

## For Israel's sake, stop settlements: Column

**Here's how Trump can make the deal that will enshrine him in history.**

Ami Ayalon, Gilead Sher and Orni Petruschka / Feb. 14, 2017

TEL AVIV — The already uncertain and chaotic nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has intensified under the Trump administration. A case in point is its unexpected, ambiguous statement this month declaring that new or expanded West Bank settlements “[may not be helpful](#)” in achieving peace, but that the existence of settlements is not “an impediment” to peace.

Here in Israel, the right-wing coalition and the settler community believe that the road to annexing the West Bank is now paved. Israel did not annex the West Bank during the 50 years after it first [conquered that territory](#), but that was not because President Trump's predecessors in the White House discouraged it. Rather, it was because such a move poses inherent peril for the entire Zionist enterprise.

Some [2.5 million Palestinians](#) live in the West Bank today. The fulfillment of Zionism by establishing a secure, democratic homeland for the Jewish people in the land of Israel requires setting its borders around a Jewish majority. These cannot include the West Bank. Settlements east of the security fence Israel built in the West Bank, and the occupation, are existential threats to our country's national security. Israel's recent announcements that it will build [5,500 homes](#) there and establish a new settlement exacerbate this threat.

As three Israelis from different walks of life, we do not venture to claim any impact on U.S. policy. Yet that policy affects the future of our beloved country. We therefore feel compelled to lay out what would make Israel the secure, democratic and prosperous home for the Jewish people.

Beginning with his meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Wednesday, Trump will have an opportunity to correct mistakes made by previous administrations and demonstrate that, by balancing diplomacy and deterrence, he can move the deeply conflicted parties a very long way — possibly all the way — to the hoped-for two-state solution. The only alternative to that outcome is one binational state and increased violence, with tragic consequences similar to the recent war in Syria.

The Obama administration spared no efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian problem. Its failure stemmed from an imbalanced policy, its unwillingness to exercise leverage on the parties, and its reliance solely on the paradigm of bilateral negotiations. As a result, it was unable to move the parties from their hard-line positions.

The repeated failures over several administrations have led to a complete lack of trust between Israelis and Palestinians, even as [slim majorities](#) of both continue to support a two-state solution. It is therefore imperative to move to a new model, one that limits the reliance on mutual trust and increases the international community's role. The new approach should present a clear vision of the destination — two states for two peoples — and demand that the parties make independent progress toward that goal.

This will require creativity, not unlike the resourcefulness needed to resolve tough business situations, and a balance between diplomacy and leverage. It should include an international coalition of influential actors, regional dialogues, and a warning to both sides that failure to move independently toward two states will bear costs.

For our country, independent steps should include declaring that Israel has no sovereignty claims over areas east of the security fence and halting all construction in those areas. Israel should also enact a voluntary evacuation and compensation law for the settlers who live in these areas to encourage them to move to Israel proper or to the major settlement blocks west of the fence. The future of those settlers who decide to stay will be determined when a final status agreement is signed. In the meantime, the Israel Defense Forces will maintain control in those areas.

At the Aspen Security Forum in 2013, retired Marine general [James Mattis](#), the new secretary of Defense, accurately described the situation in our area as “unsustainable,” declaring, “We have got to find a way to make the two-state solution that Democratic and Republican administrations have supported.” Mattis' words reflect the understanding that despite past setbacks, a two-state solution is still the preferred outcome and is in the interest of Israelis, Palestinians and America.

The Trump administration has some advantages entering this new phase. Most notably, it can include Russia as well as Europe in an international coalition, thereby reenergizing [the Middle East Quartet](#) (the mediation group comprised of Russia, the U.S., the United Nations and the European Union) and can also incorporate leaders of Arab states who felt abandoned by the previous administration.

The result of these steps could be gradual, continuous progress towards a two-state reality, leading eventually to normalization and stability, and possibly to a comprehensive agreement. That would, indeed, be the ultimate deal — one that would enshrine its maker in history.

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