

Q&A: U.S. Role in Gaza Pullout

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Aug 17, 2005

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Institute counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow Dennis Ross was interviewed on August 16 by Bernard Gwertzman, consulting editor of cfr.org, the Council on Foreign Relations' web site. The New York Times featured their discussion as a Q&A on August 17. This is a transcript of that interview.

Read (http://www.nytimes.com/cfr/international/slot1_081705.html?pagewanted=print) the interview in the New York Times.

You were recently in Israel and the Palestinian territories. With the Gaza withdrawal now beginning, what is your view of what's happening? Is the glass half full or half empty?

It's half full and half empty. I say that because on the one hand, this is a historic step -- there's no escaping it -- Israel's leaving [the settlements] after thirty-eight years. It's taking down, not only the settlements, but also the military infrastructure in Gaza.

And Palestinians [in Gaza], for the first time, will really have a chance to be free of Israeli control. So here is an opportunity for the Palestinians to demonstrate what they can do being free of Israeli control. Can they govern themselves? Can they fulfill their obligations, including those on security? If they can, they make a very strong case for saying, "Look, if this model works for Gaza, why not the West Bank?" If they can't, then they're in a very difficult position. So, it's clearly an opening, but the question depends on what's going to happen next in terms of what the Palestinians do with [Gaza], and then how you can build on it if they do in fact fulfill their responsibilities and show they can engage in good governance.

In Israel, is this going to really split the country wide open or will it die out like it did when Israel abandoned the settlements in the Sinai in 1981 as part of the 1979 peace treaty with Egypt?

You know, it very much depends on what comes in the aftermath. Sharon has bet his political future on the disengagement working. And by that I mean, not only that Palestinians handle things for themselves, but that there's calm afterwards.

I don't think it's a surprise you heard Sharon last night saying [in a televised statement] there would be a very, very tough response to any Palestinian violence. He said if there's a hand of peace from the Palestinians, we will outstretch an olive branch, and if there's terror, then we will give a very, very tough response to it. And I think this reflects a kind of understanding that if there's terror against Israel in the aftermath of leaving Gaza, the Israeli center

will move right. And if there's calm in the aftermath, then I think a major part of the Israeli right will move toward the center. So I think we really have to see whether or not we are going to have a scenario over the next, say, six months where calm prevails. If it does, it strengthens the hand of Sharon and what he's done; if it doesn't, he's terribly weakened.

Go through a bit of the timetable. The settlers are supposed to be out by the end of the month, I guess.

That's right. The plan is for them to be out in a couple of weeks.

And, of course, there are many other protesters there, mostly youth from what I read, who are opposed to the whole operation.

Right, I believe the major problem is going to be less [the] settlers and more the people who've infiltrated [the settlements]. At least half the settlers will leave on their own without resistance. Some also will leave without resistance, but will want to stay until the last minute, mainly to make a statement. There is, in my judgment, 40 percent -- I've seen estimates of 50 percent that will passively, not actively resist. They want to make it as difficult emotionally for those who are removing them, and also they want the images within Israel to raise the cost emotionally so that Gaza doesn't become a precedent for the West Bank.

There are also an increasing number of young people demonstrating around the country. Most come from the settlements in the West Bank -- not all, but most. And they are religious. They believe this is a betrayal of God's will, and I think they will resist. But, I'm not sure, even in the end, that it will turn that violent.

Talk a bit about the historic link of Gaza to Jews because in the Middle East back in the '70s and early '80s, you heard a lot about Judea and Samaria on the West Bank, but nothing about Gaza. Is Gaza actually a biblical heritage?

There is some [linkage] as you go back to the Bible. There're some references there, but it is certainly not the Jewish heartland from a religious standpoint. That's Hebron. Rachel's tomb is in Bethlehem. Hebron is where Abraham is buried. These are places that really have much deeper roots in the Bible. Gaza has much less. But there are some references, and it's because of that -- that's what leads to the religious nationalists viewing this as something that's unacceptable. Although I still feel that what drives them more than anything else is fear about this being a precedent for what they consider to be much dearer.

The West Bank?

Yes.

Let's talk about the Palestinians. This is very confusing because it's not clear who's really in charge. How much is [President of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA)] Mahmoud Abbas [also referred to as Abu Mazen] in charge of his government and his people?

You know, there is no question there is a great deal of fractionalization, even within his dominant faction, Fatah. Then there is the issue of the challenge from Hamas. Then there is the [West Bank militia] Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade. To put this in perspective, Abbas inherited from [former President of the PNA Yasir] Arafat a system that was corrupt, because Arafat needed corruption to make officials dependent on him. He was inept because Arafat didn't want to allow anyone else to be able to deliver anything. He wanted to be the one, like a Chicago ward boss, to always deliver the goods. [The Palestinian leadership] was highly factionalized with great rivalry between the factions because he never wanted anybody to become a focal point of opposition to him.

So this is what Abu Mazen has inherited, and it could have been a very daunting problem in the best of circumstances to overcome that legacy. I think we're at a point where he knows he has to build his authority. What would have helped build his authority is his being able to show that his way works, that he's able to show Palestinians that life is getting better.

If you look at the most recent polls, among Palestinians you find there's an increasing sense [Mazen] has no economic program, life isn't getting better. If, in the aftermath of Gaza, they can actually see the [international] assistance begin to materialize in labor-intensive projects like housing or infrastructure development, and if Abu Mazen is presiding over that, he would build his authority and make it increasingly difficult for others to resist him, including Hamas. So far, the approach of the international community has been very good in terms of making pledges. It's been very bad in terms of delivering.

