

VIEWPOINT

Gilead Sher

The only game in town



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ALTHOUGH A JEWISH AND DEMOCRATIC STATE with secure and recognized borders alongside an independent and demilitarized Palestinian state is a paramount national interest, no real action is being taken to break what is becoming an increasingly dangerous impasse.

"Constructive unilateralism" provides a new paradigm that could end the deadlock. The idea is that through a series of constructive unilateral steps, Israel transforms the situation on the ground and paves the way for a renewal of bilateral negotiations, leading to two states for two peoples.

The plan would proceed as follows: In a dramatic first step, Israel announces that it waives claim to sovereignty over West Bank territory east of the security fence. At the same time, it starts preparing in earnest for the return of settlers who live east of the fence or outside the settlement blocs and declares its readiness to return to negotiations at any time.

Israel then undertakes the following unilateral steps:

- Freezes all settlement construction east of the security fence and in Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem.
- Enacts a voluntary evacuation and compensation law for settlers residing east of the fence.
- Prepares a national absorption plan for settlers who relocate to Israel's secure and recognized borders.
- Establishes an empathetic ongoing dialogue with the settlers.

By advancing a two-state reality in this way, Israel would be signaling to the Palestinians and the world that it genuinely does not view the territories east of the fence as part of Israel proper. Long overdue, this message will resonate far and wide:

The international community would recognize the sincerity of Israel's intentions, helping to rebuild trust and to halt Israel's growing isolation.

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The Palestinians would realize that Israel does not object to the creation of a Palestinian state. But, at the same time, continuation of construction in the settlement blocs would put pressure on the Palestinian side to renew negotiations for better borders before the reality of two states separated by the fence and leaving them with only about 60 percent of the West Bank becomes irreversible.

The Israeli public would hear its government unequivocally emphasizing the urgent and essential need for a two-state solution and the national absorption plan would help mend the deep rifts in Israeli society over the fate of the settlements.

The settlers residing east of the fence would understand that they have to start thinking about their future. Many would take advantage of the voluntary evacuation and compensation law.

The Jewish Diaspora would be reassured about the resiliency of the Zionist enterprise.

Since there is no need for mutual agreement for unilateral steps, the paradigm enables Israel to act according to its long-term national interest, irrespective of Palestinian actions or omissions. Equally, it allows the Palestinians to take constructive unilateral steps of their own.

But it also leaves the door open for dialogue, affirms that the objective remains a two-state agreement, and that such agreement can only be reached through negotiations.

Given the recent spiraling developments in the Middle East, the two-state reality offered by the constructive unilateralism paradigm is the most one can hope for. After the November election, a newly elected or re-elected American president might shift gears in the Israeli-Palestinian arena and promote it as the only viable game in town.

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