comes at a high price, coupled with the lowered importance of these territories for national security, raised the demographic question in its extreme form. The fact that, according to population projections, the Palestinians may very soon become the majority in the territories west of the Jordan valley stresses the new importance

accorded this issue. None of the data or projections are new, but the new geo-strategic situation has made the security elite more alert to the demographic issue. In this context, the role of a few academics who include the emergency of the so-called demographic bomb in their arguments cannot be undermined (Sofer 2003). The head of the National Security Council has been overheard arguing that in the negotiations with Syria, Israel was stupid enough to insist on limiting the number of tanks Syria is allowed to locate close to the border. Today we know that the tanks do not pose any significant risk to Israel. Instead, according to him, Israel should have demanded that Syria accept the Palestinian refugees as their citizens in order to avoid a demand that Israel absorb them in any possible future peace negotiations.

Fifth, the demographic question is linked to an economic question. As part of the re-evaluation of Israel’s strategic position, there is a growing awareness regarding the economic price of the occupation. With such high fertility rates among the Palestinian poor, the cost of financing the development of water systems, electrical stations, schools, and medical infrastructures will be extremely high. Previously much of this infrastructure was financed by Europe, but this support is not assured for the future, and the expenses may mount. This could result in a possible collapse of the water system in Gaza.

These expectations for mounting occupation costs come at a time when the Israeli economy is less dependent on a cheap Palestinian labour force. Since the 1990s, the Israeli economy has transformed various sectors into high-tech knowledge-based industries. Of the economic growth reached during the 1990s, about 30 % was in these branches. At the same time, the declining older sectors began employing migrant workers from abroad as a replacement for the Palestinian labour market (Schnell 2001; Rosenhek 2000; Kemp and Rajjman 2000). These economic considerations induced most of the economic elite to support the peace

initiative initially, and later on to endorse the vision of the necessity of withdrawal.

In addition to these more strategic considerations, several tactical factors and perceptions played a role. Among them was the belief that the world is more willing than in the past to take firm measures against the colonization of the Occupied Territories and their continued occupation. The new plans were intended to help Israel regain legitimacy in the arena of world opinion by means of unilateral withdrawal. It was believed that the ball will be in the Palestinians' court. The Palestinians would have to prove their ability to properly govern the "disengaged" territories and to abolish the infrastructure of terrorism. It was also hoped that the separation plan would leave Israel with temporary borders that would include the settlement blocks in the West Bank and Greater Jerusalem. According to this stratagem, negotiations on a "permanent" peace will be postponed indefinitely, until such time as trust has been established between the two sides and a peace agreement seems concretely possible.

### **Were can we go from here?**

I have analyzed the emergence of a new consensus in Israel—but how may we proceed from this point? In this section I will present my more personal ideas, developed through long discussions with Palestinian and Israeli peace activists but still representing an Israeli view of the conflict. I leave the presentation of Palestinian sensitivities and considerations here to Palestinian scholars. I believe that the left in Israel has lost credibility among the Israeli public through being perceived as holding a naive position. Most Israelis do not believe that, after the collapse of the Barak–Arafat talks and a decade of uprisings, a peace agreement can be achieved within a short time if the leaders will only return to the negotiation table. The Palestinian side needs time to establish a state apparatus and re-establish the administration destroyed by Israel during the uprising. Israel

needs time to properly plan and implement the evacuation of settlers from the West Bank.

Given this situation, I would suggest a coordinated unilateral plan for peace. This plan is based on the assumption that both sides need time in order to enter permanent peace negotiations and for trust to be built up. It is also based on the assumption that an open-ended timetable that does not specify the final state of the agreement is unacceptable to the Palestinian leadership at this juncture, after the disappointment stemming from the failure of the Oslo agreement. Therefore, I suggest specifying a timetable of about three years. At the end of the first year, Israel will withdraw from about 85–90 % of the West Bank to a line approximately along the Wall of Separation. At the same time, the Palestinians will implement Abu Mazen's plan to build the Palestinian state apparatus. During the second year, the Palestinians will have to prove to the world that they have established one authority and one military force (either by sharing power with Hamas or through any other means chosen by the Palestinians). The third year would then be devoted to negotiations over the permanent status of the peace agreement, including border issues, the status of Jerusalem as a capital of the two states, and refugees. Any side considered by the international Quartet to be responsible for delaying negotiations beyond the third year would have to face the consequences in the international arena.

In sum, the unilateral disengagement plan and the new vision of Abu Mazen have created fresh opportunities. The goal of the peace camp in Israel and the international community is to make sure that neither side in the conflict will sabotage the suggested scenario (or any closely analogous one). The Road Map itself cannot achieve this goal, since the Palestinian political elite needs time to re-establish the Palestinian police force and Abu Mazen needs to convince the Palestinian people that a peaceful strategy may lead them to the establishment of their own independent state.

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