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Defensible Borders and Strategic Depth

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The Council for Peace and Security would like to bring to your attention this document that analyzes the issues of strategic depth and defensible borders.

These issues have re-surfaces recently in the context of potential Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, and therefore require close and responsible analysis that addresses the relevant threat environment.

To this end, the Council for Peace and Security convened a working group which produced the following document, as well as its executive summary.

The members of the working group are:

Council for Peace and Security member **Major Gen (Res). Shlomo Gazit**

Council for Peace and Security board member **Major (Res.) Ret. Amos Lapidot**

Council for Peace and Security Police **Major Gen. (Ret.) Shaul Givoli**

Council for Peace and Security board member **Brig. Gen. (Res.) Shlomo Brom**

Council for Peace and Security board member **Brig. Gen. (Res.) Gadi Zohar**

Council for Peace and Security board member **Col. (Res.) Shaul Arieli**

President of the Council for Peace and Security **Major Gen. (Res.) Nathan Sharony**

Managing Director of the Council for Peace and Security, **Helit Barel**

The document was authored by **Brig. Gen. (Res.) Shlomo Brom.**

It is our hope that this document might provide insight regarding the security aspects of the debate and steer debate back to pragmatic and professional considerations.

Sincerely

Brig. Gen. (Res.) Nathan Sharony

Helit Barel

Summary:

1 As a central issue in any forming agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, the question of defensible borders and Israel's strategic depth has recently come once more into the center of attention in public discourse. **This paper states that the formula of an agreement based on the 1967 lines with agreed upon land swaps is defensible in face of the relevant threats facing Israel today and in the future and that control of the Jordan Valley and the West Bank is irrelevant in responding to these threats.**

2 **The current threat environment** is substantially different than that faced by Israel in the past and upon which the need for Israeli control of the Jordan Valley was determined. The central threat Israel faced in the past was that of a massive ground attack with air power support from a coalition of Arab states. Clearly, the current reality of the military balance in the Middle East renders this threat nearly irrelevant due to the collapse of the pan-Arab movement, the peace agreements in effect with Egypt and Jordan, and the eradication of Iraqi military forces. Therefore, the main threats Israel must now prepare for are:

- > Asymmetrical warfare vis-à-vis non state actors using terrorist and guerilla tactics.
- > Strategic threats-mainly the use of ballistic missiles and means of mass destruction.

3 **The Jordan Valley and the West Bank are irrelevant in the context of the current threats because:**

- > Current missile and ranges allow for targeting of the entire territory of the state of Israel without the deployment of any launchers west of the Jordan River.
- > The main factors in countering terrorist and guerilla threats are the reliability of the barrier between Israel and the future Palestinian State and the latter's ability to prevent the construction of terrorist infrastructures.
- > Even in the unlikely scenario of the re-occurrence of classic conventional war, several point must be noted:
 - + The Jordan Valley does not provide strategic depth. Since Israel's width including the valley is only about 40 kilometers (about 25 miles), non-territorial responses for current threats are necessary.
 - + If the Jordan Valley is to serve in countering a ground attack then the crucial area for force deployment is the slopes leading up to the Judean and Samarian mountains. Force deployment on the slopes turn the entire Jordan Valley into a "killing zone" of the attacking ground forces.
 - + Any force permanently positioned in the Jordan Valley itself would be vulnerable to encirclement.
 - + The only significance the Jordan River line holds is in terms of border-control and ongoing security tasks.

4 **Relevant Military and Diplomatic Responses to Threats**

In the military realm, responses must rest on five elements:

1. Deterrence. **2.** Early warning. **3.** Passive defense (home front preparedness). **4.** Active defense, i.e. the interception of various ballistic projectiles. **5.** Offensive capabilities that will reduce the quantity and frequency of ballistic launches. Israel is currently prepared to defend against a massive ground attack (despite the low likelihood of such a scenario materializing). The IDF has developed and absorbed extraordinary capabilities to destroy masses of mobile and

stationary targets with great precision. This means the IDF could destroy expeditionary forces within Jordanian territory long before they reach the Jordan River line. Moreover, in a state of emergency, the IDF would be able to utilize the main roads leading to the Jordan Valley from the north and the south, as well as its airborne capabilities to introduce forces into the Jordan Valley and deploy in the slopes leading to the mountaintops.

In the diplomatic realm, peace agreements are meant to serve as an adequate alternative to control of the territory by the former adversary, both by reducing the motivation to use violence in pursuit of goals and by creating security arrangements, such as those put in place as a result of the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, in case the state of peace is undermined.

