

Gaza Disengagement:

The U.S. Role in Ensuring Success on the Ground

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Brief Analysis

I have spent the past month in Jerusalem, meeting with Israelis and Palestinians here, in Ramallah, and in Gaza City. In my years of dealing with both sides, I cannot recall a time when emotion in general, and frustration in particular, have so clearly shaped their outlook. Given the death of Yasser Arafat, the emergence of Mahmoud Abbas, and Ariel Sharon's decision to disengage from Gaza, this should be a time of hope and opportunity. Instead, there is less a sense of possibility than of foreboding. It may not yet be too late to use the withdrawal as a platform on which to build a different future. Yet, much of what could have been done to prepare the ground for disengagement has not been done—and that may explain the unease that pervades both sides.

Parallel Universes

Currently, Israelis and Palestinians are absorbed by their own realities and largely indifferent to those of their neighbors. 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 challenge him within the Likud Party, and they are behind the massive demonstrations that frequently disrupt daily life. They are also the ones calling for Israeli soldiers to defy orders and not implement disengagement—and a small numbers of soldiers will continue to heed their call.

Indeed, Sharon is continually criticized for creating trauma in Israeli society in exchange for dubious gains. Such critics berate him for rewarding terrorism; the recent bombing in Netanya and the ongoing rocket and mortar attacks against Gaza settlements and southern Israel only add to their vehemence. Moreover, Sharon is preoccupied with the possibility that the withdrawal will devolve into chaos, triggered by settler resistance or Palestinian attacks. Given all of these concerns, he is focused on his needs, not those of Mahmoud Abbas.

Abbas faces similarly daunting domestic challenges. He inherited 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. The Palestinian public clearly wants a normal life after Arafat and had high expectations that Abbas would produce it. But seven months into his

tenure, he has found it difficult to deliver.

One key obstacle is the Fatah old guard's resistance to any change. Although the young guard continues to press for reform and is frustrated by its absence, Abbas is reluctant to impose change on the old guard. Initial efforts have been made to deal with corruption, but they are not visible to the public. The absence of security, however, is painfully visible, and Abbas's reorganization of the security services (reducing them from thirteen to three) has yet to be implemented in a way provides law and order. Businessmen in Gaza complained to me that chaos holds sway—people are building without permits, public revenues are down by 75 percent because no one is paying taxes, and even traffic police are afraid to intervene if there is an accident. One would think that promises of greatly increased international aid might have at least helped put Palestinians back to work. Yet, those promises have yet to materialize and produce change on the ground. If all this were not enough, Hamas is posing an increasing challenge to Abbas as it enhances both its political and military capabilities. Small wonder, then, that the Palestinian leader is preoccupied with his needs, not Israel's.

A Third Party to the Rescue?

Given the looming opportunity presented by the disengagement and 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 appointed Lt. Gen. William Ward to help with the reorganization of the Palestinian security forces and former World Bank head James Wolfensohn to manage, on behalf of the Quartet, the economic side of disengagement and its aftermath.

General Ward's mission was narrowly defined, eschewing any effort to (a) make the ceasefire understandings more concrete, (b) establish criteria under which Israel could withdraw from West Bank cities and Palestinian security forces could assume responsibilities there, or (c) promote the kind of security coordination that could facilitate the disengagement. Although he is now empowered to do more on the security coordination front, it is already late in the day. After all, the key to making disengagement successful is to provide unimpeded access into and out of Gaza so that the area can be economically developed, especially with considerable aid flowing from donors. Israel will not permit such access, however, if it produces a security risk for them. Therefore, resolving the security-access nexus must be the first priority.

To his credit, Wolfensohn has been working to produce a breakthrough on these issues. Unfortunately, he has not been on the job long and must simultaneously try to produce meaningful material assistance for the Palestinians. Moreover, when he is not physically present in the area, little seems possible. As a result, with less than a month remaining before disengagement, there are no basic understandings on the key issues that connect security and access: crossing points and passages, the airport and seaport, and the links between Gaza and the West Bank. There are technical solutions for each issue, and they will likely be accepted in principle before the disengagement actually begins. Yet, many of these arrangements should have been worked out and even implemented already, enabling both sides to refine them before problems emerged. Now, when difficulties materialize after disengagement, access will inevitably be restricted as a result.

Facing the Challenges: The U.S. Role

Even assuming that technical issues are resolved regarding what role third parties will play in security and customs at Rafah, Erez, Karni, and the airport, the larger issues remain. What happens as the Israelis withdraw and the day after they are gone? Will there be calm as disengagement unfolds? Will there be looting of what is left behind, or will the Palestinian Authority exert control, govern Gaza, and fulfill its responsibilities?

In recent days, Abbas has shown a far greater willingness to confront the Hamas challenge, at least rhetorically. And with firefights occurring between different PA forces and Hamas elements in Gaza, he has signaled that he will be

more decisive. The Israeli government remains unimpressed, believing that nothing systematic is being done to deal with either Hamas or Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and that Egyptian mediation gives all sides an excuse to restore the tahdiya (calming down) for the time being without changing the basic relationship of power and authority.

Nevertheless, some leading Israeli security officials predict that the disengagement will go relatively smoothly, and that the Palestinians will work to produce a degree of stability afterward given their stake in developing Gaza and not endangering the flow of donor dollars.

Nothing ever implements itself, however. As she travels to the region in the coming days, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice must set the stage for not only resolving the technical questions sooner rather than later, but also getting real answers from the two sides on three crucial issues: how they will establish a buffer as Israel withdraws; what Palestinians will do to manage the area immediately after the pullout; and what specific mechanisms are being developed to handle inevitable disputes at crossing points once Israel has withdrawn.

In any event, none of the above efforts will put the two sides at ease or remove their mutual suspicions. For that, a more intensive U.S. effort will be needed, both to help Abbas succeed (while insisting that he act more decisively in return) and to build a bridge to the future that can help reconcile conflicting expectations about what comes after the disengagement.

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