

5 'SECURITY FIRST' AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR A VIABLE PALESTINIAN STATE

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The international community's participation in the peace process since Oslo has been premised on the assumption that a two-state solution is a strategic objective of both Israel and the Palestinians.

The prospect of Israel giving up the territory it has occupied since 1967 is perceived by the international community to be in Israel's strategic interest because it promises peace with its neighbours and compliance with international law. More significantly, the alternative, whereby Israel absorbs the populations of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, is presumed to result in it becoming a state with a non-Jewish majority, an apparently unthinkable prospect for the Zionist project.

For the Palestinians, the two-state solution based upon the pre-1967 war borders represents an important compromise because it would involve giving up the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel in 1948 and settling for 22 per cent of historical Palestine, together with a dilution of the right of return, whose details are yet to be negotiated.¹ While this was a significant dilution of Palestinian aspirations, it was expected that the Palestinian leadership would accept such a compromise given the military realities on the ground and the fact that the land occupied in 1967 on which the future Palestinian state would ostensibly be created included East Jerusalem. These facts, together with the perception that the refugees have limited political power, led the international community to assume that the Palestinian leadership could hope to gain just enough internal support to achieve a viable and sovereign Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders.

Thus, the international community had reason to believe that the two sides would converge on a two-state solution on 1967 borders, particularly given that anything less would almost certainly destroy the Palestinian coalition that was emerging for ending the conflict on this basis. It is therefore not surprising that long after the failure of Camp David, ex-president Clinton continued to argue (in 2004) that only a Palestinian state on the occupied territory with East Jerusalem as its capital can address the concerns of both sides. As he has put it, 'in private, we all know, within two or three degrees of difference, what the final peace agreement is going to look like, if there's ever going to be one.'²

This apparently obvious endgame makes it very difficult to explain Israel's approach to creating new facts on the ground. Far from withdrawing from the oPt after the

¹ Karma Nabulsi, 'The Peace Process and the Palestinians: A Road Map to Mars', *International Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 2 (2004), pp. 221–31.

² Bill Clinton discusses foreign policy and security threats in *CNN Interview with Christiane Amanpour*, 10 July 2004. Transcript available at www.cnn.com/2004/ALLPOLITICS/07/09/amanpour.clinton.transcript/.

signing of the Oslo Agreements, Israel has only fitfully withdrawn from heavily populated parts while accelerating the construction of settlements in other parts. At the same time, the ‘matrix of control’, in terms of roads, checkpoints and border controls, has been significantly tightened.³

The inconsistency between the two-state assumptions and the facts on the ground cannot be explained away in terms of missed opportunities, unfortunate accidents or even the power of minority groups such as the settler lobby in Israel. In fact, the Israeli conditions for engaging with the Palestinians during the period of disengagement defined by the Oslo Accords reveal significant *strategic* concerns that were not compatible with an intended withdrawal to pre-1967 borders or even to borders close to the pre-1967 ones. Israel’s insistence on ‘security first’ was the most important of these conditions.

A dissection of Israel’s security-first conditions reveals a number of possible underlying strategic concerns that may have justified Israel’s insistence on these conditions. But when we compare the facts on the ground with the behaviour that would be consistent with each of these concerns, we find that Israeli actions (regardless of the party in power) were most consistent with strategic concerns that were likely to be *undermined* by the creation of a viable and sovereign Palestinian state. The erroneous assumption that is often made is that there is a widely shared perception within Israel that a withdrawal to pre-1967 borders and the creation of a sovereign Palestinian state on the vacated territories is necessary and sufficient to preserve the constitutional features of a Jewish state within Israel’s pre-1967 borders. If this were the case, the subsequent actions of Israeli policy-makers after 1994, for instance to expand settlements, would be impossible to explain. We would have to fall back on explanations based on the irrational attachment of critical Israeli policy makers across the party divide to hold on to biblical lands that ultimately damage the prospects of a viable Jewish state. We reject the latter explanation, and instead we argue that the apparently contradictory actions of Israel can be rationally explained by the inherent internal contradictions of trying to maintain a Jewish state in the ethno-demographic mix of contemporary Israel-Palestine.

