

A Multifaceted Unilateralism

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Whoever wins the U.S. elections in November, George Bush or John Kerry will shortly have to deal with another Middle East issue apart from Iraq, namely Israel's withdrawal from Gaza.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is bringing the issue of Gaza disengagement for the first of several Knesset votes beginning Monday. The Gaza withdrawal creates opportunities. The pullout will mark the first time since 1967 that Israel will be evacuating settlers from land that Palestinians say will be part of their future state.

If the disengagement is successful, it is bound to facilitate further withdrawals from the West Bank. In no small measure, this is likely given Sharon's role as the architect of the settlement movement and, therefore, it makes his command of this withdrawal historically significant.

However, challenges also abound for what is ostensibly a unilateral pullout, but in reality will involve many layers of coordination, including the possible deployment of a multilateral force outside of Gaza's borders.

The origins of the pullout represent the failure of an Israeli-Palestinian partnership, not its triumph. Any prospects for partnership crashed amid the suicide bombings and violence, which began four years ago this week.

The environment for the pullout will be difficult, as current violence in Gaza indicates. Hamas hopes to replicate the imagery produced by Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 and to make it seem Palestinian bombs forced the pullout. Sharon has stated Israel will strike Hamas rather than have it appear that he has been pushed out. Moreover, in advance of the pullout, there is bound to be internal Palestinian tension between different groups in Gaza seeking to position themselves to fill the power vacuum left by Israel's departure.

Renewing partnership is not in the cards at this time, but the anticipated exit from Gaza could create something that has not existed for years--Israeli-Palestinian coordination. There are indications that both parties are receptive to the need for the Sharon government to cooperate operationally with Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Queria and his field commanders in advance of the pullout. Palestinians and Israelis have quietly been discussing economic aspects of the withdrawal. The World Bank is mulling the prospects of a multilateral donor drive in wake of an Israeli pullout, and the United States, Europe, Russia and the UN--who are called the Quartet--have hailed the disengagement as a catalyst to end the last four years of war and restart the battered peace process.

Another layer of coordination is the role of Cairo. Both Egypt and Israel agree that a Hamas state adjoining both of

them could mean a spillover of radicalism inside both countries, triggering rare bilateral security talks. Moreover, all agree the smuggling of arms from Egypt into Gaza through tunnels must be stopped. Yet this shared interest is tempered by a 25-year-old cold peace and a jitteriness by Cairo to avoid taking actions that could lead to conflict with Palestinian radicals.

To deal with this tunnel problem, a creative layer of coordination could resolve this issue. Both sides should turn to the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) in the Sinai that have been successfully keeping the peace between Egypt and Israel since their 1979 peace treaty.

The MFO consists of about 2,000 soldiers from 11 countries who set up checkpoints, staff reconnaissance, patrols and observation posts in other parts of the Sinai desert. Not a single MFO soldier has faced confrontation there in 25 years. Although the MFO's civilian leadership is American, the majority of its soldiers are not.

Israel will like the U.S. leadership, and the Palestinians may like the varied nature of the security force and the American public would not have to worry about seeing more U.S. troops deployed there.

The multinational character of the force also prevents charges of American unilateralism. This new MFO would not need to patrol inside an unpredictable Gaza, but rather stay in the adjoining Sinai side of the border. Clearly, the mechanism for Gaza border security exists. The current MFO is an example of the excellent results possible in an American-led multinational effort.

David Makovsky is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

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