

Twentieth Anniversary Soref Symposium: A Narrow Window of Opportunity in Gaza

May 19, 2005



In-Depth Reports

On May 19, 2005, Meir Shitrit addressed The Washington Institute's Soref Symposium. Meir Shitrit is the Israeli minister of transportation. A longtime Likud Party representative in the Knesset and former mayor of Yavne, he served previously as minister of justice, as an official in the Ministry of Finance, and as treasurer of the Jewish Agency. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

Over the past eighteen years, a major shift has occurred in relations between Israel and the Palestinians. In the wake of the Oslo process, the possibility for peace is real.

Nevertheless, challenging days lie ahead for the Israeli government in its goal of disengaging from Gaza. Due to the shortsightedness of past Israeli governments, the state is now compelled to evacuate its own citizens from homes that they have dwelled in for years. When these law-abiding people settled amid 1.5 million Palestinians, they were aided by governments that dedicated resources to the settlements while neglecting regions in Israel proper, such as the Negev and the Galilee. The current government is now obliged to provide financial compensation in order to alleviate the hardship that evacuation will impose on these settlers. Despite these difficulties, disengagement from Gaza is vital for Israel and for the advancement of peace.

The Israeli government first devised the disengagement plan as a unilateral step during a time when Yasser Arafat still led the Palestinian people. Under his rule, Palestinians regressed to the brink of disaster by resorting to terrorism. Arafat had an opportunity for peace literally in his hands, but rather than act on it, he affirmed the old Abba Eban axiom regarding the Palestinians: "They never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity."

Arafat's death opened a new window of opportunity for peace in the Middle East. The new Palestinian leader, Mahmoud Abbas, is sincere in his attempts to end violence and has taken some positive steps in the fight against terrorism. Yet, the underlying infrastructure of terror must still be uprooted. Ultimately, one cannot lead by trying to satisfy everyone; such a leader ends up satisfying no one. The fact remains that militants continue to shell Israeli targets from Gaza, and the Palestinian Authority has no real control over terrorists operating within its jurisdiction. After the disengagement, Palestinian authorities will have no excuse for terrorism emanating from Gaza.

Alongside these security issues, the Israeli evacuation must be accompanied by aid from the international community, particularly the World Bank. In addition to helping with the resettlement of Gaza refugees, such aid could potentially be used to establish rail links between Gaza and the Ashdod port, between the West Bank and the Haifa port, and even between Gaza and the West Bank. In all of these potential endeavors, the international community would need to supply the money and the means, and the Palestinian people would need to offer real cooperation, which to this date has been lacking. Moreover, rather than demolishing all of the settler housing and other facilities (e.g., greenhouses), Israel and outside actors should give the Palestinians a say in the fate of evacuated buildings.

Regarding U.S.-Israeli relations, the partnership between the two countries has long rested on a strong foundation of

shared ideals and a common perception of threats and security concerns. These ties have grown even stronger in the post-September 11 era due to Israel's experience in dealing with terrorism. The United States has in turn played a vital role in Israel's relations with its neighbors and in the pursuit of peace. Indeed, now is the time for serious structural and attitudinal changes in the region. Over the years, Middle Eastern states have spent more than \$200 billion on the conflict with Israel. The Arab world must now help the Palestinian people pursue peace.

The Gaza disengagement should provide a good platform from which to move toward a comprehensive peace agreement with the Palestinians. Yet, there will be no further unilateral disengagements after the evacuation of Gaza. Progress will ultimately depend on Abbas's efforts to halt terrorism in fulfillment of his commitments under the first stage of the Quartet Roadmap. Peace is in the hands of people, not God; all parties need to embrace the opportunity created by the coming disengagement and by Abbas's presidency.

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