It is clear that there is a broad-based Israeli recognition of the need for Palestinian ‘self-government’ and even for some form of ‘state’, since it is clear that the total absorption of the Palestinian population of the occupied territories into Israel on equal terms would immediately undermine the Jewish character of the state of Israel. However, the error of the international community (and many Palestinians) was to jump from this observation to the conclusion that full sovereignty for the West Bank and Gaza would *strengthen* Israel’s position in maintaining the Jewish character of Israel. It is our contention that if we look carefully at the ethno-demographic distribution of populations and the implication of this for Israel’s attempt to ensure its Jewish nature, the creation of a sovereign Palestinian state on any set of borders simply does not address Israel’s strategic concerns. Wherever the borders of a future Palestinian state are drawn, a significant number of Palestinians will remain outside this state with Israeli citizenship and/or identity cards. Even if these Israeli Palestinians constitute as little as 20 percent or so of what remains of Israel’s

³ Jeff Halper, *Obstacles to Peace: A Re-Framing of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict* (Bethlehem: PalMap of GSE, 2004), pp. 12–20.

population, the operation of a Jewish constitution with inferior rights for this significant minority is not going to be easy. Secondly, the refugee issue cannot be settled simply by means of an agreement with the leadership of the Palestinian state. A programme of resettlement in the newly independent Palestinian state would be contested by many refugees and would in any case take years to complete. Both of these Palestinian groups have demands and aspirations that are not immediately addressed by the creation of a sovereign Palestinian state on pre-1967 borders, and yet their aspirations have to be managed if the Jewish constitution of Israel is to be protected. We describe this as the broader ethno-demographic challenge to Israel's Jewish constitution.

From this perspective, it becomes possible to explain how security measures that indefinitely delay the emergence of a sovereign Palestinian state can enhance Israel's capacity to manage Palestinian aspirations in areas *outside* the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which is critical for the sustainability of the Jewish quasi-constitution of Israel. This 'management' strategy is not neat; it has many dangers, and is clearly unacceptable to all Palestinians. But it may be the best strategy that Israel has from the perspective of sustaining its primary goal. If we understand this, both security first and the associated facts on the ground become explicable as part of an Israeli strategy of long-term management of its 'Palestinian problem' through conditional, partial, and reversible transfers of governance responsibilities in densely populated parts of the occupied territory.

If Israel's best strategy does *not* involve the creation of a sovereign Palestinian state, such a state is not going to emerge through a process of negotiation given Israel's military dominance. As a result, the conflict may be far more difficult to resolve than supporters of the two-state solution have assumed. Our analysis points not only to the futility of the external facilitation of a process that is not likely to lead to a truly sovereign Palestinian state (regardless of where the borders are drawn); it also points to the ultimately explosive nature of a conflict that has no obvious resolution. We argue that the international discourse needs to move away from a discussion of security first conditions that cannot be met in a situation of permanent occupation and frequent Israeli military operations, to a discussion of what Israeli strategic objectives may really be, and how viable they are. In the context of Sharon's unilateral disengagement plan, the international community needs to ask if anything significant has changed in Israel's strategic calculations. To the extent that a significant change is very unlikely, the eventual outcome is likely to follow the pattern of previous Israeli withdrawals from Palestinian population centres. If the withdrawal does eventually happen, a period of possible calm is likely to be followed by increasing violations of security conditions and then by reversals and clampdowns by Israel, followed, if we are lucky, by the cycle beginning again.

'Security first'

'Security first' refers to the set of security conditions on which Israel insists over the 'interim period' prior to the establishment of a sovereign state. The uniqueness of these demands, and the insight they provide into Israel's underlying motivations, has not been sufficiently understood. Although the international community now recognizes the impact of security containment on Palestinian poverty and well-being,

there is still no recognition of the likely endgames that are consistent with such an approach.⁴ Israel's insistence upon 'security first' reveals important issues that explain why *it may not make strategic sense for Israel to offer full sovereignty to the West Bank and Gaza Strip*. If so, the gulf between the diplomatic discourse and Israel's actions on the ground becomes more explicable, but the prognosis of the prospects of real peace becomes very bleak.