Similar mechanisms would be created in a permanent status agreement with the Palestinians:

1. The Palestinian state would be demilitarized, with provision only for domestic security forces. **2.** Oversight mechanisms would be implemented and would include monitoring of the border with Jordan and other border crossings, to ensure that demilitarization is maintained. **3.** The Palestinian state would be prohibited from forging alliances and cooperation with states and movements that are hostile to Israel. **4.** The Palestinian state would be obligated to prevent terrorist activity and the establishment of terrorist infrastructure and to implement oversight mechanisms to insure that such obligations are met. **5.** An international force would be deployed in the area of the Palestinian state.

In addition, the informal strategic alliance that already exists between Israel and Jordan will be strengthened by the establishment of a Palestinian state, as the common interests of both states will grow deeper. As long as the strategic alliance with Jordan is maintained and grows stronger, in the context of a massive ground attack Israel's security border will not lie in the Jordan River line, but rather in Jordan's border with Iraq.

In conclusion

- > The main threats to Israel's security today are ballistic projectiles and weapons of mass destruction. These threats are intended to erode Israel's national moral and international standing, and in countering them, the West Bank and Jordan Valley have no significance.
- > Israel holds adequate military responses even to counter worst-case scenarios that are highly unlikely to materialize such as a massive ground attack by a coalition of Arab states.
- > A final status agreement with the Palestinians along with its security arrangements and mechanisms will provide a more-than-adequate alternative to control of the West Bank and the Jordan Valley and will create a strategic reality in which Israel's de-facto border rests in eastern Jordan.

The Question of Defensible Borders

In Israeli-American-Palestinian dialogue, the issue of Israel's strategic depth and assurance of defensible borders has come up as a key issue in discussions about the basis for territorial outlines of an agreement. In this framework, the Israeli government demands Israeli control over the Jordan Valley and the annexation of large portions of the West Bank to ensure the defensible borders and strategic depth that will allow Israel to deal with potential military threats.

In examining this issue, four main questions must be answered:

- > What are the main threats that Israel might have to face?
- > How important are the Jordan Valley and the West Bank in affording a better response to these threats, in terms of strategic depth and defensible borders?
- > What weight do diplomatic solutions and agreements carry in the response to these threats?
- > What are the current and future military responses to these threats and to what extent do they hinge on territorial control of the Jordan Valley and the West Bank?

The Threats

When the concept of the need for defensible borders was developed, including the need for Israeli control over the Jordan Valley (as expressed, for example, in the 1967 Alon Plan), the main danger to Israel was a massive ground attack with air support by a coalition of Arab countries, as occurred in 1948–9, in 1967 and again in 1973. Those threatened Israel's survival due to the lack of symmetry between Israel and the Arab world, one element of which was a lack of strategic depth. Since that time, the strategic balance in the Middle East has been transformed, and the threat of a massive ground attack has all but vanished for the following reasons:

- > Following changes in the world order, the Arabs have lacked the backing of a superpower that would provide them with material support for such a campaign.
- > The pan-Arab vision has collapsed and the chance that such an Arab coalition will emerge is negligible.
- > Israel has signed peace treaties with two Arab countries, Egypt and Jordan, removing them from the circle of war. At the same time, all Arab governments without exception, as expressed in the Arab peace initiative, have recognized the fruitlessness of attaining their goals vis-à-vis Israel by other than diplomatic means. The vision of the struggle against Israel is now perpetuated by non-state players and a non-Arab country – Iran.
- > Iraq, the key component of any eastern front against Israel, was defeated in the two Gulf wars, and its military power has been eradicated. It will be years before it can build significant military might, assuming it will be able to maintain sufficient internal stability and cohesion.
- > The Arab countries have lost hope in their ability to face Israel on a classic battlefield. Therefore, other than the oil states, most of these countries have reduced their investment in conventional maneuver warfare and have moved on to investments in military realms they consider more worthwhile.

For these reasons, the principal threats that Israel will need to face now and in the foreseeable future rest in two other main areas:

- > Sub-military conflict, i.e., guerilla warfare and terrorism. This realm is sometimes called “asymmetrical warfare,” a term that reflects its two main characteristics. First, it is not a war between states, but rather a war between a state and a non-state player. Second, it is conducted by other than conventional military means in order to counter the state's technological and quantitative edge.
- > Warfare against Israel with strategic tools, particularly ballistic missiles and means of mass destruction, i.e., chemical, biological or nuclear weapons. These are intended to counteract Israel's advantages in conventional warfare as well as in the strategic realm, in which Israel is perceived to possess military nuclear capabilities.



