

C2. AMI AYALON, ORNI PETRUSCHKA, AND GILEAD SHER, CALL FOR ISRAEL TO ADOPT “CONSTRUCTIVE UNILATERALISM” TOWARD THE PALESTINIANS, NEW YORK TIMES, 24 APRIL 2012.

Former lead Israeli peace negotiator Gilead Sher, former Israeli Security Agency head Ami Ayalon, and Israeli entrepreneur Orni Petruschka (organizers of a new group called Blue White Future) made the following proposal in a New York Times op-ed titled “Peace without Partners.” While most of the steps recommended by the authors are already being undertaken by the Netanyahu government or have previously been discussed among Israelis in the course of the peace process, the initiative is notable for openly labeling them as unilateral steps to determine final status and urging the Israeli imposition of a solution “regardless of whether the Palestinians leaders have agreed.” The op-ed appeared online on 23 April, and in print the following day. The op-ed was obtained from the New York Times website at www.nytimes.com.

For three years, attempts at negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian leadership have failed because of a lack of trust. It now seems highly unlikely that the two sides will return to negotiations—but that does not mean the status quo must be frozen in place.

Israel doesn’t need to wait for a final-status deal with the Palestinians. What it needs is a radically new unilateral approach: It should set the conditions for a territorial compromise based on the principle of two states for two peoples, which is essential for Israel’s future as both a Jewish and a democratic state.

Israel can and must take constructive steps to advance the reality of two states based on the 1967 borders, with land swaps—regardless of whether Palestinian leaders have agreed to accept it. Through a series of unilateral actions, gradual but tangible changes could begin to transform the situation on the ground.

Israel should first declare that it is willing to return to negotiations anytime and that it has no claims of sovereignty on areas east of the existing security barrier. It should then end all

settlement construction east of the security barrier and in Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem. And it should create a plan to help 100,000 settlers who live east of the barrier to relocate within Israel’s recognized borders.

That plan would not take full effect before a peace agreement was in place. But it would allow settlers to prepare for the move and minimize economic disruption. Israel should also enact a voluntary evacuation, compensation and absorption law for settlers east of the fence, so that those who wish can begin relocating before there is an agreement with the Palestinians. According to a survey conducted by the Israeli pollster Rafi Smith, nearly 30 percent of these 100,000 settlers would prefer to accept compensation and quickly relocate within the Green Line, the pre-1967 boundary dividing Israel from the West Bank, or to adjacent settlement blocs that would likely become part of Israel in any land-swap agreement.

Our organization, Blue White Future, holds regular meetings with settlers. We have found that many would move voluntarily if the government renounced its sovereign claims to the West Bank, because they would see no future for themselves there.

Critics will argue that unilateral moves by Israel have been failures—notably the hasty withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005, which left settlers homeless and allowed Hamas to move into the vacuum and launch rockets into Israel.

But we can learn lessons from those mistakes. Under our proposal, the Israeli Army would remain in the West Bank until the conflict was officially resolved with a final-status agreement. And Israel would not physically force its citizens to leave until an agreement was reached, even though preparations would begin well before such an accord.

We don’t expect the most ideologically motivated settlers to support this plan, since their visions for Israel’s future differ radically from ours. But as a result of our discussions and seminars with settlers of all stripes, we believe that many of them recognize that people with different visions are no less Zionist than they are. We have learned that we must be candid about our proposed plan, discuss

the settlers' concerns, and above all not demonize them. They are the ones who would pay the price of being uprooted from their homes and also from their deeply felt mission of settling the land.

The Palestinian Authority has already taken constructive unilateral steps by seeking United Nations recognition as a state and building the institutions of statehood in the West Bank. Neither action contradicted the two-state vision. Although many Israelis and the Obama administration objected to the bid for statehood, it could have moved us closer to that outcome had Israel welcomed it rather than fought it.

After all, Israel could negotiate more easily with a state than with a nonstate entity like the Palestinian Authority. And statehood would undermine the Palestinians' argument for implementing a right of return for Palestinian refugees, since the refugees would have a state of their own to return to.

Constructive unilateralism would also be in the interest of the United States. If President Obama supported this strategy, he would simply be encouraging actions aimed at facilitating an eventual negotiated agreement based on the parameters proposed by President Bill Clinton in 2000.

We recognize that a comprehensive peace agreement is unattainable right now. We should strive, instead, to establish facts on the ground by beginning to create a two-state reality in the absence of an accord. Imperfect as it is, this plan would reduce tensions and build hope among both Israelis and Palestinians, so that they in turn would press their leaders to obtain a two-state solution.

Most important, as Israel celebrates 64 years of independence later this week, it would let us take our destiny into our own hands and act in our long-term national interest, without blaming the Palestinians for what they do or don't do.