

# How threatened is Israel?

**T**he West Bank, we are endlessly told, is absolutely vital to Israel's security. Any sort of Palestinian entity there would be a 'mortal threat' to Israel. But is this really so?

Israel captured the 3,460 sq. miles of the West Bank, along with the Golan Heights and Gaza, in its victorious 1967 War. The West Bank divides roughly into two well-defined topographical areas: the low-lying, heavily populated Jordan River valley, and the long range of hills that runs like a spine from northern Israel down to the Negev Desert. These are the "mountains whence cometh my strength," in the words of the Old Testament, neatly defining the military advantage given by possession of the West Bank uplands. Astride the most important pass through these highlands sits Jerusalem.

There is absolutely no doubt that the West Bank gives Israel important military benefits. In its old, pre-1967 War borders, 67% of Israel's people and 80% of its industry were crowded into the narrow coastal strip along the Mediterranean that averaged about 18 miles wide and which, at Qalqilya, was less than nine miles across. On the other side was the Jordanian-occupied West Bank where long-range guns could reach much of Israel's heartland.

All this changed when Israel conquered the West Bank. Suddenly, Israel had strategic depth, a buffer zone that gave her reserves time to mobilize, more airspace and a superb natural defence line. As I saw myself while inspecting the area, any Arab army trying to invade Israel through Jordan would have to fight its way through the narrow passes in the central highlands. Small numbers of Israeli defenders could hold these choke-points until reserves arrived. Israeli electronic intelligence stations on the forward slopes of the hills look deep into Jordan and give advance warning of air or ground attack.

No soldier in his right mind would want to give up such a strong defensive position. But as the Palestinian national revolt grows on the West Bank and in Gaza, Israel may be forced to relin-

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quish some or all of the occupied territories. Israel could afford to give up all of the occupied West Bank and Gaza provided it had iron-clad security guarantees and a reliable system of early warning. This would mean the right to keep air patrols over the West Bank and listening stations on key heights. And perhaps Israeli garrisons at key road junctions and at passes for some years.

Unquestionably, the entire West Bank and Gaza would have to be demilitarized. Any Palestinian state there could only be allowed light armored vehicles and small arms. No troops from any other Arab nation would be allowed in the West Bank or Gaza without the consent of Israel.

It's worth recalling that in 1967, there were powerful Jordanian armored units in the West Bank; even so, they were crushed within 48 hours by the Israelis. A West Bank without Arab armored forces or heavy guns would be of no offensive threat to Israel. More important, Israel would retain its "red line" policy. This is an unwritten understanding between Israel and its Arab neighbors that if Syrian, Iraqi or Jordanian forces cross a series of imaginary red lines drawn up by Israel, they will be attacked immediately.

Thus, if Iraq tries to send troops from 600 miles away to attack Israel, its exposed convoys will be smashed by the Israeli Air Force long before reaching Israel's borders. Israel's ability to use small, clean tactical nuclear weapons against such concentrations further ensures that its Arab enemies will think many times before embarking on a major attack.

Clearly, any Palestinian or joint Jordanian-Palestinian state would be hard pressed to control radical elements who would see the new state as only the first step toward recovering all of "occupied Palestine." And something would have to be done about Jerusalem, which has been annexed by Israel. Still, it seems likely that Palestinian radicals could be sufficiently restrained to prevent attacks on Israel—as Jordan, Syria and Egypt have all done. Israel's almost impregnable border fence system would probably have to be realigned to cover the new frontier.

Nor would Israel's defence posture be passive. The new Palestinian entity on the West Bank would be surrounded on three sides by Israel. Any attacks against Israel would be met with swift and effective response.

One could certainly expect isolated acts of terrorism from the West Bank but not, as so many of Israel's supporters fear, a massive Arab attack that would split Israel in two. Not when a nuclear-armed Israel is the world's sixth or seventh military power. North Americans may not understand this, but most of Israel's Arab neighbors certainly do. Militarily, Israel can afford to take a bold risk on the West Bank.