

A Gaza Pull-Out Does Not Reward Terror

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Today Ariel Sharon and Mahmoud Abbas, the Israeli and Palestinian leaders, will hold their second summit in five months. Mindful of the recent admonition of Condoleezza Rice, US secretary of state, to co-ordinate their steps on Israeli disengagement from Gaza, they will focus on ensuring a smooth withdrawal of Israeli troops. If nothing else, the recent increase in violent incidents in both the West Bank and Gaza should be a wakeup call to cement the teetering ceasefire between Palestinians and Israelis.

For Mr Sharon, violent attacks against Israelis in these regions are further eroding public support for his decision to evacuate Gaza, a decision that once enjoyed the backing of nearly 70 per cent of the Israeli public and has now seen a sharp decline.

At a time when most Israelis continue to view the settlement of 8,000 settlers among 1.3m Palestinians in Gaza as a liability rather than an asset, why the slide in support? Besides the surge in violence, there are several explanations. First, the reality of having to remove recalcitrant settlers from their homes is making the public uneasy as the date for disengagement approaches. Second, the continuing settler campaign against disengagement is making greater inroads within Mr Sharon's ruling Likud Party. Third, while there is recognition that Mr Abbas, unlike Yassir Arafat, his predecessor, is against violence, Israelis appear increasingly concerned about Mr Abbas' approach of trying to co-opt rather than confront Hamas, the militant Palestinian faction. Israelis see Hamas acting with growing confidence, believing it can both amass weapons and participate in parliamentary elections in order to gain leverage.

But, perhaps, the criticism taking the greatest toll on Mr Sharon's support is that his withdrawal plan rewards the terrorists and will only invite more terror. Terror should not be seen as paying off, but this argument is wrong. Technically speaking, the terror has come from the West Bank and not Gaza. Nearly 100 suicide bombers infiltrated

into Israel during the intifada, only two of them from Gaza. And, it is Gaza that Israel is leaving, not the West Bank. Politically speaking, Mr Abbas—who consistently railed against the "militarisation" of the intifada over the last few years—won an electoral mandate as he campaigned against violence. Palestinians endorsed his platform—which is hardly vindication of the intifada in their eyes. And, the fact that Hamas, whose leaders were killed in the intifada, never made Gaza disengagement an objective, is another reminder that this is hardly a victory for them.

Finally, and most importantly, Israel's disengagement is about securing Israel's future as a Jewish, democratic state and not holding it hostage to Palestinian behaviour. According to Sergio Della Pergolla, Israel's leading demographer, by 2010 if Israel remains in the West Bank and Gaza, there will be more Arabs than Jews living in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. In such circumstances, a minority will be controlling a majority. Gaza disengagement as a first step to a two-state solution can forestall that possibility. Otherwise, if the Jews are a minority, the new talking point will be "one man, one vote, one state" among Israelis and Palestinians, and that will become a euphemism for the destruction of Israel. The best "prize" for Hamas, and the true reward for terror, would be achieving its dream, a one state solution.

Critics of the Gaza disengagement do not have an answer to the demographic time bomb. They are right to question the risks—what happens, for example, if a Hamas still committed to Israel's destruction comes to dominate in Gaza? The Israelis, the Palestinian Authority and the international community must have real answers.

Ultimately, Gaza disengagement will be the prism through which to look at the future of revived peacemaking. Palestinians have the opportunity to prove to the world and Israelis that they can govern themselves and fulfill their obligations, including on security. Making Gaza work is essential to being able to demonstrate that what works for Gaza can also be applied to the West Bank.

Mr Abbas, for his part, must not flinch from preventing Hamas from amassing arms or torpedoing the ceasefire. The international community must help him by delivering on aid pledges, while the US, as the secretary of state urged, must actively work with both sides to meet Israeli concerns about security and Palestinian concerns about access into and out of Gaza after the withdrawal.

Mr Sharon can also do his part. Without letting Mr Abbas off the hook on his security responsibilities, he can emphasise Israel's stake in Mr Abbas' success. And, in Israel, he can directly take on those who say his policy is a reward for terror. He has a good case. Leaving Gaza is Israel's choice, and it can provide a better future for Israelis and Palestinians alike.

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