

Gaza Pullout Most 'Gut-Wrenching' Move in Israel's History

by [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](#)

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations.

David Makovsky, a senior fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, says despite right-wing opposition, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plan to remove the roughly 7,600 Jewish settlers in Gaza will go ahead. "I think taking down settlements will be perhaps the most gut-wrenching internal process that Israel has gone through," says Makovsky, a former executive editor of The Jerusalem Post.

He also says that it is vital for the next U.S. president to take an active role in smoothing the way for the Israeli withdrawal. Makovsky was interviewed by Bernard Gwertzman, consulting editor of cfr.org, on September 14, 2004.

When we talked last in April, you thought Sharon's unilateral disengagement plan from Gaza would go fairly smoothly, but obviously some problems have developed.

It is an idea that clearly has its opponents, but what has been significant is that 70 percent of the Israeli public has consistently voiced support for it. It is interesting that some of the same Likud Party members who opposed the move liked Sharon when he was a bulldozer in dealing with wars with the Arabs, but [they] are not liking him as much when he's proving equally persistent in trying to push this idea through. It is, I think, highly significant that today Israel's inner Cabinet, by a vote of nine to one, is paving the way for compensation for those who voluntarily seek to leave before pullout.

How much compensation? I've seen numbers starting at about \$500,000.

Exactly. It depends on the house. It could be in that range. Basically, Sharon is counting on the fact that when you get into both northern Gaza and the northern part of the West Bank, the people there are not as ideological as [the residents of] southern Gaza, the Gush Katif region, who are religious people [and live in what] is mainly the heart of the Gaza settlements. The northern Gaza villages are smaller. There's even a fishing village, there are other people, kind of beat types from the '60s, and a lot of them just want to get out of Gaza. The same is true in the four settlements in the northern part of the West Bank.

So Sharon's basically hoping that he will create an air of inevitability about this pullout by putting forward the idea of voluntary compensation. I believe Sharon would like the Cabinet to pass his overall [withdrawal] plan before the American elections because, in his mind, if [President George] Bush wins, he would hope Bush would remember that he did this before the elections, even if it doesn't swing a single [congressional] seat or vote in Florida.

Why would the Cabinet vote affect the American election?

I'm not saying it will, by the way, but he'd like to think he's giving Bush a diplomatic achievement before the election.

I thought the Cabinet had already given him a green light.

No. The Cabinet had only authorized preparation [but] had not authorized the actual pullout of settlements.

Aren't some diplomatic niceties also involved? I think when Bush signed off on the withdrawal plan, the Israelis were supposed to keep the road map peace plan in mind.

There are definitely issues here to work out, like the so-called Philadelphia Road between Gaza and Egypt, the airport, the seaport. There are security issues here. Whichever candidate wins in November is going to have to be the impresario [who helps] organize this withdrawal. In Sharon's mind, he hopes Bush will remember he did this before the election, and if [Senator John] Kerry wins, he hopes that it will kind of lock in a new Kerry administration to his ideas of pulling out of Gaza, that this is the main issue in the Middle East agenda. I think he has an interest in getting this passed by the Cabinet by the end of October--he's given the date of October 24 to the Likud faction in the Knesset [Israel's parliament]. I tend to believe that's what he's going to do.

Ironically, I think the Knesset is much easier than the Cabinet, because the opposition is on the left. But everyone will be supportive, including the Arab parliamentarians, of this approach. I don't think he's going to have a major problem.

Why does Sharon want to do this?

What's driving Sharon is his sense that for Israel to remain a Jewish and democratic state it must contain a Jewish majority. Even though Israeli Jews make up over 80 percent of people inside the green line [the pre-1967 borders], inside Israel, when you put Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza together, it is down to 53 percent, and demographic experts and demographers say that the numbers will get below 50 percent by the end of the decade.

Sharon has come around to the view that Arafat does not want a Palestinian state, that this is only something that he'll say he favors in an interview with CNN, and what he really wants is to play for time. Time is [Arafat's] ally, and this is the first time in Zionist history that time is not on the side of Israel. [Rather than] play into Arafat's hands, which is to wait until the Jews become a minority, it's better to take pre-emptive action and set back the demographic clock.

How many settlers are there in the West Bank?

Some 223,000 as of last year; the numbers have probably gone up.

