

# Israeli Perspectives on International Peace Initiatives

by [Oded Eran \(/experts/oded-eran\)](#), [Michael Oren \(/experts/michael-oren\)](#), [Merav Michaeli \(/experts/merav-michaeli\)](#)

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Merav Michaeli is a member of the Israeli Knesset from the opposition party Zionist Union.



Brief Analysis

**Watch video or read a summary of a lively debate between Israeli lawmakers about how their government should address growing efforts to internationalize the peace process.**

**O**n July 8, The Washington Institute held a Policy Forum with Oded Eran, Michael Oren, and Merav Michaeli. Eran is a former Israeli diplomat who headed the team that negotiated with the Palestinians in 1999-2000. Oren represents the Kulanu Party in Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's Knesset coalition. Michaeli represents the opposition Labor Party in the Knesset. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

## ODED ERAN

**T**he long history of international diplomatic activity related to the Israeli-Arab conflict stretches all the way back to the Six Day War. The only breaks in such activity have been during periods of direct, bilateral negotiations

between Israel and Egypt, Jordan, or the Palestinians -- talks that resulted from leadership decisions on both sides, not from outside initiatives.

The recent wave of efforts to internationalize the Israeli-Palestinian conflict began during a lull in activity between the two parties. The EU parliament launched this wave by approving final-status parameters in summer 2014 -- French diplomats immediately turned these guidelines into a UN Security Council resolution, which did not pass after Israel and later the Palestinians opposed it. A renewed U.S. peace initiative also helped forestall passage, though Secretary of State John Kerry's mediation efforts eventually failed.

More recently, the French launched a new initiative featuring multiple international conferences on the conflict. Russia and Egypt have quietly launched similar efforts, while Palestinians continue their attempts to win acceptance in international bodies.

Israel has traditionally rejected international efforts at peace, preferring direct bilateral negotiation. This stems from their fear that the international community is not balanced on the issue. Time is not on Israel's side, however, so it may be worth reconsidering this stance. For instance, if Palestinians agreed tomorrow to accept the West Bank security barrier as the border with land swaps, any Israeli government would struggle to evacuate the 80,000 settlers who live beyond that barrier, especially given the difficulties experienced in resettling the 7,000 settlers evacuated from Gaza in 2005.

Given this reality and the poor prospects for resuming bilateral negotiations, it is time for the international community to create guidelines for future resolution of the conflict. Israel's traditional opposition to international guidelines for a two-state solution should be reconsidered, as long as such guidelines can help Israel next time negotiations start. Outside parameters can provide a useful benchmark for direct talks.

Of course the question of who will draft these guidelines and what their substance will be is still open. Israel cannot accept the French guidelines, but it can keep some of them and improve on others. Similarly, engaging with President Obama as he contemplates issuing guidelines could make them more acceptable to Israel.

Israeli society has been drifting toward the center-right for a long time, so unilateral initiatives could be political suicide for Netanyahu. Yet he might be able to consider them in response to an external threat such as imposed parameters. The question becomes what he would receive in exchange for action. For instance, the United States could offer Arab recognition of Israel as a Jewish homeland. Yet the gap between what the Europeans and Arabs want and what Israel can do is probably too wide for Jerusalem to expect rewards from them absent bold moves -- for example, expanding Palestinian economic access to Area C, allowing the creation of a Gaza port, or freezing settlement construction.

## **MICHAEL OREN**

**T**he big difference between historical and current international efforts is the nexus between non-Israeli-approved efforts and Palestinian attempts to internationalize and legalize the conflict. The latter efforts are designed to destroy Israel, not get a better two-state solution. That means new internationalization efforts may be a strategic threat to Israel. And non-Palestinian international efforts, including potential Obama parameters, are not favorable to Israel.

In response, Israel needs to take initiative to change its circumstances rather than remain passive in the face of strategic threats. A unilateral initiative is imperative if Israel wants to maintain its democratic and Jewish character. The broad Israeli center can support a plan declaring that the country will only build in areas that would be part of Israel under a two-state solution. This would still require dealing with the Jewish Home Party's opposition, since Netanyahu would fear losing power if they left the coalition.

To sell the plan to the Israeli public, the center will need visible European and American backing to show that Israeli action can produce international approval and fortify the U.S. alliance. This will require Israel to engage Europeans and Americans to ensure support for measures that may fall short of their expectations. Otherwise, new steps would be a hard political sell, mostly focusing on ensuring security benefits, defusing the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, and preserving a democratic and Jewish state. Israelis do not prioritize the peace process and are skeptical because they believe past withdrawals have resulted in worse security.

Even absent an initiative, Israel should work toward creating a two-state situation with maximal Palestinian autonomy on economic issues, governance, and other matters. It should also help facilitate more win-win situations that improve quality of life for Palestinians, such as Rawabi, their inaugural planned city in the West Bank. Additionally, Israel could coordinate with Arab states or the Russians to make international efforts more favorable to Israel. This would take a lot of wind out of the sails of such initiatives by showing the world that Israel is serious about peace.

The status quo is not sustainable for Israel if it wants to remain Jewish and democratic, so a two-state solution should be the long-term policy. At the same time, the Israeli leadership and public understand that a Palestinian state would not yet be viable.

## MERAV MICHAELI

Israelis do care about issues related to the peace process, including security. Threats to their security create deep psychological and cultural uncertainty, which are then manipulated by the right to generate fear and distract from daily socioeconomic stresses. Israel is still defined by the conflict -- the nation has existed twice as long with this version of the conflict as without it. In fact, the conflict has become a core part of Israeli identity. To rectify this situation, Israel needs to ask itself what it wants to achieve. Large parts of the government do not want a two-state solution, so that debate needs to be resolved first.

A significant camp still believes in a two-state solution to ensure the viability of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. Both symbolically and physically, Israel cannot remain a state without borders. It should therefore take the situation into its own hands and initiate a process to achieve a desired outcome, even if it is not the two-state solution. Yet the prime minister has not offered an alternative vision such as West Bank annexation or a one-state proposal. He continues to focus on maintaining a shifting status quo and avoiding the creation of the Palestinian state he fears. Instead, Israel should be trying to strengthen the Palestinian Authority, not weaken it.

International efforts to pressure the Netanyahu government are unlikely to succeed and may backfire, since his coalition sees itself and Israel as the ultimate victims and fights to maintain a monopoly on this victimhood. Netanyahu claims to be "good for the Jews," labeling his domestic and international opponents as both un-Jewish and opposed to Jewish interests. Accordingly, any outside initiative is portrayed as illegitimate pressure, which makes working with it constructively impossible.

Israel should not invite international pressure on itself; rather, it should pursue an initiative of its own. This initiative should be cast as an effort to halt a damaging settlement process and improve Israel's international image. Foreign actors would then begin pressuring the Palestinians to do their part once Israel does its part. Selling the public on a settlement freeze would be difficult only if Netanyahu continues to frame the issue the wrong way. Instead of asking what Israel will get from halting settlement construction outside the security barrier, he should ask what Israel gets from building settlements there.

*This summary was prepared by Mitchel Hochberg. ❖*

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