Well, now [International Quartet Committee Representative] James Wolfensohn has led this effort to get private money, from the United States primarily to pay for the greenhouses --

Right, it's for the greenhouses and a dairy. A lot of the agriculture there is done in a greenhouse as a way of using advanced techniques of irrigation because of water shortages. And they used greenhouses to produce not just flowers, but actually cucumbers, peppers, tomatoes, and the like.

I see. So the Palestinians will take control, and they've actually worked out the contracts?

Yes. The Israelis said they will respect all existing contracts for markets outside Israel, and the Palestinian Authority will take ownership and they will probably lease it to those who make bids. There will be technical assistance to ensure the standards are maintained, not only within the greenhouses, but [also] the dairy farm [that] had 500 cows. These were on the brink of being sent back to Israel. And the production is about 10 percent of all the consumption of milk in Gaza, most of which is provided by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency in the form of powdered milk. So here's a dairy farm that was basically selling in Israel. Well, now it can be available for Palestinians.

And these are all jobs, too.

They're all jobs. There were already 3,500 Palestinians who were permitted to work there. But most of the rest of the workers were Thais from Asia.

Oh, I see. And will the Thai workers stay on?

My guess is there will probably be a transition period, but the Palestinians will want to have Palestinians come in and take those jobs because, after all, the greatest single problem in Gaza today is lack of employment. Unemployment in Gaza is probably 60 percent.

And the private housing left behind by Israeli settlers will be destroyed?

Yes.

And then apartment houses will be put up?

That's the plan, and also, I think they want to develop tourist sites because there's beach front here as well. Palestinians were the backbone of the Israeli construction industry before the intifada.

If you want to put Palestinians back to work, there's no better project than housing. They know how to do it. They have designs, they have blueprints. All they need is the investment; all they need is the money. There's actually a place called the Sheikh Ziad township [whose construction was financed by] the late Sheikh Ziad. And the Palestinians built 736 apartment units with an integrated infrastructure, a mosque, a school, and a recreation area. This was done by Palestinians entirely from scratch in thirty months in an area of Gaza that I used to pass all the time when it was a garbage dump before. They did the designs. They did the contracting. They did the construction.

So what about the U.S. role now? In your report for the Washington Institute, you seem to be saying the United States really should be doing a lot more.

I would like to see the U.S. role fall into three categories. Category No. 1 is to spearhead [international] assistance so that it actually materializes -- that it's not just in the form of words. Related to this category is also helping the

European Union and others develop the Palestinian administration. Abu Mazen has begun to put good people in a number of places, but they need to be empowered, and they need some assistance to get things done.

Category two is having access between Gaza, Israel, and the West Bank after the Israelis are out. This means there has to be security arrangements that give Israelis confidence that they don't have to be squeezing the access. And if they're concerned about what can be smuggled into Gaza or from Gaza through Israel into the West Bank, they're going to keep a very tight hold on access. There isn't a single issue -- passages, crossing points, technical links between the West Bank and Gaza, or movement in the West Bank -- that's not related to commerce in Gaza. And there is no basic security agreement in Gaza now. And I can tell you, every one of these is going to be complicated.

And complicated arrangements always break down. Now if they break down after the settlers are out, then the Israelis will squeeze the access, and that's going to create a problem. So it's better to try to get these done in advance. Right now I'm not optimistic, I think much more emphasis should have been put on this much earlier.

The third category is building a bridge toward peace because you have very different expectations on the two sides. For Sharon, it is going to be difficult as the Israelis actually have to forcibly evict people. And even for people in Israel who have never been fans of the settler movement or the settlers, it's not easy to watch the images of people being forced out of their homes. So there will be emotional trauma in Israel. Sharon is going to say, "Look, we need a pause to absorb it, to see what the Palestinians are going to do because we're going to have an election in Israel." Sharon's going to want a pause [on further movement] until next spring.

Abu Mazen is going to want to say, "Look, to preserve the calm, I need to be able to show this was Gaza first, not Gaza last, so we need a political process under way that's visible with additional things happening."

I think we're going to have a stalemate even after the Israelis take this historic step unless we act immediately after the disengagement to say, "All right, we're going to create that bridge." And for me, the bridge potentially already exists, and that's the roadmap. There isn't a single obligation in the roadmap that is understood the same way by the two sides. That's because it wasn't negotiated with them. It was negotiated with the European Union, the Russians, and the United Nations. They don't have to carry it out -- the Israelis and the Palestinians do.

Now the Bush administration was very careful not to find a replacement for Middle East envoy. Do you think that's what's needed, or should [Secretary of State] Condoleezza Rice take it on herself?

I think she's clearly demonstrated a greater level of involvement. Look, she's already been to the region and dealt with Israeli and Palestinian leaders more times in her brief tenure as secretary than Secretary [Colin] Powell did in four years. So I think that indicates she's more willing to take it on. She's got a lot of things going on around the world, and to do what is necessary for what I'm talking about, with regard to these three categories of activities, I think you need to have one person in charge. Do they have to be called an envoy? No. But they have to be in charge. Could it be Jim Wolfensohn? Yes, if he's given a broader mandate. His mandate was only the economic side of disengagement, and inevitably he's getting into the security because he can't do the economics without the security. He doesn't have a political mandate, and he doesn't have any mandate to deal with the roadmap the way I've just described it. So, you're going to have to have somebody who's in charge, someone who's on the scene, someone who's energetic, who understands the intensity of the effort that's required.

Any recommendations?

I like Jim Wolfensohn. If he wants to stay and do it, I'd say let him do it, but empower him. Give him the mandate. He doesn't have it today.

RECOMMENDED

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