

Security, Peace, and Israel's Strategy of Disengagement

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Brief Analysis

The natural answer to this question is "a Palestinian state." Indeed, during the Oslo process, Israel operated under this very premise. Over the past three and a half years, however, considerable doubts have arisen about whether this is what the Palestinians really want. Of course, the leaders of Hamas explicitly state that the only solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the complete destruction of Israel. From their point of view, the Palestinians need not make any hasty decisions. After all, Hamas argues, a careful reading of historical, political, religious, and demographic developments indicates that the state of Israel will collapse by the year 2027. Israelis believe that Yasir Arafat shares these same views, although his method of fulfilling them may be more sophisticated. Basically, Arafat's policy is to avoid reaching a peace agreement with Israel. This policy is based on four pillars: first, promoting a diplomatic "peace process" because the process itself is something that most everyone supports; second, retaining the terrorism option; third, sustaining the notion that Palestinian victimhood is so terrible that it requires the attention of the entire international community; and fourth, biding time until Palestinians constitute a large majority in the historic land of Palestine. If all of these efforts are pursued simultaneously, then—in Arafat's view—the state of Israel will not survive. For Arafat and Hamas, the end result will be the same: the collapse of Israel.

Is the Occupation the Main Cause of the Arab-Israeli Conflict?

The general assumption, of course, is that when occupation ends, all problems between the Arab states and Israel will vanish. In fact, the Lebanon precedent suggests that Arab animosity toward Israel will not be resolved by ending the occupation. In May 2000, Israel withdrew all its forces from Lebanon and deployed them to Israeli territory, behind the precise line demarcated by UN experts. Moreover, the UN Security Council (UNSC)—not normally known as a pro-Israel institution—officially certified that Israel had fulfilled the requirements in UNSC Resolution 425. According to that resolution, the Lebanese government was supposed to assume responsibility for security along the international border. Instead, it permitted Hizballah to take up positions along that border. The result today is that Israelis can open their windows and see Hizballah military positions just a few dozen meters from their homes. This is not a hypothetical problem; at least seventeen Israelis, half of them civilians, have been killed by Hizballah since the Israeli evacuation of Lebanon. And Hizballah has succeeded in transforming itself into an organization with substantial military capacity, including around 12,000 rockets of various sorts in reach of approximately half of Israel. This situation—developed by a Lebanese organization after Israel was certified to have ended its occupation of Lebanese territory—poses a real military threat to the existence of the state.

Is there any reason to believe that the situation will differ in the West Bank and Gaza after an Israeli withdrawal? Will Hamas not follow in Hizballah's path? Will the Palestinian Authority behave differently than the government of Lebanon? Evidently, Israel's "occupation" is not the only root of the Middle East conflict.

What Role for 'International Forces'?

Israel recognizes that international involvement in support of a possible disengagement plan is not only possible, but also desirable. In many areas, especially economic and humanitarian affairs, Israel welcomes the involvement of the European Union and others. But in some quarters, there is an assumption that the best way to resolve a conflict

or build trust between the two sides is to deploy an international military force as a buffer. Again, the Lebanon precedent questions the wisdom of this approach.

A UN force -- the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL)—has been deployed along the international border for more than twenty years. At no point—either before or since Israel's withdrawal—has that force declared any intention to fight Hizballah or take steps to prevent Hizballah from attacking Israel. Although UNIFIL's official mandate is to restore security and peace along the border, it has done nothing in support of this mandate; in some circumstances, whether wittingly or unwittingly, the force has even given certain cover to activities against Israel. Based on this experience, why should Israel be confident that an international force deployed between Israelis and Palestinians would be any more effective?

What Does the Arab World Want?

A common refrain from Arab leaders and thinkers is, "We Arabs look forward to profound political, social, and cultural reforms taking hold in our societies but, unfortunately, this process cannot take place as long as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict persists. So, this problem needs to be resolved before we can tackle our internal problems." Can one seriously conclude that the extreme poverty in Egypt, the utter lack of human rights in Saudi Arabia, or the many other fundamental problems holding back development in Arab societies are the result of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Much more likely, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict provides an easy excuse not to address these problems and to divert pressure from within those societies onto an outside problem.

To What Extent Is a 'Two-State Solution' the Proper Formula for Resolving the Arab-Israeli Conflict?

This is a sensitive question, especially since the idea of a "two-state solution" has now become widely accepted as the pathway for resolving the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. But given demographic trends, is it actually realistic to believe that there is adequate space between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea for two, independent, viable states?

For example, the area of the Gaza Strip is 365 square kilometers; it contains today a population of about 1.3 million Palestinians. That figure will double in one generation. Is it possible to imagine that, when 2.5 million Palestinians live in Gaza in the year 2025, they will be able and willing to focus their national energies—economically, culturally, and so on—within this limited space? Perhaps it is neither wise nor just to premise the solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on this assumption.

Are Peace Agreements Always the Best Solution?

The legacy of the quarter-century-old peace agreement with Egypt is instructive. On the positive side, Israel has no claims against Egypt and vice versa, which is important and very positive; both sides sought to maximize their interests, which is what negotiations are all about. But there have been some problems, too. 1) Israel had an expectation that Egypt would serve as a bridge between Israel and the rest of the Arab world. Clearly, this expectation has not been fulfilled. 2) A key goal of peace agreements is to reduce military threats. Over the past twenty-five years—and thanks to massive U.S. military support—Egypt has managed to develop armed forces that are, in many respects, of more concern to Israel than are the forces of Syria, a country that has not signed a peace treaty with Israel. 3) For the treaty with Egypt, Israel withdrew from 100 percent of the Sinai Peninsula. As a precedent to other possible agreements, this creates difficulties. Theoretically, Israel may be forced to move to the pre-1967 lines in the West Bank, but no one should consider those boundaries to be "secure borders." 4) In retrospect, perhaps the most damaging aspect of the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty is what that agreement did not resolve: the Palestinian issue. In considering future peace agreements, Israel must keep these lessons in mind.

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