The main threat, therefore is not a ground attack that will threaten Israel's territorial integrity, but rather the erosion of its people's spirits and of its international standing.

These two realms share a number of commonalities. First, the main target of both is Israel's civilian population. Second, in both cases, the main weapons are ballistic projectiles, guided missiles and rockets of various ranges that can reach any target in the State of Israel. Third, neither realm seeks a decisive military victory, but rather attrition, damage to national morale and media, image-related and political benefits.

The Jordan Valley and the West Bank as responses to threats

The Jordan Valley and the West Bank are irrelevant to the two main new threats, because the ranges of missiles and rockets place the entire territory of the State of Israel under massive rocket and missile threat without deploying a single launcher west of the Jordan River.

Moving Israel's borders to the East does not provide an adequate response even when dealing with specific concerns, such as the protection of Ben-Gurion International Airport. The airport is vulnerable to two types of threats. One is ballistic missiles and rockets, to which borders are irrelevant, as they are to any other target in Israel. The second is guided missiles, which could strike planes landing or taking off. Here, too, moving the border is irrelevant because of the continually increasing range of these missiles.

In terms of the threat of terrorism and guerilla action, such as infiltration of suicide bombers or a guerilla force into Israel, territory is of very little relevance. The main factors influencing this type of threat are the reliability of the obstacle between Israel and the Palestinian state, and, most importantly, the ability to thwart the development of terrorism infrastructures within the Palestinian state. In the reality of an independent Palestinian state, the second point will be influenced mainly by other factors: the extent to which the Palestinian state is functioning and the security arrangements established in the agreement between the two states, including cooperation on fighting terrorism and the mechanisms by which these arrangements are monitored.

Although the likelihood and severity of classic military threat, the likelihood and severity of which have greatly declined over past decades, territory cannot be said unconditionally to have no significance. However, some remarks are in order:

- > "Strategic depth" with regard to the Jordan Valley and the West Bank makes a mockery of the term. With or without the Jordan Valley, Israel does not have strategic depth; it is only about 40 km across, including that valley. Thus, regardless of control of the valley, this threat must also be countered with other responses.
- > If control of the Jordan Valley is intended as a military response to a ground attack, simple military analysis shows that the pivotal issue is not military presence along the Jordan River and in the Jordan Valley itself. Any military force deployed in these areas will suffer from topographical inferiority and will be vulnerable to fire from both west and east. The critical areas are the passes leading from the Jordan Valley to the mountaintops. Deployment of Israeli defences there would make the valley the killing zone for an attacking force.
- > Any military force permanently stationed in the valley would in any case be limited in size and would find itself in constant danger of encirclement.
- > The line of the Jordan River itself is significant only in the context of border control and ongoing security.



The Jordan Valley and the West Bank do not provide the responses to the main threats anticipated following a peace agreement with the Palestinians.

The significance of diplomatic solutions and agreements

Peace agreements signed after wars are to a great extent forged in order to create diplomatic solutions as an appropriate alternative to control of the territory by the former adversary. Part of the solution is the state of peace itself, which reduces the motivation of either party to use violence toward the other. However, the basic assumption is that a state of peace could be undermined, and agreements therefore include security arrangements precisely for such circumstances. For example, the peace treaty with Egypt returned the Sinai to it, but only after security arrangements were put in place that included demilitarized and limited-force zones, an oversight mechanism and an international force. These arrangements create a situation by which the Sinai, though under Egyptian sovereignty, continues to provide a degree of an artificial strategic depth for Israel.

Similar mechanisms would be created in a permanent status agreement with the Palestinians:

- > The Palestinian state would be demilitarized, with provision only for domestic security forces.
- > Oversight mechanisms would be implemented and would include monitoring of the border with Jordan and other border crossings, to ensure that demilitarization is maintained.
- > The Palestinian state would be prohibited from forging alliances and cooperation with states and movements that are hostile to Israel.
- > The Palestinian state would be obligated to prevent terrorist activity and the establishment of terrorist infrastructure and an oversight mechanism would be created to insure that these obligations are met.
- > An international force would be deployed in the area of the Palestinian state.

