

# Ready, or Not

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

**W**ithin hours, history will almost surely be made in the Middle East as Israel begins its withdrawal from Gaza after 38 years of occupation. By taking this unprecedented step to dismantle the 21 settlements there, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon -- the driving force behind the Israeli settler movement -- has created a historic opportunity for the Palestinians. If they can show the world and the Israeli public that they can govern Gaza effectively and fulfill their security obligations, they will be in a strong position to argue that the Gaza model should also be applied to the West Bank. If they cannot, if Gaza devolves into chaos and violence, who is going to argue for Israel's turning over more territory for an eventual Palestinian state?

With so much at stake, this ought to be a time of great anticipation. But on a recent month-long trip to Jerusalem, Ramallah and Gaza, I found foreboding instead of hope, perhaps because much of what could have been done to prepare the ground for peaceful disengagement remains unfinished -- or, in some cases, barely started.

Among the most important issues left partly unresolved is that of access into and out of Gaza. For Gaza to have any chance at rebuilding its shattered economy, it is essential that it not become a virtual prison. Palestinians, and their goods, need to be able to move relatively unimpeded to Israel and through it to the West Bank. The Palestinians also want a seaport and airport to connect to the rest of the world.

But such access includes very real security risks; Israel understandably worries that radicals who have had to settle for crude rockets that can only hit border towns could soon smuggle in missiles capable of hitting Israeli cities. Until now, the Israelis and Palestinians have been unable to reach agreement on how to safeguard the movement of goods and people in a way that precludes the type of incident that could spark widespread violence and result in border-crossing closings that would stall the economy.

Beyond that, there is little agreement of what happens to the stalled peace process even if both the pullout and the next several months proceed relatively smoothly. Will talks on the West Bank move forward quickly? And if they don't, how will Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas reassure his people that Gaza is just the beginning of change -- rather than the end as so many of them fear.

Why haven't the Israelis and the Palestinians made more progress to ensure a smooth hand-over of power? Much of the reason is that both groups are so absorbed by their own realities that they are largely indifferent to those of their

neighbors.

## Domestic Dissent

In Israel, a solid majority of the public continues to support Sharon's decision, and he is as determined as ever to see it through. Nevertheless, he faces enormous opposition from what has always been his base, the settler movement, which sees him as a betrayer. They have orchestrated massive demonstrations against him and called for Israeli soldiers to defy orders to carry out disengagement.

Now they are challenging him politically; Benjamin Netanyahu's resignation from the Israeli Cabinet last Sunday reflects his understanding of Sharon's vulnerability and his readiness to try to unseat him as leader of their Likud party. Small wonder, then, that Sharon is preoccupied with the possibility that the withdrawal will devolve into chaos, triggered by settler resistance or Palestinian attacks.

Abbas faces similarly daunting domestic challenges. He inherited Yasser Arafat's corrupt, inept, highly factionalized system of authority, with security forces that resemble rival cliques with arms. Abbas must also deal with the legacy of four years of warfare that have resulted in an Israeli siege and a devastated economy.

Palestinians crave a normal life after Arafat, but eight months into Abbas' tenure, he has found it difficult to deliver. International pledges of monetary assistance remain mainly pledges, with very little materializing in the form of labor-intensive projects that would put people back to work. Notwithstanding Abbas' reorganization of the security services from 13 groups to three, there is no real law and order in either the West Bank or Gaza.

Indeed, businessmen in Gaza complained to me that chaos holds sway -- people are building without permits, public revenues are down by 75 percent because so few people are paying taxes, and even traffic police are afraid to intervene if there is an accident. If all this were not enough, Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement, is posing an increasing challenge to Abbas as it enhances both its political and military capabilities.

Given the difficulty of getting each side to see beyond its own needs, the situation would seem to beg for a third party to provide a bridge between them. The Bush administration has shown much greater interest in the area recently, with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visiting more times in six months than her predecessor did in four years. Yet the effort at brokering understandings on the disengagement has been limited and late.

