

Introduction

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The Annapolis Conference convened by the Bush administration on November 27, 2007, again brought into focus the question of how Israel and its neighbors would resolve their differences in order to reach a permanent peace settlement. Since the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) captured the West Bank and Gaza in the June 1967 Six-Day War, one of the core issues of the Arab-Israeli conflict has been the ultimate future status of those territories.

Forty years ago it was apparent to most international observers that Israel had entered those territories in a war of self-defense; hence, the UN blocked all efforts to have Israel branded as an aggressor. Indeed, Israel had faced an armed assault from the very territories it had captured at the war's end. As a result, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 242 that called for the establishment of new borders that were to be negotiated.

Resolution 242 did not call on Israel to withdraw to the vulnerable pre-war lines but merely “from territories” – notably, not “from *all the* territories” – that came under its military control. The goal envisioned by the UN Security Council was that at the end of the day Israel would obtain “secure and recognized boundaries.” In shorthand, Israel's rights in these “disputed territories” came to be described by successive U.S. administrations, particularly since the time of President Ronald Reagan, as a right to “defensible borders.”

The most recent expression of this policy was provided by President George W. Bush on April 14, 2004, in a letter to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon which emphasized Israel's rights to “defensible borders.” At the time, Israel was proposing a unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip alone, after having reached the conclusion that it was no longer realistic to expect that a negotiated peace settlement was possible with the Palestinian Authority, which had failed to halt

terror attacks against Israeli cities for more than a decade. Sharon essentially sought a diplomatic *quid pro quo* for this pullback from the U.S. instead.

The Bush letter, which he obtained, made clear that Israel was not expected to withdraw in the West Bank to the pre-1967 lines. It detailed that the changes that had transpired on the ground would likely result in the incorporation of Israeli population centers in the West Bank into Israel itself. When Sharon returned to Jerusalem with the letter in hand, he explained its significance to the Israeli Knesset on April 22, 2004, in the following way:

There is American acknowledgment that in any final status agreement there will be no Israeli withdrawal to the '67 lines. This acknowledgment appears in *two* ways: understanding the facts determined by the large Israeli settlement blocs as making it impossible to return to the '67 lines, and *implementation of the concept of "defensible borders"* (emphasis added).

In other words, the U.S. commitment to assure Israel its right to "defensible borders" was not a throw-away line without any real meaning. It was a territorial concept that assured Israel's ability to defend itself – by itself – in a very dangerous Middle East. Indeed, Sharon stressed a year later in an interview in the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz*, on April 14, 2005, that the sparsely populated Jordan Valley up to above the "Allon Road" on the eastern slopes of the West Bank hill ridge was still of supreme military importance to the security of Israel.

Essentially, Sharon was following the legacy of the late Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin who, in his final address to the Knesset a month before his November 1995 assassination, argued that Israel should retain the Jordan Valley "in the widest sense of that term." Indeed,

Israel's requirement for "defensible borders," that had been based largely on the importance of the Jordan Valley, was repeatedly articulated by most of Israel's prime ministers from Golda Meir to Benjamin Netanyahu. Thus, over the years, the idea of "defensible borders" cut across party lines in Israel and had many adherents on both sides of the Israeli political spectrum.

In the specific context of 2004, the Bush letter to Sharon had additional significance. Four years earlier in July 2000, Prime Minister Ehud Barak had sought to reach a permanent status agreement with PLO leader Yasser Arafat at Camp David, in a summit conference held under the auspices of President Bill Clinton. The summit failed even though Barak had offered unprecedented concessions to Arafat. A subsequent diplomatic round held in Taba, Egypt, where further Israeli concessions were proposed, did not satisfy the Palestinian leadership either.

As part of his role as a facilitator for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, President Clinton sought to detail what he thought was a fair middle position between what the Israeli and Palestinian negotiators were considering. The Clinton Parameters, as they came to be called, were not a formal U.S. proposal. They did not represent an updated version of U.S. policy on the Israeli-Palestinian territorial dispute, but rather were more of a summary of what the middle ground between the two parties would look like. At the end of the day, the Palestinians did not accept the U.S. ideas.

Moreover, since Clinton's bridging concepts stripped Israel of the necessary minimum territories that it needed for "defensible borders," the IDF General Staff warned in a document presented to the cabinet by Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Shaul Mofaz that implementation of the proposal on the ground would result in a "serious threat to the country's major population centers." Mofaz's warning, as reported in *Yediot Ahronot* at the end of December 2000, added: "with the emerging arrangement, we will not be able to provide a response to the threat from the East."

Subsequent events proved that the IDF General Staff's caution was warranted. During the 1990s there had been a perception that with the end of the Cold War, Middle Eastern conflicts were subsiding and Israel could take larger risks for peace, especially if an "end of conflict" agreement between Israel and its neighbors was approaching. The prospect of a full-scale conventional war was seen to have diminished.

Yet, with the outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2000 and the Second Lebanon War in 2006, it became clear that Israel still faced serious military challenges that posed a direct threat to its main population centers. Moreover, while the Soviet interventionism of the Cold War had passed, Iran was looming as a new Middle Eastern power which was seeking to obtain nuclear weapons and which was empowering the enemies of Israel: from Hizbullah in Lebanon, to Syria, to Hamas and its Palestinian allies.

