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Go Ahead

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Imagine that yasir arafat does the dread deed and unilaterally declares Palestine's independence on September 13. Israeli and American officials say it would be a catastrophe. Why? Not because the Palestinians would have their own state. Such a state may lead to disaster, but Israeli and U.S. officials assumed that risk in 1993, when the Oslo process began. No, the catastrophe would be that the declaration was unilateral, rather than part of a peace agreement in which Arafat formally proclaimed the Palestinian-Israeli conflict over.

But why is such an agreement so important? For seven years now, Israel has again and again transferred land and authority to the Palestinians and has received in return Arafat's promises to make peace, disarm terrorist groups, renounce threats of violence, cease anti-Israel propaganda, and the like. And again and again the Palestinian Authority chairman has violated those promises. To believe that Arafat would fulfill his next promise--the promise of a "final settlement"--is an ideological exercise grounded in neither history nor reason.

In fact, it misconstrues not only the Palestinians' understanding of Oslo but also Israel's. The Israeli leaders who launched and sustained Oslo understood that peace would be, at best, a by-product of the negotiations. For them, Oslo's paramount purpose was "ending the occupation"--allowing Israel to relinquish control of the populated areas of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. They hoped for peace, but they didn't require it. They wanted out, whether or not the Palestine Liberation Organization transformed itself into a neighborly government that upheld its commitments. Israeli officials had political reasons for calling their policy of unilateral withdrawal a "peace process," but maintaining that fiction has been costly, and now, after the failure at Camp David, its abandonment would be a sensible stride into a post- Oslo world.

Yitzhak Rabin, prime minister when the Oslo process began, didn't start out as a unilateralist, though he and his Labor Party had long favored relinquishing parts of the territories. Permanent control over millions of West Bank and Gaza Arabs, Rabin argued, would threaten Israel's status as a democratic and Jewish state. But Rabin said he would yield that control only to a responsible, non-terrorist Arab leader who would first assure Israel of peace and security in return. Labor for years imagined that leader would be King Hussein of Jordan, but by the late '80s the king had formally renounced that role. Rabin then fixed his hopes on the non-PLO Palestinian leadership participating in the so-called Madrid-process talks, which began after the 1991 Gulf war. Under no circumstances, Rabin vowed repeatedly during his 1992 election campaign, would Israel deal with a terrorist organization committed to Israel's destruction, like the

PLO.

For many Israelis, weary of intifada violence and decades of Arab hostility and war, Rabin's idea that Israel could unburden itself of the territories and get paid for doing so--in the form of a lasting peace agreement with non- PLO interlocutors--was irresistible: the national security equivalent of a free lunch. The model for such a land-for-peace deal was Israel's agreement with Egypt. In November 1977, Anwar Sadat had flown to the Knesset and announced an end to war between the two countries. The parties then negotiated for more than a year and signed their treaty in March 1979. Israeli withdrawals from the Sinai desert began only then--after the Arab side had publicly, formally, comprehensively, and credibly agreed to peace.

But, contrary to Rabin's predictions, the Palestinian Madrid-process negotiators were unwilling to play the Sadat role. After Rabin's election, a year passed in unproductive talks. Exasperated and embarrassed, Rabin feared that a diplomatic deadlock would hand Likud the next election and risk Israel's permanent entrenchment in the West Bank and Gaza.

Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, the Israeli chiefly responsible for what were then still-secret and only semiofficial talks with the PLO in Oslo, filled the policy vacuum. In the summer of 1993, he persuaded Rabin to initiate Israeli withdrawals without any Palestinian renunciation of the conflict and to transfer the land to the PLO, which Rabin still viewed as a terrorist organization. Rabin and Peres's land-before-peace policy regarding Arafat inverted the sequence of the Egyptian-Israeli diplomacy. Indeed, Israel's whole point was to withdraw whether the Palestinians offered peace or not.

In late August 1993, Rabin agreed to the first Oslo accord, known as the Declaration of Principles (DOP). Israel promised to withdraw from Gaza and the West Bank city of Jericho and to transfer specified "powers and responsibilities" to the Palestinians. The Palestinian side undertook to establish a governing authority, hold elections, create a police force, enact laws, and organize various official boards and banks and administrations. Absent from the DOP were any provisions requiring the Palestinians to halt the violence or end the conflict. That is, the DOP addressed land but not peace.