'Security first' describes the specific terms under which Israel has sought to withdraw sequentially from the occupied territory. These conditions should not be confused with the very reasonable demand that violence should be renounced during any negotiations. But this is not what 'security first' means in the Israel–Palestine context. Israel's security-first requirement, as recognized in the Oslo agreements and all subsequent discussions of Israeli disengagement, has been based on a unique set of conditions to the effect that *withdrawals will be partial, phased and conditional, while the details of final borders (and indeed all significant issues) will be deferred*. While all this is going on, Palestinians have to adhere to a strict code of non-aggression against Israel and Israeli settlements and settlers in the occupied territories, even if Israel continues to carry out security operations and targeted killings that it can argue are necessary for its survival. In practice, this has also meant that all withdrawals are *reversible*, because Palestinians have signally failed to show this degree of restraint.

Withdrawals would be *partial* because critical areas within the oPt would be kept under Israeli control, including in particular international borders, most internal roads, corridors necessary for military purposes, and key settlements. At the most optimistic stage of the Oslo interim period, Israel retained control of roughly 60 per cent of the West Bank and 25 per cent of the densely populated Gaza Strip. Further withdrawals were to be *phased* in a deliberately slow and open-ended way. During the interim period, Israel made no effort even to keep to the agreed timetable, signalling that the already laborious schedule could take years or even decades to complete. And these phased withdrawals would be *conditional* in that the ceding of more control over territories already handed over would depend on security being achieved for Israel, *as judged by Israel*. If security were judged unsatisfactory, for whatever reason, all or some of the withdrawals could be *reversed* and the process would begin again. The uniqueness of this set of conditions compared to other examples of withdrawals from occupied territories or colonies should not be underestimated.

These specific features of 'security first' create an open-ended period of limbo in which the disengaged territories are neither truly sovereign nor technically part of Israel. Nevertheless, authorities 'governing' these regions with very limited autonomy are to be held responsible for delivering security to the occupiers, whose direct occupation of significant areas continues, without enjoying sovereignty or controlling their internal economy. In fact, economic conditions for large parts of the occupied population actually worsened during Oslo as new, internal borders with Israel were set up without control over international borders being relinquished. During this

⁴ See *Disengagement, the Palestinian Economy and the Settlements*, World Bank, 23 June 2004. Available at www.worldbank.org/ps.

period, economic survival was based on specific ‘interim’ arrangements for economic transactions with Israel, whose economy now became ‘external’ to the Palestinians, thereby giving Israel enhanced powers of inflicting economic pain on the occupied population. The constrictive nature of these economic arrangements is critical for understanding the political and economic impasse during the Oslo period.⁵

Three possible motivations may help to explain why Israel insisted on this unique set of conditions for disengagement, each consistent with a different set of strategic goals that Israel may have been trying to achieve. The first possibility is that security first is necessary for ensuring Israeli security in the context of a strategic goal to withdraw from territories occupied in 1967. However, we will see that this claim turns out to be very difficult to justify on grounds of strategic logic if Israeli arguments are taken at face value. A second possibility is that Israel recognizes the strategic necessity of withdrawing its settlements from the occupied territories, but requires time to organize the withdrawal, and security first provides the framework for organizing the necessary withdrawal. However, we will see that this possibility is inconsistent with Israeli actions on the ground. A third, more worrying possibility is that ‘security first’ is part of a long-term Israeli strategy of *managing* ‘self-governing’ Palestinian territories that are *not intended* to have full sovereignty. While this appears to contradict Israel’s perceived interest in a two-state solution, it is possible to *understand* the rationality of this strategy from an Israeli perspective once we look at Israel’s broader ethno-demographic concerns, even though the long-term sustainability of the strategy remains questionable.

Achieving security

The difficulty of taking the first possibility at face value can be established by simply asking if the doctrine of ‘security first’ make sense as a strategy for ensuring Israeli security in a context where it intends to withdraw from the occupied territories. It is a legitimate demand for both sides that violence should cease while negotiations over the details of the withdrawal and its implementation are taking place. But we know (as ex-president Clinton has pointed out) what the outcome of the negotiations have to be if the Palestinian state is to be politically and economically viable. It cannot take a great deal of time to work out the borders of the territory from which Israel has to withdraw if this was the major issue. So why insist on a partial, phased, conditional, and reversible set of withdrawals under the security-first rubric without publicly committing itself to the final borders of a sovereign Palestinian state? The only possible security reason that could justify why Israel should insist on security first *before* it publicly commits itself to a full withdrawal could be that Israel is unsure of the *future* intentions of a hostile Palestinian state on its border. ‘Security first’ could perhaps represent a test of the Palestinian *will* to ensure Israeli security after independence is granted before formally agreeing to its final shape.

