

America Is Key to a Gaza Pull-Out

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](/experts/dennis-ross)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](/experts/dennis-ross)

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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Nowhere are the paradoxes of the Middle East more evident than in Gaza. Ariel Sharon, Israeli prime minister and architect of the settler movement, is now being castigated by Israeli settlers for his decision to withdraw from Gaza. To win Knesset approval of his controversial plan, he had to depend on the opposition Labour party.

Even though he is determined to withdraw, Mr. Sharon felt obliged several weeks ago to order the Israeli military to do what it has not done for the last three years: move into the teeming Jabaliya refugee camp to limit the firing of Qassam rockets from the northern Gaza Strip into Israel. In reality, it was not only the rockets that produced the Israeli move -- and the resulting high Palestinian casualties. Mr. Sharon feels compelled to counter the impression that Israel is being forced to withdraw from Gaza -- an impression that both Yassir Arafat and Hamas extremists seek to cultivate. Unfortunately, the recent events are probably a small foretaste of the coming months. While Mr. Sharon will proceed with the Gaza withdrawal, the Hamas Arafat desire to foster the impression of a great victory will continue to generate attacks against Israelis, peaking as the withdrawal takes place. The Israeli response of past weeks will pale in comparison with what would be an unprecedented reaction then. Mr. Sharon will not allow Israel to be humiliated.

Here again a paradox: the Israeli decision to evacuate Gaza and dismantle the 21 settlements, which should be seen as a positive step, could worsen the situation. It does not have to be this way, but it will be if the US stays on the sidelines. Gaza withdrawal will not implement itself except in negative ways. But with US help, the withdrawal could help end the current Israeli Palestinian warfare.

After all, Israeli withdrawal and dismantling of settlements introduces a new factor into this bleak situation. More importantly, it creates a precedent. Never before has Israel withdrawn from settlements in Palestinian areas. Should Palestinians assume responsibility in those areas -- including real security responsibilities -- it would be possible to end the day to day war and get back to peace making. But the Sharon decision to withdraw must be seized upon, and that means someone must co ordinate between Israelis and Palestinians. Only the US can play this role. Since 2001, the European Union, with the US largely withdrawn from the diplomatic process, has shown it is ill equipped to play the broker's role. For its part, Egypt has increased the importance of its own role since it has no interest in seeing Gaza devolve into chaos after the Israeli departure, and even less interest in seeing Hamas and the Islamists emerge

stronger there. Egypt can certainly be helpful but it cannot replace the US in becoming a bridge between Israelis and Palestinians when none exists.

If disaster in Gaza is to be avoided, the US must become active again. The task will be difficult but not impossible. There are potential partners on the Palestinian side. Palestinian reformers have become far more assertive, challenging Mr. Arafat in unprecedented ways: former proteges, such as Mohammad Dahlan and Palestinian cabinet members such as Kadura Faris have blamed Mr. Arafat for much of the anarchy in the West Bank and Gaza; and numerous reformers have insisted on elections in the Fatah party and in the municipalities over Mr. Arafat's opposition -- and they are proceeding.

One other paradox helps explain the new assertiveness of the reformers: the prospect of Israel leaving Gaza. It confronts reformers with a challenge and an opportunity. A challenge insofar as Palestinians must govern themselves when the Israelis are out; they must fulfill their obligations, and prove there will not be independent militias with the impunity to attack Israel. If they prove this, they can demonstrate to the world and to Israelis that they are ready for statehood and that the Gaza model can be applied to the West Bank. But if they fail, the Palestinian cause will suffer a huge setback.

In all probability that is what will happen if violence accompanies the Israeli withdrawal. Rather than empowering Palestinian reformers, the Israeli responses will undermine them. To avoid this, the US must broker specific steps. First, it must be established what Mr. Sharon requires from Ahmed Qurei, the Palestinian prime minister, and his supporters in political and security organisations to allow for a smooth Israeli withdrawal. Second, we must find out what help Mr. Qurei and his reformist backers need to meet Mr. Sharon's requirements. Third, the US must coordinate a declared public stand among EU and Arab leaders that they will help meet Palestinian needs but only in the absence of attacks on the Israelis as they pull out. This step is critical to de-legitimising such attacks and raising the costs to Mr. Arafat and Hamas of orchestrating them. Whoever is elected US president next week will have to prepare the ground well in advance of the Israeli withdrawal if the Gaza pull out is to offer an opening to stability and not simply a new line from which the daily war continues.

The writer, a former US envoy to the Middle East, is author of *The Missing Peace* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux 2004) and counselor at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

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