

The Secret Plan to Turn the Gaza Disengagement into a Coordinated Peace Effort

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Jul 30, 2015

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Articles & Testimony

A previously unpublished 're-engagement' proposal negotiated just before Israel's 2005 withdrawal from Gaza reveals some new twists in our understanding of the peace process.

Over 10 years ago, many months before the target date set for Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip, a dozen Israeli and Palestinian experts convened secretly in a European resort. They were there in an effort to work out a joint plan to transform what was devised by late prime minister Ariel Sharon as a purely unilateral move -- evacuating the settlements there and pulling out the IDF -- into a well-coordinated initiative which would allow the parties to re-engage in the stalled peace process.

Unfortunately, I am still not allowed to disclose the names of the participants -- except those of my late colleague Zeev Schiff and myself -- or the identity of the European prime minister who hosted the meetings. But among those attending were some of Yasser Arafat's top advisers, including from Gaza, as well as several Israelis who previously held high-ranking positions in different branches of the government.

The sessions were focused on drafting a document offering a new approach to the withdrawal from Gaza. Three days of lively -- sometimes heated -- discussions ended with an agreed 10-page paper titled: "Disengagement towards Re-engagement: A policy of unilateral disengagement and mutual responsibilities."

The Palestinian participants were in frequent contact with their leadership in Ramallah. The Israelis -- none of them close to the government -- planned to present the proposals to Sharon once back home. Here are some of the highlights, published here for the first time.

The preamble read:

Opportunity or Calamity

The Israelis and Palestinians stand today on the threshold of either opportunity or disaster. The disengagement initiative of the Israeli government can become either an unprecedented breakthrough leading to the renewal of the peace process or it can lead to a catastrophic series of events that will doom progress for a generation.

What Is Success?

Success of the initiative must be defined as a complete Israeli disengagement from Gaza and the region between Nablus and Jenin -- a larger geographic area than Gaza, hereafter referred to as the Northern West Bank (NWB) -- in accordance with Prime Minister Sharon's plan. The ultimate goal must be a peace treaty consistent with the roadmap.

Action Now

Only a policy based on specific and certifiable actions by both sides, as we have outlined below, will enable such success. Only then will both Israeli and Palestinian constituencies and the international community insist to the political leaders of both sides that the precedent be repeated on the West Bank. Furthermore, if the policy is to be workable, both sides must confront their internal opponents.

Then the paper suggested an Action Plan:

If planning for implementation does not happen now, the necessary preparations will not be in place on the day of withdrawal. It is therefore imperative that the following steps be enacted immediately. There is no time to waste.

On the Palestinian side:

1. Law and order must be reinstated on the Palestinian streets.
2. To do so will require reorganization and reform of the Palestinian security structure, based on the creation of three distinct branches, each with a clearly defined mandate, explicitly defined functional jurisdiction, and full accountability. Their missions are:

To combat subversion and terrorism and keep law and order.

Gendarmerie

Gathering and assessment of information on external developments.

The heads of the security services should be professional security experts with no political involvement. Specific information about imminent terror activities as well as long-term plans should be promptly relayed to the Palestinian ISS (Internal Security Services).

3. All Palestinian militias and military groups must be fully disarmed, and all unauthorized weapons must be confiscated. Cessation of all hostile activities against Israel is required.
4. The manufacturing of weapons must end completely, along with the smuggling of weapons and ammunition into Palestinian territory.
5. The Palestinian Authority will assume responsibility for the handover of Gaza and the NWB after the Israeli departure. A single party must have the ultimate responsibility for developments inside these territories.
6. The entire process of Palestinian reform must be accelerated before reaching the final deadline for Israel's withdrawal.

On the Israeli side:

1. It is essential that Israel implement the undertakings it assumed in writing in its April 2004 agreements with the U.S. Israel will compromise the credibility of its unilateral disengagement strategy if it does not carry out these promised actions. As stated in the exchange of letters, these agreements include a commitment to the following: Establishing restrictions on settlement growth, in conjunction with the U.S. Removal of unauthorized settlement outposts. Lifting mobility restrictions in the West Bank and Gaza (including roadblocks and barriers).

2. In addition to the above commitments, Israel should take the following types of steps to encourage and facilitate positive Palestinian behavior as actions are taken by the Palestinians to change conditions on the ground in Gaza and the West Bank. These possible steps include:

Subject to implementation of all Palestinian commitments Israel should end all targeted assassinations and other military incursions into Gaza and the West Bank. This will be especially important with the presence of Egyptian, U.S., and/or other international officials assisting in Gaza and the NWB.

Israel should re-open the safe passage from Gaza to the West Bank. If the disengagement continues to succeed, then the plan to construct a railway passage between the West Bank and Gaza should be implemented subject to the successful conclusion of a feasibility study and financial arrangements.

The airport should be re-opened subject to mutually agreed security arrangements. The reconstruction of a seaport in Gaza must commence consistent with signed agreements and mutually agreed security arrangements. As long as this seaport is not fully operational, an alternative option should be considered, most likely in Ashdod.

A special role was allocated to third-party actors:

"There should be an American-led team to coordinate and assist with security reforms. It should include the participation of several countries, especially Arab and European, in a variety of training and supervisory roles.

"A limited team of international monitors, as called for in the roadmap, should be appointed to verify Palestinian performance and Israeli withdrawals. It should be restricted to verification, but it should not play any military role, "peace keeping" role, or any form of an imposed solution. The monitors should be appointed by the Quartet to whom they should report. Although the Quartet will write their rules of engagement, they should be deployed only with the acceptance of both the Israelis and the Palestinians.

"It must be made clear by Israel, the Quartet and the World Bank to the people of Gaza what will happen immediately upon Israeli withdrawals, including the dispersal of agricultural land, new housing plans and the dispersal of settler assets. The monitors should also supervise Palestinian compliance with any commitments they may have made to the international community, regarding destructive behavior both during and after the Israeli withdrawals.

"Given the critical importance of economic improvement in Palestinian society, the international community through the AHLIC (the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee of the Donors) must develop a plan for rehabilitation of the Palestinian economy (please see the economic section below). Only donors through the World Bank should handle all non-security and political issues, including joint teams to handle handover and development issues."

Then the document went into details of an economic plan based on close Israeli-Palestinian cooperation with Western and Arab assistance. It concluded with a statement:

"Obviously, the economic and security challenges to disengagement are enormous, but the potential benefits are of equal magnitude. If concerted Israeli, Palestinian and international planning begins immediately, the prospects of success will be enhanced though even then by no means assured. Success itself will occur only after constant vigilance, determined effort, and prolonged engagement by all sides. There is no time to lose."

In addition to the document itself, one of the Palestinian participants, a top official of the PA security services, presented a detailed plan to stop weapon smuggling through the tunnels along the Gaza-Egypt border.

Of course we had grave doubts whether Arafat would abide by the clauses of the proposed coordination effort. The text was translated in full into Arabic for his review. Yet we felt it was worth trying to obtain Palestinian commitments in exchange for the territories they were about to receive. There was an obvious advantage to at least offering such coordination with a set of mutual obligations.

Upon returning to Israel, three of us went to present our ideas to Sharon. As far as I remember, we spent 2-3 hours debating the pros and cons of the document.

At the end, Sharon -- always attentive and polite -- informed us that he preferred unilateralism. He did not change his mind when Mahmoud Abbas succeeded Arafat.

Within two years Hamas had taken over the Gaza Strip.

Ehud Yaari is a Lafer International Fellow with The Washington Institute. ❖

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