

Prospects of Israeli Disengagement:

A Status Report

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](/experts/dennis-ross), [Wendy Sherman \(/experts/wendy-sherman\)](/experts/wendy-sherman)

Jul 8, 2004

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.



[Wendy Sherman \(/experts/wendy-sherman\)](/experts/wendy-sherman)



Brief Analysis

There is no doubt that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is absolutely determined to carry out disengagement despite the political problems within his own party. The demographic issue of ensuring a long-term Jewish democratic majority in Israel and the associated political pressure has fueled his determination to proceed with disengagement.

Sharon and those within the government who support him prefer to make the disengagement from Gaza complete. They do not wish to create a situation where Israel will have left the settlements but will still control everything that enters and exits Gaza. Although the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) recognizes that it will have to implement the prime minister's decision, the army is currently focused on the kinds of weapons that can get into Gaza through the extensive smuggling networks and tunnels from Egypt. Yesterday's rocket attacks in Sderot resulted in the first fatalities caused by the launching of Qassam rockets into Israel from Gaza. The IDF fears that qualitatively more sophisticated and deadly weapons, such as katyusha rockets or shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles, will soon be smuggled into Gaza as well. The Israelis recognize that Egypt has been targeting the smuggling more than it has in the past, but they believe a more intense effort is required. Otherwise, the weapons, supplied in part by Hizballah, will find their way from the Sinai into Gaza, thus creating a situation that will require Israel to maintain its presence on the Philadelphia route along the border between Egypt and Gaza. The key question for Sharon, then, is how to establish security arrangements sufficient to prevent the smuggling and how to establish a degree of confidence so that a complete withdrawal can be achieved.

It is also imperative for Sharon that there be no evacuation under fire. Sharon does not intend that there be no withdrawal if there is a great deal of violence, but he considers that the nature of an Israeli response to such violence must be even greater than anything seen until now. This warning should serve as an additional reminder and

incentive to the Palestinians, Egyptians, and Americans, as well as to the international community, that it is crucial to create an environment of calm by the time Israel is to leave Gaza.

The Palestinians start with the premise that the Israeli pullout from Gaza is going to take place. Their main concern is whether the withdrawal will be complete and whether Israel will leave the Philadelphia route and not maintain control over the air and sea space. Recognizing that Israel will pull out and the Palestinians themselves will be responsible for governing produces ferment on the Palestinian side. The Palestinians want to develop some type of national dialogue that will work out the needs of good governance. Mohammad Dahlan has been working to produce elections in Fatah in Gaza. Those elections will take place by September. What is emerging as a result in Gaza is a base within the organization of Fatah that is going to be increasingly independent of Yasir Arafat because none of the people being elected are Arafat's people.

There is no question that among people such as Abu Ala and the reformers, there is a preoccupation with developing a ceasefire. Even without a mutual ceasefire with Israel, there is still a desire to create an internal ceasefire that will include Hamas in certain power-sharing arrangements. The formula that the Palestinians present for dealing with the rejectionist groups is to create a rule of law that is respected. If the Palestinians are then able to create calm on their side, they will want the Israelis to respect it and not take steps that make their lives more difficult. Israel will also have to confront the idea that Hamas may limit its activities in Gaza and focus on the West Bank, thereby forcing Israel to make a decision on whether and how to retaliate if attacks continue. All of these issues indicate that there needs to be some degree of coordination in conjunction with the disengagement, which leads back to Egypt's role.

For the Egyptians, the disengagement not only creates an opportunity to restore the peace process, but also serves their interests in not allowing chaos to emerge in Gaza or the domination of groups such as Hamas. From their own standpoint, they put a premium on having certain assurances from the United States in a number of areas. First, they want to know that the disengagement is connected to something larger and is Gaza first, not Gaza last. Second, they will have a set of requirements for the Israelis, which they have yet to specify, but they will need American support as they seek these requirements. Third, they will look to the United States to provide training, assistance, and material support to the Palestinian security forces that were promised during the Abu Mazen period. Last, they will want the United States to lead a donor effort that will create a real infusion of assistance into Gaza.

