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Opinion

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

A Settler's View of Israel's Future

By Yishai Fleisher

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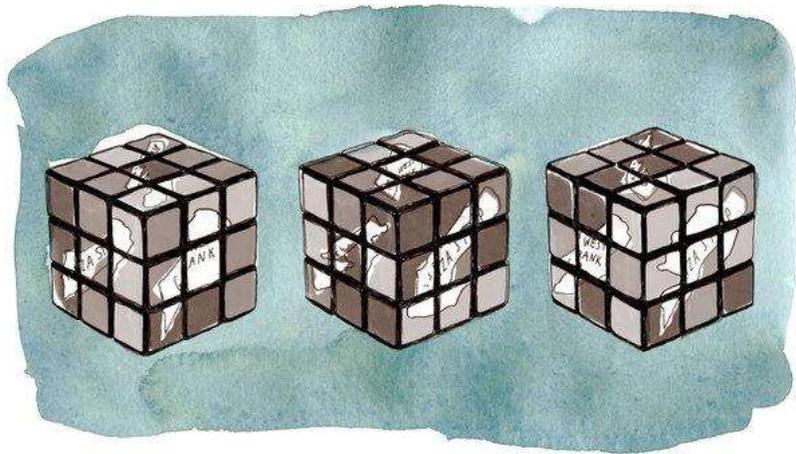
Credit Lauren Simkin Berke

HEBRON, West Bank — Last week, Israel's Parliament passed a controversial bill that allows the government to retroactively authorize contested West Bank Jewish communities by compensating previous Palestinian land claimants.

Opposition parties warn that this law could open Israel to prosecution at The Hague, and the chief Palestinian negotiator, Saeb Erekat, said, "Israel's Parliament has just approved a law to legalize theft of Palestinian land." This theme has been echoed recently at the Paris peace conference, in a United Nations Security Council resolution and by a major policy speech by then Secretary of State John Kerry, which all condemned settlements.

Israel never seems to have a good answer to accusations against the settlement enterprise. Whenever the claim that Israel stole Palestinian lands is heard, Israel's answers inevitably are: "We invented the cellphone," "We have gay rights," "We fly to help Haiti after an earthquake." Obvious obfuscation. And when pushed to explain why the much-promised two-state solution is perennially stuck, the response is always to blame Arab obstructionism.

This inability to give a straight answer is a result of 30 years of bad policy that has pressed Israel to create a Palestinian state in the historic Jewish heartland of Judea and Samaria, which the world calls the West Bank. This policy has worked to legitimize the idea that the territory of Judea and Samaria is Arab land and that Israel is an intractable occupier. Today, as Israel is beginning to walk back the two-state solution, it is not easy to admit we were wrong; and many people's careers are on the line. This is why Israel mouths the old party line, yet takes no steps toward making a Palestinian state a reality.



But for us settlers, the truth is clear: The two-state solution was misconceived, and will never come to pass, because Judea and Samaria belong to the Jewish people. Our right to this land is derived from our history, religion, international decisions and defensive wars. Jews have lived here for 3,700 years, despite repeated massacres, expulsions and occupations — by the Romans, Arabs, Crusaders and Ottomans. And the world recognized the Jewish people's indigenous existence in this land in the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and the San Remo Accords of 1920.

When Israel declared independence in 1948, Jordan, along with five other Arab states, attacked Israel, occupied Judea, Samaria and eastern Jerusalem, and drove out Jewish residents. Again, in 1967, Jordan attempted to wipe out the Jewish State, but this time, Israel forced the Jordanian army back across the Jordan River. While the government of Israel was ambivalent about whether to retain the newly emancipated areas, the settler movement was not. We set about holding and developing the land, just like the pioneers of the Kibbutz movement.

Today, the estimated number of Arabs living in Judea and Samaria is [2.7 million](#), though some researchers dispute the data and argue that the figure is far lower. Yet the presence of these Arab residents alone does not warrant a new country. Arabs can live in Israel, as other minorities do, with personal rights, not national rights. But many Arabs reject that option because they do not recognize the legitimacy of a Jewish State, with or without settlements.

This pervasive intolerance was laid bare in the aftermath of Israel's 2005 withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, when Hamas seized control in 2007 and turned the territory into a forward base for jihad, starting three wars in seven years. As a result, most Israelis, however pragmatic, no longer believe in a policy of forfeiting land in hopes of getting peace in return. While a Hamas-controlled Gaza is now a reality, no Israeli wants an Islamic State of Palestine looking down at them from the strategic heights of Judea and Samaria.

