



PolicyWatch 2214

# Clarifying the Security Arrangements Debate: Israeli Forces in the Jordan Valley

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U.S., Israeli, and Palestinian negotiations could lower the heat and shed some light on the clash over Jordan Valley security arrangements by promoting a public debate grounded in the facts of current and prospective Israeli deployments.

As U.S. diplomats work to reach "an agreed framework" for future Israeli-Palestinian negotiations before the April expiration of current talks, security arrangements along the Jordan River have emerged as a key sticking point. Both parties have drawn lines in the sand about their respective positions, injecting passion and emotion into an agenda item that -- unlike the issues of Jerusalem and refugees -- was expected to be resolved through technical discussions among professional military experts.

## PRINCIPLED POSITIONS

So far, each side is holding to a position based on principle. For the Israelis, the principle is that the Jordan River must, for a lengthy period, remain their eastern security border. This means maintaining an Israeli military presence that not only guards against terrorist infiltration and weapons smuggling, but that could also provide the basis for a first line of defense against threats that may someday emerge east of the river. While Israel welcomes cooperative security arrangements with Jordan and the Palestinians in this effort, it looks around at the ineffectual third-party forces on its other borders -- especially the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) in the Golan Heights, and the UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), which still operates in Jerusalem six decades after its creation -- and rejects the idea that international forces, even from NATO, could replace its own troops. Israel also wants the term of its military presence along the river defined by certain criteria, not limited by a "date certain" that would be determined without regard to existing strategic realities.

For the Palestinians, the principle is that the independence and sovereignty of their future state require the removal of all vestiges of Israel's military occupation. Palestinian Authority leaders say they recognize the need for a transition period in which Israel would retain some military presence in the area; PA president Mahmoud Abbas recently told *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman that this could be up to five years, after which, he stated, "my country will be clean of occupation." In addition, he has said he welcomes the deployment of international forces -- including NATO troops -- along the Jordan River and throughout the future state of Palestine as a way to ensure security and allay Israeli fears. But on numerous occasions, he has declared that there will be "not one single Israeli soldier" on Palestinian territory at the end of the transition period.

The United States has attempted to bridge this gap through creative proposals devised by Gen. John Allen, former commander of international forces in Afghanistan and former deputy head of U.S. Central Command. While the details of his ideas have not been made public, they are said to be premised on a sympathetic understanding of Israeli security requirements while drawing on the U.S. experience in Afghanistan to inject a heavy dose of technology, with multiple layers of sensors, drones, high-tech fences, and other measures proposed as a means of reducing Israel's post-transition presence along the river. While Israel has not formally rejected these suggestions -- some of which have appeared in previous rounds of negotiations going back to Camp David and Annapolis -- various statements by Israeli leaders have disparaged them for suggesting an over-reliance on technology as a substitute for people.

## **LOWERING THE TEMPERATURE OF THE DEBATE**

One item missing from the public debate over security arrangements is a factual discussion of Israel's current deployments. Virtually all public statements and press reports on the topic reference "Israeli forces" in the Jordan Valley without detailing their size and composition. Most journalists also blur distinctions between Israeli deployments throughout the West Bank (i.e., the traditional "military occupation") and deployments in the Jordan Valley and along the Jordan River, whose principal task is border security. As a result, it is easy to conclude that Israel's military presence in the valley consists of brigade- or even division-size formations with thousands of troops, and that Israel seeks to retain a presence of this magnitude after the transitional phase of a final-status agreement.

In fact, the current Israeli military presence in the valley is much smaller than that widespread impression. It consists of a handful of infantry companies (totaling between 200-500 troops) plus a smaller number of security personnel at the border crossings, many not in uniform. Israel does not hide the small size of this contingent, but it does not advertise it either. It is able to maintain such a limited force because of close coordination with highly professional Jordanian security forces, cooperative working relations with still-developing Palestinian security forces, and the supplementary use of advanced technology.

## **EVOLUTION DURING THE TRANSITION PERIOD**

During the transitional period of implementing a final peace deal, one can expect Israel's military presence in the Jordan Valley to be roughly in line with its current size. There may be some fluctuation as Israel adjusts force levels to deal with potential threats emanating

from the east and west. In any case, its security arrangements for the valley would eventually transition from relying mainly on people enabled by technology (e.g., inspectors at border crossings and dismounted infantry patrols) to relying mainly on technology enabled by people (e.g., scanners, sniffers, and remote sensors), while progressively handing over certain security responsibilities to the PA and Jordan. In so doing, Israel would also have to transition from accepting zero risk in the pursuit of absolute security to accepting a more complex set of risk and security calculations in order to reap the strategic benefits that a peace agreement would hopefully yield.

In the post-transition period -- whether defined in advance by specific criteria (as Israel demands) or by a set schedule (as the PA demands) -- Israel would like to keep a small deployment of "invisible" monitors at border crossings (operating behind two-way mirrors or watching video monitors in adjacent rooms) as well as a contingent of troops to patrol a corridor along the Jordan River. This force would be roughly the same size as that currently deployed in the area and would work with the Jordanians and Palestinians to provide a buffer against infiltration and terrorist activity. As noted above, however, PA officials have ruled out any kind of enduring Israeli presence in the valley once the transition period has concluded.

## **SQUARING THE SECURITY CIRCLE?**

Security issues were not supposed to be the toughest nut in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, but they have assumed center stage in Secretary of State John Kerry's determined efforts to achieve progress. Indeed, the size and status of residual Israeli forces in the Jordan Valley is only one of several thorny security issues that remain unresolved, including Israel's demand for lightly manned early warning stations on strategic hilltops in the West Bank; arrangements for the aerial approaches to Ben Gurion International Airport; access and control over the main east-west roads and passes in the West Bank; management and control of airspace and the electromagnetic spectrum in the Palestinian territories; and details of the Palestinian state's demilitarization.

Here again, focusing on the details of Israel's actual and prospective deployments along the Jordan River may provide a way to deescalate tensions on this issue and promote a more dispassionate public debate. Palestinians may take a different view if their leaders clarified that the question of Israel's future military presence in the valley concerns a few hundred personnel, not the thousands that are often implied.

Regional experience could also be used to soften the debate's edges. For example, it is not difficult to imagine that future developments in the region -- especially the jarring potential for tumultuous change in Jordan -- could cause the PA to welcome, not just endure, some external presence in the Jordan Valley. Even today, the PA often finds it politically convenient for Israeli forces to arrest Hamas suspects in "Area A" -- the portions of the West Bank under full PA civil and security control -- rather than having its own forces do the job, though it is difficult to envision this practice continuing after the Palestinians have an independent state.

Similarly, Egypt was reluctant to accept significant restrictions on its sovereignty in the Sinai as part of the 1979 peace treaty with Israel, and Israeli leaders rejected Cairo's past requests to loosen some of these restrictions. Today, however, Israel is eager for Egypt to enhance its military presence in the peninsula beyond what is allowed under the treaty in

order to counter the growing jihadist threat there. And Cairo has turned a blind eye to (and perhaps even abetted) Israeli drone strikes against these jihadists -- a violation of sovereignty that no Egyptian government would have countenanced a decade or two ago. The lesson is that security arrangements evolve over time and with changing regional circumstances.

At the end of the day, security issues may prove to be the sticking point that prevents an Israeli-Palestinian agreement. But before that point is reached, it behooves the parties -- and their American mediator -- to promote a public debate grounded in facts, not in exaggeration or misrepresentation.

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