

The myth of demilitarization

written by David M. Weinberg | 29.12.2023

Since the dawn of the Oslo peace process, Israel has insisted on Palestinian demilitarization. This meant that any degree of Palestinian independence from Israel in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza was predicated upon the prevention of symmetrical and asymmetrical military threats against Israel - including conventional warfare, terrorism, and guerrilla warfare - from and via the territory of an autonomous Palestinian Authority or a prospective Palestinian state.

It was explicit in every Israeli-Palestinian deal signed since 1993 that the Israeli public would not countenance living alongside a Palestinian entity that houses a terrorist infrastructure or active, hostile military forces. The definite Israeli assumption was that the IDF could deny or block the massive military armament of a Palestinian government. The unequivocal Israeli expectation was that massive military armament would not be sought by a peaceful Palestinian government.

Alas, three decades of Palestinian terror and missile attacks from Judea, Samaria, and Gaza, the Hamas attack on southern Israel two months ago, and the gargantuan caches of weaponry since discovered in Gaza have blown these assumptions and expectations out of the water.

My conclusion is that demilitarization is a myth. In any territory evacuated by Israel, it is neither possible to enforce nor reasonable to expect that.

The attendant conclusion is clear too: only full Israeli military control of the territories adjacent to Israel has any chance of preventing enemy military buildup, and even then, it would remain an ongoing and difficult challenge.

THE IDF has confiscated more than 30,000 rifles, rockets, RPGs, IEDs, and attack drones from Hamas terrorists and hideouts in Gaza over the past two months and destroyed at least 250,000 other such items, along with hundreds of thousands of rounds of ammunition. It has also captured millions of shekels of cash used for weapons purchases and documents that expose tens of millions more expended on weapons purchases. This does not include the billions apparently spent on building and equipping Hamas's terror attack tunnel network, an underground network that seems to be 500% more extensive than IDF intelligence knew or presumed to know before the war began.

According to an IDF Special Forces briefing this week, “the scope of the captured munitions is unprecedented. The volume of weaponry, especially anti-tank missiles, is on a scale reminiscent of and even beyond that of the warfare of global jihadist organizations in Syria and Iraq.”

A lot of this weaponry was smuggled into Gaza through tunnels beneath the Philadelphi corridor or through Egyptian-controlled border crossings in Rafah. Additional weaponry was manufactured in Gaza, using machinery and civilian supplies repurposed for weapon manufacture that were imported into Gaza with Israeli approval and even support.

(The same applies to the millions of tons of cement Israel allowed into Gaza for construction and rehabilitation after previous rounds of conflict, much of which was poured into the terror attack tunnels.)

And today, weapons can be produced with 3-D laser printers in any basement hideout; no large and identifiable manufacturing facility is necessary.

Again, all this means that the demilitarization of zones where Palestinians assume governance over themselves is a myth. It is neither possible to enforce from afar nor reasonable to expect it in any territory evacuated by Israel. Only the Israeli military can and will permanently demilitarize Judea, Samaria, and Gaza.

And again, even then, demilitarization will remain a challenge. Consider Jenin, for example. The Palestinian Authority has long lost effective control of the Jenin refugee camp and similar terrorist headquarters in Samaria, forcing the IDF to operate deep inside these areas in full battle array with heavy equipment, almost like Gaza.

Hundreds of professional-grade weapons (not just homemade, ragtag weaponry) were discovered and confiscated this month in Jenin, including the beginnings of a West Bank missile manufacturing capability. Much of this was smuggled in via the porous Israeli border with Jordan. (No, the “moderate” Jordanians are not doing nearly enough to interdict such massive smuggling, and neither is the IDF.)

But the only reason that Katyushas and Kassams are not raining down every day from Kalkilya and Jenin on Gush Dan (Greater Tel Aviv) is that the IDF maintains overall security control of the West Bank envelope; direct military control over Areas B and C, which is 80% of the West Bank; and acts aggressively (“full

freedom of operation,” in formal terms) to keep the terrorists off base in Area A, which is the remaining 20% where the PA was accorded “full security control” to supposedly prevent militarization and terror.

IT IS IMPORTANT to recognize that this grim situation is very far from the idealized, empty theoretical framework of demilitarization and peace imagined by the Oslo Accords. Was it obvious from the start and inevitable that the PA would become a failed state and serve as a base for terrorist infrastructure? I don't know. But was the notion of full demilitarization of the territories by Palestinians a fallacy from the very beginning? Apparently so.

Remember that from day one, Yasser Arafat financed, directed, and equipped 16 competing Palestinian Authority militias, providing nearly 60,000 “security forces” with weapons - through local manufacturing and smuggling - that were prohibited in the Oslo agreements. He gave these forces all the trappings of an army (i.e., organizational structure, operational functions, unit names, ranks, etc.), expanding them well beyond what had been agreed upon. Since then, many Palestinian Authority military men and policemen have turned their guns against IDF troops and Israeli civilians, and some reports have them now organizing for Hamas-style raids into Israeli towns too.

According to an analysis written back in 2014 for the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, an Israeli think tank, by Maj. Gen. (res.) Aharon Ze'evi Farkash, former chief of IDF military intelligence, the Oslo Accords unambiguously stipulated that no Palestinian army or military capabilities that could constitute a threat would be established. Moreover, the “strong police force” allowed by Oslo was to “ensure demilitarization” by preventing terrorism, dismantling terrorist infrastructures and armed militias, preventing arms smuggling and terrorist infiltration, preventing armed or ideological interference in the proper workings of the Palestinian state by radical extremists and opponents of peace, preventing incitement to terrorism, and building a “culture of peace.”

This was to include neutralizing all channels of support for terrorist organizations (such as the transfer of funds to and activities conducted by extremist associations disguised as organizations established to help the needy) as well as eliminating school curricula as well as sermons in mosques and other religious and cultural institutions that encourage violence, martyrdom, and suicide.

Alas, almost none of this has happened. Arafat and his successor, Mahmoud Abbas, never ripened into partners for peace. Abbas has not uttered one dash of distaste, never mind a clear condemnation, of the October 7 Hamas attack, and he continues to “pay for slay” (to pay rewards to the families of terrorists).

So, the suggestions to give the Palestinian Authority more authority to expand territory in the West Bank or to bring it back as ruler of Gaza are both outrageous and dangerous. Abbas and his Fatah party never have and never will ensure demilitarization of the territories, not to mention real peace with Israel. And the suggestions to pose a broader pan-Arab security force in Gaza to ensure the demilitarization of Gaza going forward are similarly unrealistic.

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