The change in the strategic landscape was also marked by the emergence of new centers of global *jihad* in the heart of the Middle East. Al-Qaeda may have been born in distant Afghanistan in 1989, but after 9/11 it transplanted many of its capabilities to western Iraq, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Lebanon through new affiliate organizations. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan was also repeatedly struck by operatives who came from these groups. These developments shattered the illusion that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could be isolated from larger regional trends and that a stable territorial settlement could be reached that did not take them into account.

To his credit, Clinton stated at the end of his term that his proposals would be "off the table" when he left office. Moreover, in early 2001, the incoming Bush administration formally notified Israel that it would not be bound by the negotiating record from Camp David or Taba. After all, nothing had been signed and no binding commitments had been made. Nonetheless,

in certain foreign policy circles in the West there were diplomats and writers who suggested that the inevitable outcome of a future Israeli-Palestinian negotiation had already been determined and that it would resemble what had been proposed at Camp David and Taba.

The Bush letter fortunately provided an alternative point of reference for future Israeli-Palestinian negotiations to the Camp David-Taba period. Indeed, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert specifically referred to the Bush letter in his Annapolis address, although he did not specify what part of the letter he was adopting as his policy.

In the aftermath of Israel's Gaza pullback, implemented in August 2005, the wisdom of insisting on "defensible borders" for the West Bank became all the more apparent to anyone acquainted with Israel's security concerns. In withdrawing from Gaza, Israel pulled out from the Egyptian-Gaza border area, known as the Philadephi route. Soon, massive arms shipment began to freely enter Gaza en route to terrorist groups like Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and even to new organizations that claimed to be al-Qaeda affiliates. At the same time, Hamas operatives left Gaza for training by the Revolutionary Guards in Iran before returning to Gaza across the Philadephi route.

Were Israel to abandon its right to "defensible borders" and pull out of the Jordan Valley that separates the West Bank from the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, an identical process would most probably ensue, enabling a massive flow of weapons and volunteers to reach militant groups in the West Bank. Despite the best efforts of Jordan to stem the flow of this weaponry, it would likely reach a scale that would confound the Jordanian security forces.

Moreover, with entry to the West Bank completely open, and a new security vacuum created, many Islamic militants would seek to relocate to Jordan itself, undermining the long-

term stability of the Hashemite Kingdom. Thus, Israel's right to "defensible borders" has regional implications that go well beyond Israel's security alone. The eventual rise of a new, heavily armed center of radical Islamic militancy in the West Bank, for example, could affect Israel's neighbors as well.

In the aftermath of the Annapolis Conference, Israel is being asked to make a determination about its future borders, even while it is far from evident that the Palestinian Authority will manage to vanquish the sizable terrorist infrastructure that was set up in the West Bank during the last decade. Moreover, the extent of the regional threats to Israel remains unclear. Hopefully, the U.S. armed forces will completely uproot al-Qaeda in Iraq, but no one can say with certainty that this will be the final result. It is also possible that al-Qaeda in Iraq will transplant itself to Syria and Jordan, as a result of the U.S. offensive against its forces.

The fate of Iran also influences the future strategic landscape. It is entirely possible that Iran will obtain a nuclear weapons capability and provide a strategic umbrella over the activities of both Sunni and Shiite terrorist groups across the region. Given the wide range of possible scenarios in the near future, it would be a grave error for Israel to assume that a benign environment is on the horizon which would enable Israel to safely withdraw from strategically significant territories, like the Jordan Valley, that have served as the front line of its defense since 1967.

When Israel faces Palestinian negotiators in the future, it will hear their oft-stated diplomatic demand for a full Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 lines. Israeli negotiators cannot afford to be silent and must present an initiative of their own. It is now especially vital, in the aftermath of the renewal of negotiations following the Annapolis Conference and the strategic changes transpiring across the region, that Israel reassert its rights and requirements that too

often have been forgotten in the public discourse on the Middle East. In short, Israel must insist that any peace settlement ensure that it achieves “defensible borders” in order to protect its long-term security in the future.

It should be added that European officials have not generally been as sympathetic to Israel’s security requirements for defensible borders as their American counterparts. While UN Security Council Resolution 242 was jointly drafted back in 1967 by Britain and the U.S., with the full input of Prime Minister Harold Wilson and President Lyndon Johnson, the British position changed over time, adapting itself to the European consensus in the 1970s and 1980s.

Nevertheless, there were important European leaders who explicitly supported Israel’s right to defensible borders, including British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Spanish Prime Minister José Maria Aznar. Speaking in the House of Commons on June 21, 2005, Prime Minister Tony Blair’s foreign secretary, Jack Straw, appeared to be adopting language from the April 2004 Bush letter to Sharon, when he commented that “a solution will also inevitably take into account how things have changed since 1967.” In a post 9/11 environment, European statesmen showed a greater readiness to consider Israel’s tough security dilemmas.

In view of the continuing importance of the concept of “defensible borders” for Israel’s security, the following essays were prepared in order to familiarize the reader with its historical, military-strategic, legal, and diplomatic dimensions. These essays are prefaced by an executive summary that takes into account most of the ideas raised throughout the monograph as a whole. By reviewing all aspects of this issue, it will become clear how “defensible borders” remains a guiding principle of Israel’s national strategy after it was first proposed by some of the main architects of Israeli defense policy forty years ago.

Map 1: Israel and the Middle East

