

# Cracking the Israeli-Palestinian Security Challenge Is Possible, But It Requires Thinking Outside the Box

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**While Israel views the core security issues in a broad regional context, the Palestinians tend to perceive them in strict bilateral terms, so creative solutions will be needed to help close this strategic gap.**

Over twenty years have elapsed since Israel and the Palestinians launched the Oslo process towards a permanent two-state solution, and much ink has been spilled on trying to understand why it has failed. To me, one thing is clear: there are real gaps between the parties on all core issues. Do not believe those who tell you that the parties ever came "that close."

Of the core issues, security has usually been characterised, alongside territory, as a 'practical issue' easier to resolve than the 'narrative issues'. Indeed, since the latter subjects such as Jerusalem, refugees and mutual recognition touch on the deep, core identity of each party, they are extremely difficult to reconcile. However, the parties are yet to come to an agreement on the 'practical issues', which also involve a heavy dose of psychology and perceptions.

Israel considers security to be paramount because although the country is militarily strong, it is highly vulnerable due to its lack of strategic depth, limited resources and location in a hostile environment. Security is all the more sensitive regarding a comprehensive withdrawal from the West Bank because the 1967 lines which the Palestinians see as a baseline for an agreement leave Israel with a dangerously narrow waist along its coastal plain -- less than 15km at its thinnest point -- and overlooked by the West Bank's commanding hills. This narrow strip contains Israel's major cities, about 80 per cent of the country's gross domestic product, 70 per cent of its population, as well as its main infrastructure and sole international airport.

Israel's threat perception envisages potential threats emanating from a future Palestinian state (such as an Islamist takeover), regional challenges, and combined threats between the two. Israel is highly concerned about potential

dramatic changes in the strategic regional landscape, which have happened more than once, especially in recent years. No analyst accurately predicted the eruption of the 2011 Arab Spring or the emergence of ISIS, and certainly no one knows what the situation will be in 20 years. None of these scenarios are reason not to seek a deal -- rather the contrary -- but it is reason enough to carefully craft security arrangements.

Israel therefore seeks solid arrangements which will compensate for the required compromise in a two-state solution and enable it to protect its critical national security if things go wrong. Yet this stance inherently clashes with the Palestinian desire for independence, sovereignty and dignity.

To address Israel's threat perception, the country developed, and consistently presented, a comprehensive security concept for the permanent-status solution based on three complementary pillars: firstly, Israel seeks territorial adjustments to the 1967 lines to establish more secure, defensible boundaries, primarily by incorporating the major settlement blocs along the 1967 lines (as part of territorial swaps) in order to modestly beef up the country's depth.

Secondly, Israel wishes to create 'conditional strategic depth' through a series of non-territorial security arrangements, first and foremost the demilitarisation of a Palestinian state.

Thirdly, Israel seeks to establish a special security regime on the two sides of the Jordan River, including a limited yet effective Israeli military deployment for an agreed period of time. Such a regime would verify demilitarisation, serve as a deterrent factor, tripwire against military threats, provide early warning, and deal with daily threats of terrorism. It was Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin who, given Israel's lack of strategic depth, defined the Jordan Valley as the country's eastern security -- though not necessarily political -- border. This position is informed by deep Israeli concerns about long-term stability in Jordan (which is a paramount Israeli strategic interest) as well as hostile state, state-sponsored or jihadi threats from the east.

During peace negotiations, the Americans made several important technological-operational suggestions for a border regime, which would make it hard to cross without being identified and stopped. However, Israel was no less focused on the strategic dimension. Even an operationally perfect border system cannot address a scenario in which Hamas takes over the State of Palestine or if Jordan is destabilised by jihadists. Israel has made it clear that if such scenarios materialise and turn into real emergencies marginalising the border regime, it will not gamble on its national security and may need to send troops into Palestinian territory in order to pre-empt or respond to the emerging threats.

In the history of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations none of these issues were fully resolved, though the principles of territorial adjustments and demilitarisation were agreed upon. Behind the gaps, among other things, stands the fact that while Israel views its security in a broad regional context, the Palestinians perceive the security dimension in strict bilateral terms.

This is not to suggest that there are no solutions. Cracking the security challenge is possible. It requires thinking outside the box, deeper involvement by Egypt and Jordan in security arrangements in Gaza and the West Bank respectively, and perhaps broader regional security architecture.

*Brig. Gen. Michael Herzog, IDF Res., is a visiting fellow with BICOM and a Milton Fine International Fellow with The Washington Institute. He has participated in nearly all of Israel's negotiations with the Palestinians since 1993. ❖*

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