Nevertheless, Israeli leaders understood that they could command more domestic support if their concessions to the PLO were seen not simply as unilateral withdrawals but as necessary steps in a mutual peacemaking process. And, when they finally received the peace promises they sought from the PLO-- in side letters to the accord sealed on September 13, 1993, with that famous Rabin-Arafat handshake on the White House South Lawn--Israeli officials adjusted their story. They stopped saying DOP withdrawals would occur without regard to Palestinian peace promises and began claiming instead that Israel's concessions hinged on peace. They warned that if the Palestinian Authority failed to suppress terrorism, limit its arms, transfer terror suspects to Israel for prosecution, amend the PLO Covenant, and generally perform its obligations, Israel would not only stop the process but reverse it. Rabin thus wrapped his radical new policy in the rhetoric of a familiar old one, dressing up Oslo to look like land-for-peace.

But Arafat grasped from the start that Israel would not actually condition its withdrawals on his keeping his word. Accordingly, the Palestinian Authority has systematically violated the Oslo accords. It maintains security forces larger and more heavily equipped than permitted, and it refuses to use those forces to fulfill the PA's obligations to disarm terrorist groups and hand over suspects to Israel. In fact, the PA has not honored even one of the numerous Israeli requests for such transfers. Nor has the PA fulfilled its most basic commitment: to promote peace by refraining from anti-Israel propaganda. In schoolbooks, official maps, TV broadcasts, summer camps for teenage boys, and speech after speech by its top leaders, the PA delegitimizes Israel, preaches hostility, praises anti-Israel violence, and otherwise reaffirms the "armed struggle." Arafat continually invokes the 1974 PLO strategy of dismantling Israel in stages. On several occasions, the PA has organized mass violence against Israel, and PA forces have twice fired their Israel-provided weapons at Israeli soldiers, in September 1996 and again this May.

In response, Israel sometimes threatens to call off the process. But, true to the logic of unilateralism, those threats

time and again prove empty. Indeed, Israeli officials have generally played down the violations lest they undermine domestic support for Oslo and disappoint the many Israelis who have invested great hopes in the peace process. On occasion, Israeli officials have even actively defended the PA from pressure--for instance, lobbying to stop pro-Israel members of Congress from tying U.S. aid to PA compliance.

Nor did Benjamin Netanyahu--Rabin and Peres's Likud successor, who made Oslo's lack of reciprocity a centerpiece of his 1996 campaign for prime minister--insist on transforming Oslo from a process of unilateral Israeli withdrawals into an authentically reciprocal arrangement. He talked frequently about PA violations and delayed Israeli withdrawals in protest, but he remained unwilling to prick the Oslo bubble--to insist, once and for all, on PA compliance. He made additional agreements (Hebron and Wye) and implemented withdrawals thereunder, despite a long list of unremedied PA violations. He could not bring himself to admit to his public that Oslo's promise of peace was mere window dressing and that Israel's only realistic ambition in the process was to redraw the lines behind which it would continue to defend itself against unregenerate antagonists.

Seven years ago, Rabin embraced Oslo to give himself freedom of action. But instead Oslo has put the Israeli government on an accelerating treadmill, requiring it to run faster and faster, making bigger and bigger concessions to the Palestinians, to preserve the appearance of cooperation with Arafat and to prevent a return to open conflict, which would be more dangerous now because the PA has 40,000-plus men under arms. Israelis once regarded peace with Arafat and the PLO with almost universal skepticism. But leaders like Rabin and Ehud Barak, former chiefs of staff reputed to be smart and tough-minded, have done much to neutralize that skepticism. In doing so, they outsmarted themselves. To win public support for withdrawals, they asserted for years that Oslo would produce peace. They used their personal credibility to persuade much of the public not only that Arafat would end the conflict but that Israel "has no alternative to peace." Thus, Israeli officials put themselves in a box, with Arafat holding the key.

At Camp David last month, Arafat showed how costly a "final settlement" agreement would be. It is hard to overstate how extraordinary the concessions Barak offered were. According to the most credible reports, they included approximately 90 percent of the West Bank, recognition of a new sovereign Palestinian state therein, the absorption into Israel of 100,000 Palestinian refugees, the abandonment of various Jewish settlements, and, most astonishingly, the division of Jerusalem, with the Palestinians to have sovereignty over the Arab neighborhoods outside the Old City walls and more limited "control" over Muslim and Christian sections of the Old City-- including the Temple Mount.

