

# The Status Quo isn't an Option

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The decision to allow just a small and unrepresentative portion of Israel's electorate to vote in the recent referendum was reflected in the fact that just 1% of the country's eligible voters voted against the prime minister's proposal – and this was sufficient for defeating it. Polls suggest that a diametrically opposite outcome would have resulted had the referendum been open to the entire electorate.

This boondoggle combines with the fact that the issue itself was not clearly defined. After all, what is the “plan” in this “separation plan”? What is its strategic goal? Where is this road supposed to lead us? As a result of this lack of clarity, public discussion was diverted from the primary issues.

The referendum results do not end this affair since the problems cannot evaporate on their own. Israel has reached one of its most important crossroads since attaining independence. The decisions that we make today – either directly, or by default through non-decision – will determine the nature of the country and society that we'll leave our children and grandchildren. Hence, it is crucial for the public to see the big picture, to internalize its long-run consequences, to determine coherent national objectives – and to enact the policies that will enable their attainment.

The “separation” issue must be examined from a much broader perspective than has been the case thus far. Our decision must be based on the impact of “separation” on the three main areas that affect Israel's future: our national identity, national security, and a socio-economic agenda.

10.5 million people live between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean Sea (3.7 million Palestinians and 6.8 million Israelis). Just 5.5 million are Jews. In the year 2020, the population between the Jordan and the Mediterranean will rise to roughly 15 million people – and only 45% of them will be Jewish. Since a solid Jewish majority can be preserved solely through moral, democratic, and legal means, the only real way to preserve Israel's Jewish-democratic nature is by determining the country's borders on the basis of defense considerations (so that we will be able to physically exist) and demographic considerations (without the Palestinians, Jews comprise 81% of Israel's population)

Therefore, our political and strategic objective must be to disengage from the Palestinians and into a Jewish-democratic state.

The traditional objectives of Israel's Right and Left – even in their current manifestations – are recognized by most of the public as unrealistic. A decisive majority of the Israeli public disengaged itself long ago from the idea of one country – Israel – between the Jordan and the Mediterranean since this would become a defacto binational state. Similarly, only a small minority accepts the outcomes that would result if the Geneva accords were to be realized, and even this minority will age considerably until a Palestinian partner will be found (if ever) that is willing and able to implement their part of the agreement.

On the other hand, unilateral disengagement – together with a security fence, while keeping open the door to final settlement negotiations – carries with it the following advantages:

- This policy provides a better combination of offense and defense in fighting terror than is attained today. The removal of 7,500 civilian Israelis from the midst of 1.3 million Palestinians in Gaza, for example, will relieve us from the considerable burden of guard duty within heavily populated Palestinian areas while enabling us to shorten our perimeter defense lines, thus heightening our effectiveness in fighting terror.
- This policy clearly moves us toward our strategic target – disengagement from the Palestinians – even in lieu of a partner willing and able to reach a historic compromise and a peace agreement.
- This policy is an Israeli initiative that can garner support within Israel and from abroad while creating a reality that will enable coexistence, ultimately yielding a Palestinian partner for peace.
- This policy frees us to formulate an imperative socio-economic agenda whose importance it is difficult to overstate.

Israel's unemployment rates have been rising steadily decade after decade – from under 3% in 1973 to 11% today. With more people have difficulty in finding jobs, it is not unsurprising that poverty has been on the rise since the seventies as well. Today, over a third of Israel's families have fallen below the poverty line – with no signs of change in these trends on the horizon.

Deficient provision of basic infrastructures – such as a better educational system and an efficient transportation network – has prevented a large and growing segment of our society from receiving the conditions and opportunities that would have enabled full realization of its abilities. Leaving those families behind not only harms them, it also precludes their potential contribution to Israel's economy and society. During the past 30 years, this country's standard of living has been falling farther and farther behind the leading western countries. In an era of globalization, when the world is both competitive and increasingly open, these conditions make it increasingly difficult for us to reduce emigration and attract aliya.

It is crucial that we refocus our national priorities and increase the transparency in the allocation of our scarce national resources. In a country with an annual public civilian budget (that is, excluding defense expenditures and even interest payments on the national debt) that is approximately 50 billion NIS greater than the western average – proportional to GDP – while at the same time investments in the country's transportation infrastructure are only half of what is common in the West, it is not difficult to guess the ultimate destination of huge amounts that could have been utilized elsewhere.

This situation is not some predetermined destiny. It is the result of an unbalanced public agenda reflecting mistaken national priorities that developed over time into an existential danger to the State of Israel.

We need to begin focusing on what is really important and imperative for Israel: ensuring the Jewish-democratic character of the country, increasing personal security and effectiveness in fighting terror, and implementation of a socio-economic agenda. The “separation” is but one step – that all of Israel's citizens (and not just Likud members) need to partake in – of a larger disengagement process whose ultimate aims were outlined above.

Planning this journey and leading us through it – in all of its aspects – is the duty and responsibility of our elected leadership and we must demand this accountability from them. But the responsibility is not only theirs. On our shoulders rests the obligation to chose from here on a leadership capable of making such a historic journey – a leadership with vision and a sense of direction, ability to make decisions, wherewithal to implement them, integrity and personal standards above reproach.