Egypt will also place a set of requirements on the Palestinians. Egypt will not send any advisors into Gaza until after there is a set of understandings with the leaders of the new security organizations. The country is asking for a reduction in the number of security organizations from the current number (nine to twelve) to three, and it wants to create a professional standing for those organizations so that they are unaffiliated with political factions. Egypt will insist on reaching an understanding of the specific role and obligation of each organization and then will monitor whether those responsibilities are being fulfilled as agreed.

Arafat has, at this point, agreed in principle to the Egyptian plan, but in practice his answer will probably be no. The Egyptians have clearly put pressure on him, but they have allowed him a two-month timetable to implement restructuring of the security organizations. A point will come when the Egyptian and other traditional friends of the Palestinians in both Europe and the Arab world will have to be prepared to go public to make it clear that Arafat is the one obstructing this process. Egypt may be prepared to do this, but it will likely want Arafat to be able to leave the Muqata and travel to Gaza in return. That issue is coming. One reason for the delay by Egypt is that the Egyptians doubt very much that the Bush administration will support such an approach before November.

The second big question mark is whether the Egyptians can meet the security requirements of the IDF on the Philadelphia route. Can they do it on their own, or do they need help from the outside? Similarly, can Egypt play the broker role without more active help from the United States? For example, the Palestinians will need to know exactly when the Israelis will be withdrawing and how. The Israelis will need to know what responsibilities the Palestinians

are picking up on the ground and when. The security forces on both sides will have to talk to each other.

WENDY SHERMAN

Three major themes emerged during this trip: the dynamic of terrorism, the implications of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation, and the prospects for reform in the Middle East. First, it is within the conceptual framework of terrorism that Sharon has become so determined to carry out the disengagement plan. That sense of the importance of countering terrorism has really become convergent with American foreign policy under the Bush administration such that it overwhelms virtually every other issue on the U.S.-Israeli agenda. Terrorism is also an issue of great concern for others in the region, including the Egyptians. There is a difference of opinion on whether prosecuting the war in Iraq has created a base for terrorism or whether it has in fact shown an element of power that will ultimately constrict terrorism in the region. There is also a growing consensus, particularly in Israel, that Iran is fueling the terrorist efforts and that Syria is also playing a significant role.

A number of people now believe that Syria has risen in priority. There are concerns about Syria in terms of terrorism and its relationship with Israel. There is a split between those who believe that now is the perfect moment to negotiate with Syria and those who favor taking military action. Perspectives on this issue are largely shaped on an analysis of whether Bashar al-Asad wields full control.

One issue to flag for the future is that the next administration, regardless of who wins in November, will place a very high priority on addressing WMD. Furthermore, there will probably be a worldwide effort to look at the protocols involving nuclear weapons. As a result, the United States needs to engage in discussions now on where that would leave Israel. In addition, there is great concern that, if Iran does get nuclear weapons, a domino effect could occur in the region, thus encouraging countries such as Egypt to head in that direction.

On the third theme of reform, the war of ideas, and democracy, the Israelis, Palestinians, and Egyptians expressed a perception that the United States does not have a clue about how to address these issues.

The reformers, leaders of human rights, civil society, and women's rights groups in Egypt all receive most of their funding from U.S. institutional sources. This money is clearly well spent because there would be no civil society or growing reform movement without U.S. involvement. However, on the public diplomacy side, neither al-Hurrah nor Radio Sawa are perceived to be doing the job intended. The money that the U.S. government is currently spending on radio and television might be more effectively spent on funding more civil society groups, conferences, and exchanges. There is clearly a need to rethink the approach to this entire process.

Finally, the United States has to help the region understand that its role can be both pro-Israeli and pro-Arab, both pro-Israeli and pro-Muslim. No one—not in this administration nor in the past one—has figured out how achieve that balance. There needs to be a way to help people move toward freedom without feeling a threat to their very sense of tradition and reality.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Ben Fishman.

Policy #466

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

TOPICS

Peace Process (/policy-analysis/peace-process)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)