⁵ Jamil Hilal and Mushtaq H. Khan ‘State Formation Under the PNA’, in Mushtaq H. Khan, with George Giacaman and Inge A mundsen (eds.), *State Formation in Palestine: Governance and Viability during a Social Transformation* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), pp. 71-82.

This justification appears to be reasonable, but does not in fact make strategic sense. There can be no credible pre-commitment of their future intentions by the Palestinians because human beings can always change their minds. For Israel to be sure that future attacks will not take place, it needs to have conventional military forces deployed along an internationally recognized border. However, Israel already possesses overwhelming military superiority not only against any conceivable threat from a future Palestinian state but also against threats from more populous and militarily advanced Arab neighbours. Given this, it is difficult to make a security case to delay a full withdrawal and transfer of sovereignty. And if a security case could be made, which argued that Israel does not have the military superiority to defend its pre-1967 borders, there would never be a time from a security perspective when sovereignty could be handed over. This is because there is no such thing as a credible commitment not to attack in the future by showing a willingness to refrain from attacking today. In either case, by unpacking the steps in the strategic logic we can see that the doctrine of security first makes no sense as part of a roadmap towards the creation of a sovereign Palestinian state on pre-1967 borders *if Israel was really committed to a full withdrawal and the creation of a sovereign Palestinian state*. If anything, by increasing Palestinian frustration and allowing the expansion of critical settlements, it makes the eventual creation of such a state *less likely*.

Allowing the withdrawal of settlers

A second, more credible Israeli justification for 'security first' is that even if Israel is committed to the creation of a sovereign Palestinian state by withdrawing to pre-1967 borders, it has to ensure the security of the settlements during an interim period when withdrawal was taking place. Since it may be politically difficult to make the security of the settlements a major public demand from the Israeli side, even as an interim measure, it may be easier to ensure their security by insisting on the more general demand of security first as a condition for proceeding with the withdrawal. The difference with the previous argument is that although it cannot be explicitly stated, the aim here is to ensure the security of settlers *now*, rather than the security of the international borders of Israel *in the future*. The utility of the 'security first' approach would be to allow Israel to maintain effective sovereignty over parts of the occupied territory during an interim period in order to ensure the security of departing settlers.

But to be plausible, this explanation needs to be substantiated by at least some observations of concerted efforts by Israel to prepare for the withdrawal of settlements, not just from selected population centres, but also across the board. Yet under Oslo, just the opposite occurred. Far from withdrawing settlers from settlements that were far from Palestinian population centres, the number of settlers roughly doubled between 1994 and 2000. It is particularly interesting that the rate of increase of settlers was just as high if not higher under Labor governments that were ostensibly more committed to the Oslo process. Although some settlers in 'unauthorized' settlements that could not be easily protected were occasionally removed, there was no political showdown based on a planned withdrawal of settlers in general. These facts on the ground suggest that 'security first' was not a strategy to facilitate the withdrawal of all settlers. If it had anything to do with settlers, it was to offer critical settlements *permanent* protection, often on the most fertile land with access to water.

More to the point, the argument about the need to protect settlers while they prepare to leave does not explain why ‘security first’ conditions should continue to hold for the Gaza Strip *after* the settlers will ostensibly have left. According to Sharon’s plan, Israel will continue to control parts of the Gaza Strip and to control access to it by land, sea, and air. It will thereby continue to contain the Gaza Strip economically while testing the Palestinian commitment to Israeli security conditions without any Israeli settlers being present in that specific territory. If these security conditions are not met by the Palestinians, which is the likely eventual outcome under conditions of economic hardship and political domination, reversals can be expected in the future. If ‘security first’ were really intended to protect settlers, it would be discontinued in the Gaza Strip under the Sharon disengagement plan, and the expansion of settlements in the West Bank would have ceased long ago.

The conclusion cannot be avoided that both the expansion of settlements in the West Bank and the proposed withdrawal of settlers from the Gaza Strip are more consistent with the well-established pattern of conditional, partial and reversible Israeli withdrawals from population centres and that they help to retain an overall ‘matrix of control’ over the occupied territory.

