

Martin Sherman

The Autonomy Fallacy

There is a cardinal logical flaw in the conventional wisdom regarding the current "peace process."

Proponents of the process say it hinges on two interrelated goals. The first is a framework for fulfilling the Palestinians' aspiration to rid themselves of Israeli authority. The other is securing this framework's stability through economic development, generating the prosperity needed to reduce the incentive for unrest.

The former objective entails political segregation of Israelis and Palestinians. The latter entails economic integration. And the measures required to ensure economic integration will preclude political separation.

Economic opinion is largely unanimous in advising

"free movement of people and goods" across the line between the autonomous areas and Israel, without any customs or immigration barriers. But such counsel is almost always hedged by the circumspect (and self-contradictory) proviso that this openness must be "subject to the constraints of security."

Behind the call for free movement is the realization that the economic infrastructure of the autonomous areas will not produce anywhere near enough jobs for their present population — let alone the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from neighboring Arab countries who would pour in if the Palestinian interpretation of the accord prevails. To prevent the unrest that accompanies large-scale joblessness, tens of thousands of Palestinians will have to find their livelihood within Israel proper, subject to Israeli law and Israeli restrictions — the antithesis of the Palestinians' desire to be free of Israeli authority.

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Maintaining security will require checks at the new frontier, an inevitable source of friction. Any distinction between such checkpoints and the immigration stations rejected by the economists will be little more than semantic. Israel will be shorn of any powers of investigation and preventive arrest within the territories, so these checks will have to be especially stringent, lest the "enemies of peace" smuggle instruments of death across the newly resurrected "Green Line."

Experts also concur that in order to prevent inunda-

tion of the Israeli labor market, a system of work permits will be needed. Putting aside the bureaucratic labyrinth that this would entail, how could this be enforced? For if a "free flow of people" is to be allowed, there will be many legitimate reasons for entering Israel other than to seek employment — tourism, shopping, family visits. There is no way to ensure that those entering Israel for any of these purposes will not remain there to work. Israel will either have to resign itself to wide-scale illegal labor, or resort to the repressive, intrusive methods of searching restaurants and building sites for illegal waiters and bricklayers and deporting them back to the territories.

Economic integration, say the experts, requires that tax rates on both sides of the border be roughly equal, as disparate fiscal policies would create disparate costs and prices in the two economies. To ensure parity, Israel would have to determine tax policies in the territories. But that would be a gross violation of the cardinal principle of autonomy — giving the Palestinians the freedom to run their own internal affairs.

If there are to be no customs checks, how would we ensure that taxes, needed to prevent unfair competition, have been paid on goods "imported" into Israel from the territories? And what if the Palestinians feel that the interests of their own economy would be best served by a fiscal policy unlike Israel's? Would they be prevented from instituting such a policy?

If the answer is "yes," how could it be done without sanctions that would either harm the economic development of the territories, or the status of the Palestinian leadership, thereby undermining the accord itself? If, on the other hand, the answer is "no," and a "fiscal gap" opened up between Israel and the territories, how would economic integration be achieved? If the territories are not to become a tax shelter, Israel must either forgo the idea of integrated economies, on which the prosperity vital to the autonomy accord's success hinges, or demand fiscal powers in the territories, rendering the notion of autonomy meaningless.

It is here that the conventional wisdom breaks down. Economic integration would result in the higher living standards essential to the autonomy regime's stability. But it demands measures that run counter to the Palestinian desire to free themselves from Israeli authority.

For the Jewish people, this analysis incorporates what for many may be an unpalatable truth. Interim autonomy is no more than an attempt to evade the harsh simplicity of the Jewish-Arab conflict: Between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, there can (and eventually will) prevail either Jewish authority or Arab authority. The side that will endure as a sovereign nation will be the side whose national will is the stronger and whose political foresight the sharper.

□ Martin Sherman, the former secretary general of the Tsomet party, is a lecturer in the political science department of Tel Aviv University.