From a broader strategic perspective, there is another diplomatic mechanism that does not rely directly on the agreement with the Palestinians, but is connected to it: the relationship with Jordan. An informal strategic alliance already exists between Israel and Jordan. The establishment of the Palestinian state will strengthen that alliance because it will prevent the undermining of ties between the two countries due to friction with the Palestinians and will create a strong common interest in preventing the Palestinian state from becoming a subversive security threat to both countries. As long as the strategic alliance with Jordan is maintained and grows stronger, Israel's security border does not lie in the Jordan River line, but rather in Jordan's border with Iraq.



A permanent status agreement with the Palestinians with built-in security arrangements will offer a more than adequate alternative to the minimal benefit of continued control over the Jordan Valley and the West Bank. Such an agreement will create an advantageous strategic situation for Israel, in which its de facto security border is in eastern Jordan.

Military Solutions

A broad security perspective must also include the worst-case scenario. As mentioned above, the peace agreement itself will provide Israel with numerous security advantages, but it bears consideration as to what would happen in the event of the collapse of the peace agreement and the diplomatic assumptions on which it rests. Would the peace agreement's security arrangements and Israel's military capabilities provide a suitable response to the threats in such a situation?

The answer is twofold. In terms of the most likely threats – terrorist and guerilla actions on the one hand and the use of strategic weapons on the other – our situation will be the same with or without control of the Jordan Valley and the West Bank. At any rate we will have to find technological and operational solutions to attacks by terrorist squads and suicide bombers, as well as ballistic attacks. The responses to the second and most significant threat, of strategic weapons, must be built on five elements:

- + Deterrence
- + Early warning
- + Passive defense, i.e., shelters; protective rear against chemical and biological attack; firefighting capabilities; search and rescue; medical capabilities and the ability to quickly treat affected population; and rapid-recovery capability.
- + Active defense, i.e., projectile and missile interception capabilities.
- + Offensive capability intended to reduce the number and frequency of launches. In the context of an agreement with the Palestinians, the demilitarization mechanisms greatly facilitate the offensive element.

With regard to the threat of massive ground attack, let us take the worst-case scenario: An Arab military coalition is able to form following regime changes in Jordan and Iraq. Iraq manages to reconstruct its capability to dispatch a substantial

expeditionary force. Jordan decides to permit Iraqi, Saudi and perhaps Iranian expeditionary forces to enter its territory. This scenario seems highly implausible in the current Middle Eastern strategic reality, and yet, what could Israel do if it materialized?

Even under such circumstances, Israel's position is reasonably solid and the main danger would still come from the masses of ballistic projectiles targeting it rather than from the ground campaign. In the past decades, modern warfare has been dramatically transformed. Fire capability has improved significantly at the expense of maneuverability. The IDF has evolved from an army based mainly on maneuvering heavy armored formations by developing and absorbing extraordinary capabilities for long-range destruction of masses of mobile and stationary targets using precise fire. This means that the IDF has the ability, which will continue to improve, to decimate expeditionary forces that enter Jordanian territory long before they reach the Jordan River line.

Moreover, in an emergency, the IDF would be able to utilize the main roads leading to the Jordan Valley from the north and the south, and its airborne capabilities to introduce forces into the Jordan Valley and deploy in the pass through its airborne capabilities. The demilitarization agreements with the Palestinian state would allow for this with relative ease.

The transformation of the modern battlefield has also limited the ability of the IDF to conduct mobile warfare. Accordingly, the gravest danger stems from the possibility of the war becoming one of attrition in which ballistic threats play a central role. However, as noted, the areas under discussion are irrelevant as a response on this issue.

A permanent-status agreement with the Palestinians will improve Israel's standing in the international community, while the stabilization of Israel's relations with the United States will ensure a sympathetic international atmosphere that will help Israel continue to develop the key military capabilities it needs for dealing with worst-case scenarios.

The international legitimacy accorded to Israel as a result of an agreement would allow it greater capacity to use force against threats that emerge after the signing of the permanent-status agreement and withdrawal to the new borders.



Israel possesses suitable military responses for worst-case scenarios whose likelihood declines considerably after reaching an agreement. The diplomatic fruits of an agreement will ensure the perpetuation of military capabilities over time

Conclusion

An analysis of the key issues involving defensible borders reveals that in the framework of permanent-status negotiations with the Palestinians on permanent borders, it is possible to devise defensible borders based on the 1967 lines with limited exchanges of territory.

The comprehensive security package including all the diplomatic components of the agreement, its security arrangements, strategic relations with surrounding countries that would result from the agreement and concomitant international legitimacy, will improve Israel's security situation over its current state and will allow it to achieve security at a reasonable cost.