The administration appointed Lt. Gen. William Ward to help with the security situation and former World Bank head James Wolfensohn to manage the economic side of disengagement and its aftermath.

However, until recently, Ward's mission was too narrowly defined, geared principally to reorganizing the Palestinian security forces. Although he is now empowered to facilitate Israeli and Palestinian security coordination, it is already late in the day to get the groups to work together to prevent security concerns that could lead Israel to close its border crossings with Gaza.

## Sticking Points

To his credit, Wolfensohn has been working to produce a breakthrough on these issues. Unfortunately, he has not been on the job long and has simultaneously tried to produce meaningful material assistance for the Palestinians. As a result, even as the disengagement begins this week, none of the key issues that connect security and access have been resolved: crossing points, the functioning of the airport and seaport, the possible role of a third party on security and customs, and the links between Gaza and the West Bank.

Here's just one of many examples of how failing to agree on details could quickly lead to squabbling and possible border closures or restrictions. Both sides agree on the need for high-tech scanning of cargoes going through the crossing points. But the Israelis want to continue the practice of unloading trucks at the border and reloading the cargo on "clean" vehicles for trips to Israel or through Israel to the West Bank. The Palestinians decry the cost in time

and money of such a procedure, but at this point have mostly small trucks, not the flatbed trailers and containers that would make quick scanning possible.

As for the other issues like the airport and seaport, and links between Gaza and the West Bank, the problem is not what will initially happen. The airport will take a year to rebuild, the seaport three years to build, and initially Palestinian goods will move to and from the West Bank in escorted convoys of trucks. But neither side is close to agreeing on how to handle these issues over time, with the Palestinians wanting unencumbered operation and the Israelis seeing this as a prescription for unlimited smuggling of people and weapons into Gaza and the West Bank.

No doubt, technical solutions can be found on many of the immediate issues related to the crossing points and probably will be by the time that the disengagement is concluded in September. But even on the immediate issues, there is still no mechanism to handle disputes. For example, if there is a problem that gives rise to Israeli security fears, there is no agreed-on mechanism for preventing the closing of crossing points or slowdowns in commercial access -- nor is there an understanding on the specific steps the Palestinians would need to take to restore passage. Getting such agreements must certainly be part of the Wolfensohn mission.

But there is a larger problem that goes well beyond Wolfensohn's current mandate. The two sides have totally different expectations about what will happen after disengagement. Sharon will want a pause that lasts until the next Israeli election, probably in the spring. He will justify the delay in any peace negotiations by saying it's necessary for Israel to absorb the emotional trauma of the withdrawal and to evaluate Palestinian performance in Gaza. Abbas, however, will say that to preserve calm, his public must see that the Israeli pullout from Gaza is not the end of the process.

#### Dust Off 'Road Map'

To forestall the stalemate that is certain to result, the United States needs to build a bridge to the future before the problem emerges. Ironically, the "road map" to peace, which has been moribund, could be that bridge if the Bush administration is ready to transform it. Today, there is not one obligation in the peace plan that the two sides understand the same way. Certainly the Israelis interpret all the Palestinian obligations on security and incitement maximally, and the Palestinians interpret all the Israeli obligations on freezing settlement activity and lifting checkpoints far differently than do the Israelis. As such, the road map in reality has become treated as a list of slogans, not a guideline for action.

The administration could change that by declaring after the disengagement that it will work with both sides to find a common definition of every obligation in the road map. But that will take time and the kind of grinding diplomacy that the administration has avoided in the Middle East. It would allow Sharon to answer those who say he has bet Israel's future without knowing what comes next. And it would permit Abbas to say there is a pathway for ensuring that Gaza is the beginning of the process, not the end.

Although too little was done early enough to prepare the disengagement, it is not too late to manage the day-after scenarios now -- provided the United States will take the lead and anticipate what lies ahead. ❖

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