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The Road Down

It's unlikely that the Rabin government's policies will cause the sudden, cataclysmic demise of Israel. But if implemented, demise they will bring — through gradual economic and military decline, followed by national disintegration. Such is the logic inherent in the process that has been initiated.

The sequence of tragic events will commence with the establishment of autonomy in Jericho and the Gaza Strip. The "experiment" will in all likelihood *not* result in widespread fratricide among Palestinians within the autonomous areas and wholesale murder of Jews living nearby. Acts of terror will continue, probably even intensify slightly, but will not be considered sufficient provocation for Israel to launch large-scale military action within PLO-administered territories. Left-leaning military figures will patiently explain to an increasingly skeptical, apprehensive public that all this was to be expected: that it was unrealistic to expect to eliminate terrorism; that these deeds were perpetrated by "enemies of peace"; that the villains must not be allowed to prevail; that the "process" must continue.

At the end of the supposed trial period, the public will be told, amid an orgy of media support — full-page newspaper ads, financed by unidentified sponsors, and catchy peace jingles played endlessly on the state-controlled radio — that the "limited experiment" in autonomy has been a "relative success" and must now be expanded to further regions. For despite Rabin's declaration that autonomy is reversible, it won't be. Domestically, for the government to admit error would be politically untenable; internationally, it would be totally unfeasible for Israel to dismiss Arafat or deport him back to Tunis. The only direction will be forward, or what's called forward.

As the boundaries of the autonomous region grow, the difficulty in governing them will increase. Greater powers will be demanded by the PLO authorities to deal with ever more active opponents. The longer borders will become harder to patrol, placing growing pressure on Israel's combat units. The burden of reserve duty will increase, rather than diminish as promised.

The influx of Palestinians from surrounding Arab countries, promised under the terms of the agreements, will exacerbate the difficult economic conditions in the autonomous regions, creating fertile ground for the extreme Islamic organizations. Their influence will be especially strong among refugees, whose aspirations to regain land that they consider their birthright will put continual pressure on the PLO regime to make territorial claims within the 1967 lines.

The PLO will be hard-pressed to persevere in its policy of cooperation and rapprochement with Israel. Rejectionist movements will be given greater freedom of action within the refugee camps. With the coastal plain — where most of Israel's commercial and industrial infrastructure and the majority of its population are concentrated — lying below the heights of Judea and Sa-

maria, it will be but a matter of time before the rejectionists succumb to the temptation to lob an occasional mortar shell or Katyusha rocket into the metropolis spread beneath them.

With the heart of the country continually under the threat of bombardment from extremist elements ostensibly operating against the will of a PLO administration, and with the routine of daily life constantly in danger, Israel will find it harder and harder to attract investments. Foreign corporations will cut back on their activities in the country.

Moreover, no matter what agreements are signed with the present regimes in the Arab countries, the threat of Islam will oblige Israel to maintain a credible defense. This is a point emphasized even by Rabin himself. But shorn of the strategic advantages afforded by the Golan and the heights in Judea and Samaria, Israel will be obliged to spend huge sums on intelligence, advanced military technologies, frequent combat-ready alerts and increased reserve duty. This will have to be financed either by government borrowing, budget deficits or increased taxation. The result will be a massive diversion of resources from the civilian sector to the military, stifling the very economic development that the PLO accord was purported to herald.

The long periods of reserve duty, the deteriorating security and economic situations, and spiraling taxation will plunge the country into unprecedented disillusionment. A discredited leadership will be incapable of rallying a cynical and dispirited population. The number of Jews in the country will dwindle. The more talented, despairing of any future, will seek their fortune elsewhere. Those remaining will be unable to resist the inexorable advance of Islam, and the era of Jewish independence will come to an end.

For generations, Henry Kissinger's words of warning concerning the Mideast peace process will echo through the melancholy corridors of history: "Today's optimists are merely weavers of wishful fantasies who believe the millennium has arrived . . ." They will be damned as the false prophets who misled the nation, but for the Jews it will be too late. □

Martin Sherman, the former secretary general of the Tsomet party, lectures in political science at Tel Aviv University.

