

# Sharon's Disengagement Plan:

## A Likud Perspective

Jun 14, 2004



Brief Analysis

**D**espite recent events, there are several reasons for cautious optimism in Israel. First, many remain hopeful that the war in Iraq will have some positive consequences. Second, a growing sense of realism has emerged among Israelis and Palestinians alike. Third, Yasir Arafat's intifada has failed, both politically and in terms of its goal of breaking the backbone of the Israeli people. Fourth, Israel's military campaign against terrorism has been successful.

### Unilateral Separation: Original and Revised Plans

On June 6, the Israeli government approved a plan for unilateral separation by a 14 to 7 vote. The plan includes complete withdrawal from the Gaza Strip (with the exception of the so-called "Philadelphia Corridor" on the Egypt-Gaza border) and from certain West Bank settlements. It is scheduled to be implemented beginning in March 2005 and should be completed by the end of that year.

Although the term "revised plan" is now used in place of "disengagement plan," the old and new plans are substantively similar. The new plan still calls for the completion of preparatory work and the commencement of actual evacuation by March 2005. The four groups of settlements mentioned in the original plan remain, but under the revised plan, the cabinet can deal with them either collectively or separately. Like the original plan, the revised plan does not include formal sequencing or conditions regarding Palestinian obligations. The Palestinians should not treat this omission as a blank check, however. Certain actions on their part could delay portions of the evacuation process.

The two plans do differ somewhat in their treatment of the physical infrastructure of the settlements. Under the revised plan, all private houses in the settlements will be destroyed while all public buildings will be left intact. One rationale for that approach is emotional; seeing Hamas flags raised over former settlers' homes could have a number of negative psychological effects. Indeed, given the sheer size of the Palestinian population in the Gaza Strip, the Israeli government feared that the houses would not go to those who could really benefit from them. The withdrawal plan also mandates a freeze on new construction in the settlements slated for evacuation (effective June 6) in order to preclude any unnecessary expenditures. In addition, individuals who move into these settlements after the government vote last Sunday will not be entitled to compensation of any kind.

The new plan was meant to ease some of the fears of those who object to the idea of withdrawal entirely. Many feel that a withdrawal conducted in stages will be more palatable to critics of the plan. At the same time, the potential difficulties of such an approach must be acknowledged. For example, a phased withdrawal will likely spur intense debate on every stage of the plan, lending each settlement added symbolic weight. Moreover, Palestinian terrorists might see withdrawal phases as a timetable for committing attacks against settlers and inside Israel proper. Yet, some compromise between Israeli political leaders was necessary in order to generate the revised plan. These compromises allowed all sides involved to declare victory. The result is an action plan rather than an inaction plan—

one that Israel intends to pursue despite the potential difficulties along the way.

### Why Unilaterally?

Israel has chosen to act unilaterally for several reasons. First, there is no reliable partner on the Palestinian side. Second, under the current circumstances, no formula appears capable of producing an eventual final agreement that would be acceptable to both sides. Therefore, Israel is trying to improve the situation by making tangible progress. The revised plan will allow Israel to improve its security and to decide for itself the scope of withdrawal, with U.S. backing.

Although the withdrawal is a unilateral step, some bi- and multilateral factors remain. The United States will be part of the process, and Egypt and Jordan are projected to play certain roles as well (e.g., as indirect leverage on the Palestinians). Any potential coordination with the Egyptians should be viewed as a positive sign (though not all Israelis agree with this sentiment). Israel appreciates Egypt's role in the region and would like to see Cairo take an active role in helping to secure Gaza's borders. Trust continues to grow between the two countries, which share many interests.

Some worry that the planned withdrawal will give the Palestinians the mistaken impression that the terrorists have achieved victory, as happened in Lebanon. There are differences between the situations in Lebanon and Gaza, however. The Gaza evacuation process will take a year or longer, as opposed to the Lebanon withdrawal, which was conducted essentially over night. Moreover, Israel will not be constrained with regard to security matters in Gaza, nor will it be subject to the same sorts of outside pressure it faced in Lebanon.

Israelis also have their doubts about the Palestinians' true intentions. Although these suspicions are partly rooted in the failure of the 2000 Camp David summit, the subsequent peace talks at Taba, and the Oslo Accords in general, they are also informed by the cool reaction that many Palestinians exhibited toward the Geneva Accord (polls showed that only 25 percent of Palestinians believed the Geneva initiative could bring an end to the conflict). What, then, does it mean for Israel to have a real peace partner? First, Palestinians must have a leader who is able to put an end to the current environment of terror, which would, hopefully, bring down the terrorist infrastructure and curb incitement. Second, Palestinians must declare their ideological acceptance of the Jewish state of Israel. Third, Palestinians must accept UN Security Council Resolution 242 in all of its facets, not just according to their interpretation.

Israel's unilateral withdrawal plans should also be viewed in light of President George W. Bush's April 14, 2004, letter to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, which emphasized that Israel must have secure and recognized borders. The letter also mentioned that every agreement must be mutually accepted while reflecting the realities on the ground. Indeed, given the new realities on the ground, it is unrealistic to expect a full withdrawal to the pre-1967 borders. Bush's letter also emphasized that the solution to the refugee problem should involve Palestinians returning to their own state rather than to Israel.

### Israeli Political Implications

Sharon's achievements in Washington were important, and most of the Israeli public was pleased with the subsequent declarations. Even so, Likud members rejected the original withdrawal plan, and many different political scenarios now seem possible. The general feeling among Israeli politicians is that early elections are quite likely. This development may occur even if the Labor Party joins Sharon's government, given the fact that a large portion of Likud opposes his Gaza plan. Indeed, there are at least eleven or twelve Likud members who may vote against the plan every step of the way. Some Likud members opposed the original plan in principle because they object to any unilateral step. Others opposed it because they disagree with dismantling Jewish settlements. Others saw the plan as an unjustified response to terrorism that made Israel appear weak. Still others felt that time is on Israel's side, and

that Israel should wait and enjoy Bush's letter and the promises it offered.

In any case, Finance Minister Binyamin Netanyahu does not want to become merely the de facto leader of the Israeli right wing. Doing so could cost him the support of the Israeli center, which he has gained over the past year by promoting a successful economic policy. Therefore, he has been eager to find a compromise that would allow other coalition partners (e.g., the National Religious Party) to stay in the government instead of bringing in Labor. If Labor enters the government, Netanyahu may find it difficult to keep his economic policy alive; Labor has united with the Am-Echad Party, which opposes his economic agenda. In fact, Netanyahu may lose his post as finance minister, which could be disastrous for Israel. Accordingly, keeping Labor out of the government was an important factor in leading Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom and Education Minister Limor Livnat—two key oppositionists to Sharon's original plan—to consider the compromise offer made by Absorption and Immigration Minister Tzipi Livni.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Ben Thein.

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