

Crossroads After Gaza

By Yonatan Touval*

Executive Summary

With the smoother than expected implementation of Israel's unilateral disengagement from Gaza and the northern West Bank, the political scene in Israel faces a new crossroads. The perceived success of the disengagement, and the feelings of national self-confidence that this perception has aroused, may not necessarily lead Israel back to the negotiating table. For one thing, with elections scheduled for November 2006, little if any policy initiatives are expected during the next fourteen months. Although Sharon's coalition remains fragile, Netanyahu's failure to oust Sharon, coupled with Labor's declared intention of prolonging the life of Sharon's government, on the other hand, seem to have given Sharon's government a new lease of political life. Such a prolonged election period, however, is dangerous, since any void in the political process opens the door to extremists on both sides who are well adept at exploiting frustration. The second obstacle to Israel's return to the negotiating table lies in the emerging popularity of the political doctrine of unilateralism, which means that when a new government does eventually form, it may well prefer another unilateral action over a negotiated agreement. For the Israeli political left, therefore, the challenge ahead is two-fold: first, to bring about early elections in order to shorten as much as possible the period of deadlock and inaction; and second, to convince the Israeli public that unilateral actions are no substitute for a negotiated resolution to the conflict.

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I. A Post-Gaza Assessment

The completion of Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip and a small area in the northern West Bank marks a potentially important turning point in Israel's political life. The general feeling in the Israeli public is that the implementation itself went extremely well. This feeling is all the more pronounced given the general anxiety that characterized the months leading up to disengagement. Warnings of a violent, even bloody, process became the *bon ton* on both the left and the right, and the media fanned the flames with investigative reports predicting mass defections in the security forces, civil disobedience, and even political assassinations, all in order to scuttle the disengagement. Even Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who, as the one who initiated the disengagement process, might have been expected to sound a more reassuring tone, chose to describe the atmosphere during the weeks preceding scheduled start of the disengagement, as that of "the eve of a civil war."¹

And yet the actual process of disengagement went remarkably smoothly. Some violence against the security forces during the evacuation was used, but nothing approaching the dimension or severity that was feared, not to say positively predicted. True – and this must not go unmentioned – deadly violence was directed at Palestinians, with two Jewish terrorist attacks, one in the West Bank and one in the Israeli-Arab town of Shfar'am, claiming altogether eight Palestinian lives. But these attacks were isolated incidents, and they did not unleash a wave of violence between Palestinians and Israelis or scuttle the disengagement.

Thus, against the backdrop of doomsday scenarios, the smooth implementation of the disengagement has far-reaching implications. On the immediate level, it seems to have

renewed feelings of public confidence (not to say pride) in those charged with implementing the disengagement process—that is, in the Israel Defense Forces and the Police. This is noteworthy. Such sentiments were an historically important element in the Israeli national psyche, and their reawakening evokes a strange kind of nostalgia for an older—mythic, no doubt—Israel, the Israel before the occupation, an Israel that predates the first and second Intifadah, not to say the protracted war in Lebanon. To say that these sentiments recall something of the euphoria that swept the Israeli nation following its victory in the Six Day War of War would be an exaggeration. But the temptation to exaggerate reflects something of the public mood in the days that followed the disengagement.

Yet such renewed public confidence is not only culturally and sociologically interesting. It is politically significant. For it expresses an entirely new sense of confidence in the very practicability of removing settlements. This new found confidence is perhaps the most tangible fruit of the disengagement, and may prove to have important implications both at the level of policy and of politics in the near future.

II. The Conceptual Fruits of Disengagement

It would be wrong to underestimate the significance underlying the complete removal of Israel's settlements in the Gaza Strip. Over the years, the settler movement managed to portray itself as the heart and soul of Israel, and for that reason also as all-powerful. The disengagement process exposed the Israeli settler leadership as a mostly a right-wing, religious public that is finally powerless to prevent the evacuation of settlements. At the same time, the political constituency of the settler movement

was revealed to be comprised in the whole of law abiding citizens who, when push came to shove, accepted the democratic rules of the game. The majority evacuated the settlements in accordance with the law.

The most far-reaching implication of this lesson is that, for the first time since the rise of the settler movement in the mid 1970s, the public perception is that a future withdrawal from most of the West Bank would not be impossible. Indeed, should the Israeli government decide to withdraw in within the framework of a peace agreement with the Palestinians, the feasibility of evacuation would be even greater.

There are other lessons as well. For instance, that Sharon, although seemingly invulnerable, reacts to pressure – or at least to the perceived threat of pressure. After all, Sharon's decision to withdraw from Gaza would not have been made were it not for the internationally sanctioned Roadmap, which Sharon was determined to bypass, and the domestic pressure that he felt following the introduction, in December 2003, of the unofficial Israeli-Palestinian peace plan known as the Geneva Initiative. Sharon himself admitted as much in an interview published in the *New York Times* in April 2004.² So did his closest aide, Dov Weisglass.³ Of course, the question of motivation is, by definition, not only a political but also a psychological one. Other factors must have surely lain behind Sharon's decision to initiate the Gaza pullout, including the pressure he felt from a corruption investigation against him and his sons.⁴

III. The Political Lay of the Land

What does the successful evacuation of the Gaza Strip and four isolated settlements in the West Bank mean for the future?

Perhaps the most salient political implication of the perceived success of the Gaza pullout is that the deep rift that, as many had warned, would tear the Israeli body politic finally appeared not on the national level but rather inside the right wing—and more specifically, inside the governing Likud party. And although a formal split within the Likud party had been postponed for now, an ideological split within the Likud will affect its functioning and coherence in the months to come.