A part of Israel’s long-term management strategy

If the first justification for ‘security first’ is not strategically credible, the second is inconsistent with the facts on the ground. A third possible justification *is* consistent with the facts on the ground but *appears* to be inconsistent with Israel’s long-term strategic interests. This argument is that ‘security first’ is part of a long-term Israeli management strategy that is *not intended* to lead to a sovereign Palestinian state but only to pockets of Palestinian self-government subject to Israeli re-occupation. This explanation appears to be inconsistent with the widespread assumption that Israel seeks a resolution to its ethno-demographic crisis by supporting a two-state solution on pre-1967 Israeli borders. But this is only because outsiders have taken a simplistic view of the ethno-demographic challenge facing Israel.

A closer look at the issues suggests that the creation of a sovereign Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders will *not* solve critical aspects of the ethno-demographic challenge that constitutes Israel’s ‘Palestinian problem’. Indeed, in some respects, the creation of such a state may make the management of some aspects of this ‘problem’ *more* difficult from an Israeli perspective. This could explain why an internal Israeli consensus on the two-state solution has never emerged. Even those Israeli policy-makers who ostensibly support a two-state solution have had a very limited conception of what a “state” is, and ultimately colluded in the perpetuation of a ‘management strategy’. Outsiders have looked at the demographic implications of Israel trying to absorb the Palestinians in the *occupied territory* to conclude that Israel must support a two-state solution, and that to be politically and economically viable, the Palestinian state must be based on 1967 borders. But they have not adequately addressed two far less soluble facets of the same problem.

First, Israel already has a large internal Palestinian population with Israeli citizenship, amounting to 20 per cent of its population and growing. Wherever the final borders are drawn, Israel will continue to have a significant Palestinian minority. A serious

potential challenge to Israel's Jewish constitution does not require a Palestinian majority. A significant minority that demands equal constitutional rights is just as damaging. Second, Israel has to deal with a refugee Palestinian population in exile that is at least as big as Israel's current Jewish population. The Palestinian refugees in exile have rights that a Palestinian leadership in a West Bank state may not be legally capable of signing away, even if it were politically minded to do so. Nor are the refugees likely to give up their political fight regardless of the legality or the politics of any deal between Israel and the Palestinian leadership based in the occupied territories. When these two critical aspects of the broader ethno-demographic challenge are factored in, it becomes clear why many Israelis believe that there is no lasting and permanent solution to its 'Palestinian problem', *wherever the borders with a Palestinian state are drawn*.

There is a growing recognition across the Israeli political spectrum that this is indeed the case. Statements that have explicitly supported our interpretation have come from Benny Morris at one end of the Israeli political spectrum to Binyamin Netanyahu at the other. But outside observers have either ignored these internal Israeli discussions or believed that they represent the concerns of insignificant minorities.⁶ The likelihood is that although many Israelis may support a Palestinian state, the type of state they support is a permanently 'non-sovereign' one. Indeed, from Israel's perspective, it is possible to see why a full withdrawal to the 1967 borders and the creation of a sovereign and viable Palestinian state may actually make the management of these other problems *more* rather than less difficult.

To begin with, consider the Israeli Palestinians. They now make up around 20 per cent of the Israeli population, and some Israelis have already identified them as the most serious threat to Zionism. Israeli Palestinians are beginning to argue that Israel will have to choose between its claim of being a democracy and maintaining the core characteristics of the Jewish state. This is because the Jewish nature of the state in Israel is not just about Judaism having a ceremonial role as the state religion (akin to Anglicanism in England) but about establishing a series of unequal and preferential legal and constitutional rights for Jews. These include the right of return (denied to non-Jewish refugees and their descendants), significant formal and informal rights that flow from the responsibility of military service (that Palestinians are not 'required' to do), preferential access to land, unequal taxation, differential access to state services, different classes of citizenship with and without voting rights (the Arabs of annexed East Jerusalem have Israeli identity cards but no voting rights) and so on. By contrast, the constitutional recognition of democracy would entail equal legal rights and responsibilities for all Israeli citizens irrespective of their religious or racial affiliation.⁷

⁶ See Benny Morris, 'There Can Never be Peace Between Israelis and Palestinians', *Guardian*, 21 February 2002 and Nabulsi, 'The Peace Process and the Palestinians', p. 226.

