

Israel in the Territories: From Disengagement to Settlements

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Brief Analysis

Disengagement is the most important step Israel can take at this time to secure its own future; however, disengagement poses a unique challenge, namely, how to address the emotional and practical difficulties in removing settlers from Gaza and the West Bank. The Knesset's recent rejection of a referendum bill to stop the disengagement plan was the last political obstacle to preventing evacuation. Although this is a major victory for Ariel Sharon and his coalition government, the most difficult part of the process -- implementation -- is just beginning.

The Settlements

The settlements scheduled for dismantling are not vital to Israeli interests. The negative consequences of sustaining 8,000 Israelis in the midst of 1.5 million Palestinians in Gaza -- territory that much of the world does not recognize as Israeli -- far outweigh any benefits that the settlements provide. These settlements are costly and burdensome to preserve. The four settlements in the northern West Bank that will also be dismantled will give Palestinians a large tract of land to govern and allow them to move about freely, a step that will reduce friction between the two sides.

Aside from being practically wise, disengagement is politically necessary in order to preserve Israel's identity as a Jewish democracy. The Palestinian population is growing quickly, and Israel must separate itself before Palestinians outnumber Israelis.

A Psychological Step toward Peace

Disengagement creates a golden opportunity for improving Israeli-Palestinian relations by addressing the "mental blocks" that have until now strained relations, namely, the Palestinian belief that Israel would never relinquish control over occupied territories, and the Israeli belief that the Palestinians would never renounce terrorism. Dismantling the settlements represents a significant psychological step in the Israeli political context and illustrates Israel's willingness to make painful concessions for peace. The Palestinian leadership needs to recognize this and then respond with meaningful reciprocity. Israel is ready with a larger package of gestures -- releasing more prisoners, transferring more cities to Palestinian control, lifting more roadblocks -- but it is unable to implement these steps until it sees Palestinian efforts to enter into serious coordination with Israel in the impending disengagement. Coordination requires overcoming both physical and psychological hurdles, but without significant actions to improve bilateral relations, a single terrorist act could derail the progress that has been made over the past several months.

Disengagement has also increased the prospects for improving Israeli relations with Arab states by proving Israeli willingness to make concessions for peace. Diplomatically, there has already been progress on this front, including the reinstatement of the Egyptian and Jordanian ambassadors to Israel. But continued progress will be dependent on strengthening Israeli-Palestinian coordination in the disengagement effort, which will create an atmosphere hospitable to parallel peace talks with Arab states.

Technical Difficulties and Security Concerns

Aside from the psychological barriers, the disengagement plan poses a number of technical difficulties, many of which would be much easier to overcome with Palestinian coordination. There is a significant debate in Israel over which infrastructure will be dismantled and which will remain. It is certain that Jewish graveyards and synagogues will be dismantled and moved to Israel proper, but talks between Israel and the Palestinians will be required to determine the fate of houses and other infrastructure. Unfortunately, the Palestinian Authority (PA) has not shown the willingness, to date, to enter into such detailed coordination.

The overall cost of disengagement will be borne by the Israeli government and is estimated at \$1 billion. But to facilitate success, it is also important that the world commit resources, specifically to internal improvement projects in Gaza and the West Bank. Significant planning and preparedness on the part of the PA will be required to properly exploit the resources directed toward reinvigorating the Palestinian economy.

Other technical considerations for Israel include the relocation of some 1,600 families comprising the 8,000 Gaza settlers. Many of these families will be encouraged to relocate to the Galilee or the Negev, which have a high capacity for absorbing these numbers. The government will offer parcels of land, but since it will take at least eighteen months to construct housing on those plots, interim living arrangements will be necessary. Israeli authorities must also consider the settlers' need for jobs and access to education.

Israel must be prepared for an increase in terrorism during the implementation phase of disengagement. It is likely that Palestinian terrorists will increase their activity in order to show that Israeli disengagement is a result of terrorist pressure. As part of a coordinated effort, the PA must show a willingness and ability to prevent these attacks and pursue those who perpetrate them.

Israel must also be wary of its own diehards. There are fears in Israel that the strong resistance to the disengagement plan coming from the extreme Israeli right could result in bloodshed. Those fanatics eager to derail the disengagement process may attempt attacks on political figures and Israeli soldiers. Sharon has been called a traitor, and the disengagement plan has even been likened to Nazism. In fact, some have compared the current public atmosphere to the atmosphere immediately before the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin.

Looking Forward

Disengagement is a significant step in the implementation of the Roadmap, moving toward final-status negotiations with the Palestinians. In order for this action to be successful, Israel must see a Palestinian government that is able to manage its own domestic affairs and prevent terrorist attacks. Since Mahmoud Abbas assumed office as PA president, terrorism has declined significantly, but his accomplishments are still fragile and could be reversed quickly. Concern has already been raised about Abbas's willingness or ability to dismantle the terror infrastructure. His government's performance in Gaza and areas of the West Bank transferred to Palestinian control will be closely examined by the Israeli public, and tangible results -- particularly a reduction in the terror threat -- must be evident.

The ball is largely in the Palestinian court. The extent to which Palestinians are prepared to coordinate the disengagement process and make it succeed will be viewed by Israel as a measure of their eagerness to reinvigorate the peace process. Limited actions to improve coordination have occurred, but more significant steps, particularly on the part of the PA, must take place. A halt in progress at this time is equivalent to a setback.

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