The first several weeks following the disengagement saw increasing tensions inside the Likud party, with a dramatic attempt by Benjamin Netanyahu, now formally leading (together with Uzi Landau) the so-called “rebels” inside the party, to oust Sharon from the Likud leadership and to bring on early elections. Driven by polls suggesting he had a sizeable majority inside Likud, including inside the indomitable Likud Central Committee (the 3,000-odd-member organ that acts at one and the same time as the legislative as well as the executive branch of the party), Netanyahu led a vigorous campaign to bring forward the date of the primaries for the leadership of the party, assuming that a victory in advancing the date of the primaries would be followed by a victory in the primaries themselves. Following a dramatic meeting that culminated in the physical silencing of Sharon (the sound system was shut off just as Sharon began to carry his speech, apparently the result of sabotage), the Central Committee voted, a by slim margin, against Netanyahu’s proposal, thus dealing a humiliating blow to Netanyahu’s all but assured victory over Sharon.

The immediate implications of this defeat remain to be seen. But the general sense is that Sharon's victory will now give him new breathing time within Likud, thus pushing back any immediate threat to his coalition. Most significantly, Sharon's victory puts off for now any possibility that Sharon would leave the Likud and form a self-styled "centrist" list, perhaps together with several members of Likud as well as Shinui. Such a split within Likud would have dealt a severe political blow to the Israeli right, potentially paving the road to a return of the left to power after the next election, perhaps in the framework of a center-left coalition headed by Labor. With primaries in the Likud back on schedule for April, however, the next foreseeable challenge to the coalition is the budget bill. If the bill fails to pass the Knesset by 31 March 2006, new elections will be held within 90 days. As for a possible exit by Labor, this remains for now unlikely. If anything, the probable victory of Shimon Peres in the Labor primaries this coming November will only fortify the party's declared intention of staying in Sharon's government until November 2006.

IV. Political Prospects after Disengagement

The ideological crisis in the right is good news for the left. But whether the left will be able to benefit politically from this crisis is too soon to be determined. For one thing, with the leadership of the Labor party deeply committed to staying in Sharon's government, the leadership of the Israeli left has fallen to the much smaller party of Meretz-Yachad, headed by Yossi Beilin.

Despite its fierce ideological opposition to Sharon's political, social and economic policies, the Meretz-Yachad party decided early on that, if Sharon intends to evacuate settlements and withdraw from Palestinian territory, it would not stand in his way. With the rising opposition to Sharon from both the right wing and, more radically,

from within his own Likud party, Meretz-Yachad lent a political hand to Sharon from the opposition in order to enable him to carry out the disengagement plan. With the disengagement plan complete, the Meretz-Yachad party announced it would now work to topple Sharon and bring about early elections as soon as possible.

Under Beilin's leadership, Meretz-Yachad's position is that, regardless of the results of new elections, early elections are crucial if Israel and the Palestinians are to avoid a prolonged paralysis and, what usually comes with political paralysis, renewed violence. The thinking is that, with elections scheduled for November 2006, Sharon will not initiate any further moves until after the elections and his presumed reelection. Worse yet, not only will Sharon not initiate any further moves, he is likely to do what he can in order to shore up political support from the right. Construction of Jewish neighborhoods in and around East Jerusalem and settlement expansion in the West Bank are most likely to go on, perhaps in a more rapid pace than usual.

Thus, unless elections are brought forward, Israel and the Palestinians will face a dangerous lull of 14 months, in which growing feelings of frustration and political deadlock are likely to invite extremists on both sides to renew their cycle of violence. With critical elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council scheduled for late January 2006, such a deadlock will have negative consequences for the pragmatic forces on the Palestinian side, which are facing what appears to be a serious and increasingly difficult challenge from Hamas.

V. Policy Options After Gaza

The question of when the next elections will take place, however, does not answer what the next government will choose to do. While there is wide expectation that the next government will aim to initiate another withdrawal from Palestinian territory, there is a big uncertainty over how the next government will pursue this goal—that is, whether by another unilateral move (or moves) or, alternatively, through negotiations and (if possible) by agreement with the Palestinians. To put it another way, if the ideological crisis in the right reflects a wide recognition of the need to divide the land and allow for the creation of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel, a similar crisis over how this division is to be achieved has affected the center-left, which exhibits an increasing tendency to prefer a unilateral approach to a negotiated one. Claiming to have been “enlightened” by the failure of the Oslo process and, more specifically, the tragic outcome of the Camp David summit of July 2000 and the outbreak of the Intifadah, the advocates of a unilateral approach are former leftists and rightists who together form a new centrist front that enjoys broad-based support in the Israeli public.

Israel, therefore, is at a crossroads. Despite the generally positive feeling about the disengagement process, it is too early to judge it a success. For the tactical smoothness of the implementation process alone cannot turn the disengagement process a success. What will determine its success will be what follows next – and more specifically, whether Israel will prove to have made progress on the road to reaching a permanent status agreement with the Palestinians or not.

ENDNOTES

¹ Sharon made the comments in an interview to NBC News on 11 April 2005.

² See his interview with William Safire, *New York Times* on 16 April 2004.

³ In a much publicized interview published in *Ha'aretz* on 11 October 2004, Dov Weisglass compared the disengagement plan to “a bottle of formaldehyde” within which Sharon sought to freeze the political process, including that laid out in the Roadmap.

⁴ The suggestion that Sharon’s idea to withdraw from Gaza was intended, among other things, to deflect public attention and political pressure from the corruption investigation was made most explicitly by Raviv Druker and Ofer Shelah. See their *Boomerang* (Tel Aviv, 2005).