⁷ See, for instance, Azmi Bishara, 'Being an Arab Citizen of the State of Israel', *Los Angeles Times*, 12 January 2003 and Allan C. Brownfeld, 'Israel Must Face the Contradiction between a "Jewish" and a "Democratic" State', *Washington Report on Middle Eastern Affairs*, April 2003, pp. 71–2. The latter is available at www.washington-report.org/archives/april03/0304071.html. See also William Cook, 'Israeli Democracy: Fact or Fiction?', *Counterpunch*, 25 January 2003 (available on <http://www.counterpunch.org/cook01252003.html>); and Oren Yiftachel, *The Shrinking Space of*

There are a number of ways in which the internal constitutional dilemma faced by Israel impacts on its strategy towards the West Bank and Gaza Strip. If Zionism requires the maintenance of inferior legal and constitutional rights for Israeli Palestinians *in any case*, why should Israel not extend the system of graduated rights and absorb the West Bank and Gaza entirely, or in large part? Indeed, some members of Likud openly advocate the complete absorption of the occupied territory into Israel by extending the partial citizenship system of East Jerusalem, namely Israeli identity cards without voting rights, to the rest of the oPt.⁸

Other unspoken considerations are even more serious. Most Israeli Palestinians have been restrained in their criticism of the limited and unique constitutional rights that apply to them. Their quiescence is not surprising when Palestinians in the occupied territory are contained in dependent bantustans with vaguely defined borders. The fear of being converted into similar ‘self-governing’ areas and of their liberty being subjected to severe restrictions has kept Arab Jerusalemites and Israeli Palestinians from voicing constitutional demands with any vigour. Were a sovereign Palestinian state with internationally recognized borders to be created, this would remove the ambiguity about the status of Israeli Palestinians, and it would be natural to expect these citizens of Israel to assert their claim for equal rights much more strongly.

Further, for some Israelis the maintenance of Jewish enclaves in the occupied territory also keeps alive the possibility of ‘resolving’ the problem of the Israeli Palestinians in radical ways. For instance, it may be possible to put pressure on a client Palestinian state that remains territorially and economically unviable to accept the ‘transfer’ of Israeli Palestinians out of Israel in exchange for persuading some of the remaining settlers in the West Bank to return to Israel. These dreams of a further round of ethnic cleansing are increasingly being discussed in Israel, but their limited plausibility would disappear entirely if a future Palestinian state has achieved full sovereignty and economic viability. Keeping outposts of settlers deep inside a disconnected set of bantustans and maintaining the Gaza Strip as an area subject to asymmetric containment, even if it is without any settlers, increases Israel’s political flexibility to explore such options 15 to 20 years from now. A fully sovereign Palestinian state, on the other hand, would be far less likely to assist in resolving such problems.

As for the refugees and their descendants, there are legal questions as to whether their right to return, which is an individual right, can be signed away by the leader of a Palestinian state that would be based on territories from which most refugees did not originate. Quite apart from the fact that any Palestinian political leader in the West Bank-Gaza Strip would be committing political suicide by signing away these rights, it is not at all clear, as touched on above, that any Palestinian leader has the *legal* authority to sign these rights away. This means that regardless of any deal with a Palestinian state on the right of return, Israel would have to live with the demands of millions of Palestinian refugees in neighbouring countries who are unlikely to accept the legitimacy of any ‘signing away’ of their internationally recognized rights.

Citizenship: Ethnocratic Politics in Israel, Middle East Research and Information Project, 2002. This is available at www.globalpolicy.org/nations/sovereign/citizen/2003/0618israel.htm.

⁸ Moshe Feiglin, *A Jewish Road Map*, 2003. Available at www.rjews.net/manhigut/en/view_article_manhigut_en.php3?article_id=206.