Therefore, most settlers say without ambivalence that the two-state solution is dead, and the time has come for a discussion of new options by which Israel would hold onto the West Bank and eventually assert Israel sovereignty there, just as we did with the Golan Heights and eastern Jerusalem. Yes, Israel will have to grapple with questions of the Arab population's rights, and the issues of the country's security and Jewish character, but we believe those questions can be worked out through the democratic process. At least five credible plans are on the table already.

An Israeli settlement in front of an Arab village in Amona, West Bank. Credit Chris Mcgrath/Getty Images



The first option, proposed by former members of Israel's Parliament Aryeh Eldad and Benny Alon, is known as "Jordan is Palestine," a fair name given that Jordan's population is generally reckoned to be majority Palestinian. Under their plan, Israel would assert Israeli law in Judea and Samaria while Arabs living there would have Israeli residency and Jordanian citizenship. Those Arabs would exercise their democratic rights in Jordan, but live as expats with civil rights in Israel.

A second alternative, suggested by Israel's education minister, Naftali Bennett, proposes annexation of only Area C — the territory in the West Bank as defined by the Oslo Accords (about 60 percent by area), where a majority of the 400,000 settlers live — while offering Israeli citizenship to the relatively few Arabs there. But Arabs living in Areas A and B — the main Palestinian population centers — would have self-rule.

A third option, which dovetails with Mr. Bennett's, is promoted by Prof. Mordechai Kedar of Bar-Ilan University, near Tel Aviv. His premise is that the most stable Arab entity in the Middle East is the Gulf Emirates, which are based on a consolidated traditional group or tribe. The Palestinian Arabs are not a cohesive nation, he argues, but are comprised of separate city-based clans. So he proposes Palestinian autonomy for seven non-contiguous emirates in major Arab cities, as well as Gaza, which he considers already an emirate. Israel would annex the rest of the West Bank and offer Israeli citizenship to Arab villagers outside those cities.

The fourth proposal is the most straightforward. Caroline Glick, a Jerusalem Post journalist, wrote in her 2014 book, "The Israeli Solution: A One State Plan for Peace in the Middle East," that, contrary to prevailing opinion, Jews are not in danger of losing a demographic majority in an Israel that includes Judea and Samaria. New demographic research shows that thanks to falling Palestinian birth rates and emigration, combined with opposite trends among Jews, a stable Jewish majority of above 60 percent exists between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean (excluding Gaza); and this is projected to grow to about 70 percent by 2059.

Ms. Glick thus concludes that the Jewish State is secure: Israel should assert Israeli law in the West Bank and offer Israeli citizenship to its entire Arab population without fear of being outvoted. This very week, Israel's president, Reuven Rivlin, announced his backing for the idea in principle. "If we extend sovereignty," [he said](#), "the law must apply equally to all."

Israel's deputy foreign minister, Tzipi Hotovely, similarly advocates for annexation and giving the Palestinians residency rights — with a pathway to citizenship for those who pledge allegiance to the Jewish State. Others prefer an arrangement more like that of Puerto Rico, a United States territory whose residents cannot vote in federal elections. Some Palestinians, like the Jabari clan in Hebron, want Israeli residency and oppose the Palestinian Authority, which they view as illegitimate and corrupt.

Finally, there is a fifth alternative, which comes from the head of the new Zehut party, Moshe Feiglin, and Martin Sherman of the Israel Institute for Strategic Studies. They do not see a resolution of conflicting national aspirations in one land and instead propose an exchange of populations with Arab countries, which effectively expelled [about 800,000 Jews](#) around the time of Israeli independence. In contrast, however,

Palestinians in Judea and Samaria would be offered generous compensation to emigrate voluntarily.

None of these options is a panacea. Every formula has some potentially repugnant element or tricky trade-off. But Israeli policy is at last on the move, as the passing of the bill on settlements indicates.

Mr. Kerry's mantra that "there really is no viable alternative" to the two-state solution is contradicted by its manifest failure. With a new American administration in power, there is a historic opportunity to have an open discussion of real alternatives, unhampered by the shibboleths of the past.

Yishai Fleisher is the international spokesman of the Jewish community of Hebron.

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