

On the Verge of Gaza Disengagement

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#), [Michael Herzog \(/experts/michael-herzog\)](#), [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](#)

Aug 12, 2005

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



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Brief Analysis

On August 4, 2005, Dennis Ross, Brig. Gen. Michael Herzog, and David Makovsky addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Ambassador Ross, the Institute's counselor and Ziegler Distinguished Fellow and former U.S. Middle East peace envoy, has just returned from a month in the region. General Herzog of the Israel Defense Force is a visiting military fellow at The Washington Institute. Formerly the senior military aide to the minister of defense, he was also an Israeli peace negotiator. Mr. Makovsky, senior fellow and the director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at The Washington Institute, is author of the Institute monograph *Engagement through Disengagement: Gaza and the Potential for Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking*. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Dennis Ross

On the brink of disengagement, a profound psychological divide exists between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Each side is absorbed by its own concerns. Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon is risking his base support and faces the problem of keeping unity in a deeply divided society. Palestinian Authority (PA) president Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) likewise faces internal division, not only between Hamas and Fatah, but also within his own party as the young and old guards of Fatah fight for control. These internal factions and problems have preoccupied both sides to the extent that they have failed to reach an understanding on any of the major disengagement issues, especially

security-for-access issues such as crossing points and a connection between Gaza and the West Bank. While solutions exist for these issues, they will not be resolved until the final hour, precluding a testing phase where the inevitable problems can be worked out ahead of time.

Despite these unresolved issues, the withdrawal itself likely will go relatively smoothly. Both political leaders are deeply invested in making disengagement work. Sharon has said that he will not withdraw under fire -- meaning there will be no fire, not that he will not withdraw. Palestinians know what that means. None of the Palestinians want Israeli military intervention. They realize that it is in their interest to prove they can manage the Israeli withdrawal and its aftermath. They want to show that the Gaza model of good governance and fulfillment of security responsibilities can be applied to the West Bank as well.

Even if withdrawal proceeds as planned, a stalemate will likely develop as Sharon declares that there is a need to pause after events so traumatic for the Israeli populace. By contrast, Abu Mazen will quickly seek to demonstrate that the situation is Gaza first, not Gaza last. To build Abu Mazen's authority, there must be a quick delivery of economic aid. But to avoid a stalemate, the United States should announce that it will take the Roadmap to Middle East peace and negotiate a common understanding of every obligation in it. This process will take time, and it will not be easy, but it will provide a pathway for the future.

Michael Herzog

The Israeli disengagement is unprecedented. It represents not only the first removal of Israeli settlements from Gaza and the West Bank since 1967, but also the first time Israel is likely to relinquish control over part of the external perimeter of the PA on the border between Gaza and Egypt. Therefore it is vital that an effective alternative security regime be developed on the frontier to make possible the agreed notion of demilitarizing the future Palestinian state.

The internal Palestinian scene is characterized by a serious political struggle between the PA and Hamas. Since Yasser Arafat's death, Hamas has demanded a share in political power. In their March agreement with the PA, Hamas traded a ceasefire for benefits such as retaining its arms, an election date prior to disengagement, and a favorable election system. When Abbas, realizing the shortcomings of the deal, postponed the elections until after disengagement and tried to stop Hamas rocket attacks, Hamas responded with violence. That led to the most serious PA-Hamas clashes since 1996. Disengagement further polarizes the PA and Hamas as they vie for support among the populace. Hamas maintains that the disengagement is a victory for the armed struggle under its leadership and therefore demands a say in running Gaza after the pullout. The PA maintains that it is a victory for the people of which it is the sole authoritative representative. Hamas may prefer not to escalate the situation in Gaza immediately after disengagement, rightly gauging public opinion as elections near, but Hamas is motivated to increase its terror activities in the West Bank, which could trigger Israeli reactions and spill over into Gaza.

Abbas seems to be willing to take on the Hamas challenge, but feels that he does not possess enough security and political tools to enforce his policies. Abbas needs to be strengthened. First, it is important to show the Palestinian people what specific economic benefits lie ahead pending a violence-free environment. That requires ensuring that the substantial money pledged by the G8 reaches the Palestinian people quickly to demonstrate that Abu Mazen is their best choice. Security reforms must also be quickened to produce a core security force loyal to Abbas and effective in preventing both internal violence and violence against Israel.

David Makovsky

Disengagement represents a key moment in Israel's relationship with the settler movement and, at this point, it is clear that the settlers have lost the fight for Gaza. Israeli public support for withdrawal stands at 57 percent, and the protestors have failed to derail the process in the courts or the Knesset. In the nineteen months since Sharon first announced the disengagement, settlers have aroused great sympathy from the greater Israeli population, but they

have failed to transform sympathy into support. The majority of the population not only sees Gaza as a security and demographic liability, but has also distanced itself from the dissenters because of the aura of massive civil disobedience that permeates the protest movement. Having lost the battle for public opinion, the antidisengagement movement has shifted its goal from preventing withdrawal to making it as traumatic as possible to ensure that there will be no further disengagement from the West Bank.

Sharon has deftly maneuvered from a minority government to a broad coalition, but it is critical for him that the Gaza disengagement goes smoothly. The disengagement can be viewed as successful for Sharon if the attacks on Israel cease and if Hamas is unable to claim the disengagement as a victory for armed resistance. If disengagement is followed by sustained Palestinian attacks, Sharon will hit back hard to prove that the withdrawal is not a victory for terror. If these criteria are met, Sharon's approval ratings will go up. However, if the disengagement becomes a fiasco, his political career could be over.

It is also important that economic conditions improve for Israelis and Palestinians after disengagement. Israel's economy has largely recovered to its preintifada level. Gaza and the West Bank are doing better than at the nadir of the intifada but are still far from recovery; in the first quarter of 2005, Gaza's unemployment stood at 34 percent, compared to 13 percent before the intifada. Effective distribution of the G8's \$9 billion pledge would be a start in improving these economic circumstances. Hopefully, the G8's commitment will shame the Persian Gulf states to increase their level of giving, especially in light of their windfall profits in the current oil market.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Elizabeth Young. ❖

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