Yet Arafat refused the offer. Among his chief reasons was Israel's refusal to acknowledge a Palestinian "right of return"--that is, an Israeli duty to receive millions of Palestinians within the pre-1967 boundaries. Even leaders of Israel's peace camp voice amazement at the turn of events. After Camp David's failure, eminent Israeli novelist Amos Oz wrote in *The New York Times* that the Palestinians "insist on their 'right of return,' when we all very well know that around here 'right of return' is an Arab euphemism for the liquidation of Israel." The self-described "peace activist" says it is unclear, even at this late date in the peace process, whether the Palestinians want peace or want to "massacre the Israelis and throw them in the ocean."

Barak insists that the concessions Israel offered at Camp David are now null and void. But peace-process logic does not allow for such nullification. Before the meeting, it was conventional wisdom, even among many of Israel's opponents, that under no circumstances would the Jewish state compromise its exclusive sovereignty over an undivided Jerusalem. This idea--which had become a powerful national asset--has now been negated. New Israeli-Palestinian talks will begin where Barak left off last month.

The refusal of Israeli leaders to label Oslo accurately as a process of unilateral Israeli withdrawal does not mean there are no arguments for such a policy. The lack of civil and political rights for West Bank and Gaza Arabs was a distressing moral dilemma. Ruling that large Arab population drew on Israel's financial and military resources and divided the country politically. Now that it has delivered into the PA's hands towns and villages containing nearly 100 percent of those Arabs, maybe Israel, though smaller, will be happier--less isolated in the world, with better morale and with a Jewish voting majority safe from drastic dilution.

Unilateral withdrawal, however, also has its drawbacks: it may endanger Israel militarily and force the country into a hair-trigger defense posture. An independent, revanchist "ministate" in the territories could destabilize Jordan as well as Israel; harbor terrorists; ally with rogue states such as Iran, Syria, and Iraq; and import hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees to camps threateningly positioned on the border with Israel. Also, unilateral withdrawal (especially in light of Israel's retreat from Lebanon) looks like running away, which may embolden Israel's enemies, undermining deterrence and making war more likely.

But Israel has never hashed out these arguments, because for seven years its leaders have refused to acknowledge that unilateral withdrawal has been national policy. And, now that Israel has already quit so much territory, the debate would be academic.

But appreciating Oslo's unilateralism helps clarify the decisions U.S. and Israeli officials now face. Would the United States and Israel be better served by assuaging Arafat to get his signature on a "final settlement" agreement with Israel--or not? All things being equal, it would be better if the Palestinian side renounced the conflict with Israel formally and promised to keep the peace--better still if the PA were to keep that promise. But all things are not equal, for Arafat is demanding a lot for his consent to a "final settlement." So the real choice before Israel and the United States is this: Should they pay the PA--with East Jerusalem, the Jordan Valley, the "right of return," and billions of dollars of aid--to declare independence within the framework of yet another agreement that, history tells us, the Palestinians won't fulfill and Israel won't enforce?

Alternatively, Israel could set its borders on its own, making any additional withdrawals openly and honestly unilateral. Israelis would know that the conflict continues, but Oslo's core notion--that Israel can itself end the conflict through reasonable concessions--would be usefully discredited. Arafat would declare an independent state, and, as Israel has already given the Palestinians the key elements of statehood (population, land, self-government), it couldn't stop him. But neither Israel nor the United States would be required to recognize such a state or give it aid.

The Palestinians might someday produce a leadership willing to make peace in good faith. Until then, Israel would have to warn the new state that it will retaliate against acts--or threats--of violence. But Israel does this already, and it would have to continue to do so even if it bought Arafat's signature on a "final settlement."

To acknowledge that Oslo has failed in its declared purpose--and that its essence has from the beginning been Israeli withdrawal, not bilateral peace--is to invite charges that one opposes peace. Which is why political leaders tend not to say it. Peace, as any decent person knows, is valuable and worth paying for. But illusions of peace, like those Oslo has promoted among Israelis and Americans for the last seven years, are not valuable at all. In fact, they're worth paying to avoid.

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