From an Israeli perspective, the creation of a sovereign and viable Palestinian state may well make the management of this problem *more, not less*, difficult. As long as there is no settlement, the status quo can continue and the hopeful Zionist may believe that eventually the refugees will disappear into their host communities. However, as soon as a Palestinian state is created, the refugee issue will come to the fore. Even ignoring the issue of the Israeli Palestinians, a Zionist might support a two-state solution only if it were also possible to force this Palestinian state to accept large numbers of returning refugees. The latter are at least very likely to be indignant with a leadership that had colluded in what they would perceive as a 'sell-out'. Even if the Palestinian state had signed treaties to this effect, the 'return' of refugees to a place from which they do not originate may be very difficult to effect. International subsidies for absorbing refugees might not compensate a future Palestinian state for the potential political risk and cost of absorbing large numbers of disgruntled and disaffected citizens. On the other hand, if the Palestinian 'state' remained weak and dependent on Israel, and security first conditions allowed Israel to maintain a presence and a say inside the territories, much more effective pressure may be put on this state to cooperate in absorbing, managing and containing the potential hostility of millions of returning Palestinians. Since the repatriation of refugees would take years and perhaps decades to complete, the management of this aspect of the 'Palestinian problem' is at least a very long term if not permanent strategic concern for Israel.

This brief discussion suggests why creating a viable and sovereign Palestinian state before other equally serious aspects of Israel's 'Palestinian problem' have been resolved may *restrict* Israel's perceived freedom of manoeuvre and even threaten the viability of Israel's Jewish quasi-constitution. Israel's goal, from this perspective, is therefore to *manage* the 'problem' by means of creating a series of reversible bantustans. The problem is that these enclaves are by definition not viable and create more Palestinian anger and violence. From this perspective, 'security first' plays a critical role both in signalling Israel's long-term interest and presence in all of the Palestinian territories, and in justifying an ongoing response to the unrest that is likely to be a permanent feature of an endless 'transitional' phase.

This is the real strategic significance of 'security first', which makes no sense as a means of achieving security in the conventional sense or as a step towards achieving a viable and sovereign Palestinian state. Even though official Israeli policy documents do not make these connections for obvious reasons, it would be unfair to accuse Israel of any hidden agenda or conspiracy. Many of the discussions and debates on which this analysis is based are public – in the Israeli media, political parties, think tanks, and universities. The relevant documents are easily available, including on the Internet.

If there is a conspiracy, it is a conspiracy of silence on the part of the international community, which has refused to acknowledge what the Israelis have actually been saying. Members of the international community have preferred to rely upon what they *think* they know about Israel's real interests. In contrast, Israeli leaders, and not just Sharon, have often said that the 'Palestinian problem' is unlikely ever to be solved; it just has to be 'managed'. Israel's strategic goal, the origins of which can be traced back to the very foundation of the state, has been to achieve the military and

political capacity to manage the problem.⁹ When considered in the context of the demographic facts, the constitutional, not just the territorial, claims of Zionists and Palestinians ultimately constitute a ‘zero-sum’ game. This reading of its options suggests that as its long-term strategy, Israel is at best likely to agree to the creation of a number of dependent Palestinian homelands. The significance of ‘security first’ is that it is both invoked as the justification for not engaging in discussions of full withdrawal and the rapid creation of a sovereign Palestinian state, as well as providing the cover for the necessary military management of the inevitable Palestinian unrest.

This analysis suggests that the international community’s focus on territory and territorial concessions has diverted attention from the real obstacles on the path to the two-state solution. Instead of asking, for example, why the Palestinians have been unwilling to concede two or three per cent more of their land, it would have been more pertinent to ask why Israel feels compelled to keep another two or three per cent or indeed a significantly higher percentage of Palestinian land; why it wishes to control Palestinian borders; and why it wants to maintain a presence deep inside ostensibly sovereign territories. Why has Israel been so keen to maintain control over the political, ecological, and economic viability of the Palestinian entity or entities that it seeks to create? Further, does the justification of all this on the grounds of ‘security first’ actually make sense in terms of security? Might security first not make more sense in terms of Israel’s perception of how it can deal with the broader range of ethno-demographic challenges it faces, and which it openly discusses within the country? Had these questions been asked sooner, it would have been apparent that the massive gap between the facts on the ground and the diplomatic discourse was no accident and that it did not reflect a failure of consistent strategic behaviour on the part of the Israelis.