How important is the National Religious Party to all this?

They are important because they are, de facto, the settler party. They are the religious spearheads of the settlement movement, and this has been the case largely since the 1973 war. There's been a real change in their leadership, and there's some who believe that the Gaza pullout is unwise and feel that they've become too identified with it. Sharon, I think, has to assume that he's going to lose them, but he's hoping that he'll have what I would call a "double safety net," which is arrangements with the Labor Party in the opposition not to topple him on issues of peace and security and side understandings with the ultra-Orthodox--funding for their schools, etc.--so they don't topple him on economic issues.

Former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had proposed a national referendum. I gather Sharon knocked that idea down.

I think Sharon feels that every time he agrees to such votes he walks into somebody's trap. He feels he was elected by the people, he ran on the theme of meaningful concessions, and 70 percent in the polls support his ideas. What's new is that some of the people in the Likud have not seen him as a bulldozer against them. I think he's very

determined.

Has there been any softening in Sharon's position on finding Palestinians to deal with on turning over Gaza?

This is going to be a difficult issue because you have someone like Mohammed Dahlan who has broad support in key security organizations. It's unclear to me if there are going to be elections on the Palestinian side, to actually vote who will be there on the ground. Omar Suleyman, the head of Egyptian intelligence, has been trying to use shuttle diplomacy and get [Palestinian leader Yasir] Arafat to marginalize himself. Everything we know about Arafat is that he has no intention to step aside. I saw your interview with Khalil Shikaki suggesting that elections would be useful, that the United States and Israel shouldn't object to Arafat being really legitimized. I think that this is going to be a very problematic issue, both within the U.S. administration and the Sharon government.

Your colleague Dennis Ross was at the Council last night talking about his new book, "The Missing Peace." Ross seems to think that the administration has not taken a strong hand in trying to organize Palestinians on one side and the Israelis on the other and organize the Gaza withdrawal in a better way.

I definitely agree that Israel can't just take the keys and throw them over the fence and see who's going to catch them. There has to be, frankly, an understanding with [Prime Minister] Abu Ala [Ahmed Qurei] and the Palestinian security officials on insuring a smooth turnover. I think that will be done by whoever's elected in November. Once it's clear that Israel is doing this, any American president is going to have to [be] more energetic in making it happen.

You think Bush will do it if he's re-elected?

I don't want to get into American domestic politics. I just think that you've got a situation in which an Israeli government wants to get out of Gaza and wants to take down settlements. These are American foreign policy objectives that are shared by both parties. I think that it will not be controversial here at all; it would seem to me that it's imperative that it's done.

I think a lot of Americans, remembering the 1995 assassination of Prime Minister Rabin by an Israeli gunman who opposed his policies, are worried about comments about a "war of brothers" or civil war. Is this something most Israelis are worried about too, or is this something that's been a little hyped?

The words "civil war" are a bit strong. I think taking down settlements will be perhaps the most gut-wrenching internal process that Israel has gone through since its formation. On the other hand, I tend to believe that the American view of civil war is the blue caps against the gray caps, and I do not think there's going to be a brother-on-brother war in Israel because, I think, the settlers and their rabbinical leaders think, for the most part, that it's religiously forbidden to shoot Jews. And they know, even if it wasn't religiously forbidden, it would be politically suicidal to fire on a citizen's army, to fire on fellow soldiers. I just don't think that is going to happen.

However, it is going to be gut-wrenching--there will always be a few fanatics who invariably will shoot, and the head of the Shin Bet says there's 200 people walking around who are out to kill Prime Minister Sharon. Sharon is under attack from the right, and that might sound counterintuitive to Americans who associate Sharon with the right, but they have turned on him, believing that he has turned on them. How could the father of the settlement movement be the first guy to take them down? It is a historic thing, if Sharon and everything he represents in the Israeli imagination is the one to take them down.

I tend to think that it's very important that this withdrawal take place, not just because there's a historic justice that Sharon be the one to start the process, but it sets a political precedent that will facilitate other withdrawals from the West Bank. That's why the settlers are scared, precisely of that precedent. Therefore, they will try to make the Gaza withdrawal as traumatic as possible without unleashing a civil war, but there will be civil disobedience, there will be mass demonstrations, there will be a lot of strife. ❖

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