However, although Israel’s insistence on ‘security first’ makes sense in the sense that it is arguably the best strategy from the perspective of Zionist goals, this does not mean that these goals are achievable. It is important for the international community to understand what they are signing up to by not questioning the feasibility of these underlying goals. Israel’s overwhelming military superiority and its alliance with the only remaining superpower may well have lulled it into believing that its management strategy can be a permanent one. But too many things can go wrong. One possibility is that power in the occupied Palestinian territory may slip out of the hands of those Palestinians who hope against hope for a peaceful resolution into the hands of those who believe (as most Zionists already appear to believe), that the Palestinian conflict with Israel truly is a ‘zero sum’ game. If this happens, a very rapid deterioration can be expected, with the possibility of Israel attempting to carry out large-scale transfers of population and the involvement of neighbouring countries in a major conflict. It is not at all clear that the international community is prepared for this. At the other extreme, another possibility is the emergence of a non-violent Palestinian movement to demand civil and political rights for all Palestinian constituencies. This too could present a new and perhaps even greater challenge to the permanent continuation of Israel’s management strategy.

⁹ See Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (London: Penguin, 2000) pp. 1-53.

The disengagement plan

To many, the disengagement plan initiated by Sharon appears to be significantly different to the earlier Oslo process. It may appear to contradict the analysis presented so far. But in many key respects, it represents a minor modification of an established strategy.

An immediate difference appears to be an Israeli commitment to withdraw settlers from most or all of the Gaza Strip. But in fact, conditional withdrawal from population centres while maintaining the containment of these areas is precisely the old strategy. Indeed, for Israel this was a cornerstone of the Oslo process. The proposed withdrawal of settlers from Gaza has been combined with the intention of maintaining and even strengthening Israel's containment by enhancing border controls with Egypt and the Mediterranean while strengthening and extending settlements in the West Bank.

In this context, the plan to withdraw settlers from Gaza can be viewed as entirely consistent with a strategy of controlling and containing Palestinian territories while withdrawing from densely populated areas. Indeed, our argument has been that settlers have been used to *justify* 'security first' and the containment of Palestinian territories rather than that containment was imposed to protect the settlers. Settlements assist containment only if they can be cheaply maintained; otherwise, containment and limited sovereignty are less easy to justify, but our argument explains why they will continue. Maintaining settlements is no longer inexpensive in the Gaza Strip, in isolated areas of the West Bank or deep inside Palestinian towns. But for most settlements and settlers, the Israeli intent to stay put remains unchanged for the foreseeable future. Indeed, settlements are being expanded in the West Bank.

These observations raise important questions about the role of the international community in facilitating the disengagement plan. The international community is caught between a rock and a hard place. There is no question of withdrawing, or possibly even reducing, aid to the Palestinian territories and to the Palestinian National Authority in the context of one of the steepest declines in living standards seen in recent history.¹⁰ At the same time, subsidizing Israel's strategy of containment is not likely to lead to progress towards a viable two-state solution, as the Oslo experience has clearly demonstrated. It is not easy to dismiss out of hand the voices of those Palestinians who now argue that Oslo afforded Israel the opportunity to intensify and formalize containment in a way that may not have been possible during the pre-Oslo occupation. A similar and further intensification and formalization of containment may follow in Gaza, and the international community may once again participate in giving this process legitimacy. Far from disengagement being a step towards the creation of a viable Palestinian state, it may further the formalization of a system of control that can better be described as 'institutionalized containment' or 'bantustanization'.

¹⁰ World Bank, *Disengagement, the Palestinian Economy and the Settlements*, pp. 1-3.

Conclusion

The dilemma facing international donors should not preclude support for Palestinians in the context of Israeli plans for a unilateral disengagement from Gaza. But this should be truthfully described as relief and welfare, not as support for a state-formation exercise that is not remotely realistic. Nor should it preclude a more transparent analysis of Israeli strategies.

In the long run, resolution of the conflict requires a frank debate within Israel and between it and its friends abroad about what, if anything, can be done to preserve Zionism given the demographic reality of modern Israel–Palestine. It is precisely because the creation of a sovereign Palestinian state does not provide a satisfactory solution to the constitutional crisis facing Zionism that Israel has refused to grab the apparent opportunity presented by Oslo. On the other hand, a bantustanization strategy posing as a two-state solution is unlikely to get the minimum Palestinian support required to achieve even a temporary resolution of the conflict. Palestinians on the ground can see the reality of what is happening. Their growing internal fragmentation and refusal to participate with any great enthusiasm in this ‘state-formation exercise’ is evidence of this. But this should not be interpreted as signalling the absence of partners for peace on the Palestinian side. Instead, it should force the international community to reconsider some of its own assumptions about the strategic goals of the parties and the price that has to be paid if Israel’s underlying strategic goal is not to be questioned.