

Partition without Partnership?

Disengagement and the Future of the Peace Process (Part I)

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In-Depth Reports

For some time, we have all been preoccupied with Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon's unilateral withdrawal plan. The fate of the peace process today depends on the outcome of political maneuvers taking place in Israel. And, once again, we find ourselves in a vicious circle, even taking steps backward. Instead of the discussion revolving around how to reassure and satisfy the Palestinians -- the party most affected by this issue -- the talk is of how to please the political parties in Israel.

Israel currently occupies the entire West Bank and key parts of Gaza. It controls Palestinian airspace, territorial waters, and crossing points. Hypothetically, such a situation would normally end with a conclusive political formula dictated by a powerful, triumphant Israel. But that has not happened. A political vacuum has been created, and one of its most important consequences is the failure of any political solution.

When I came to The Washington Institute, I wondered whether Sharon would benefit from President George W. Bush's assurances regarding the disengagement plan. My speculation was not related to the Likud Party referendum on the plan, but to the prospects of reaching the solution for which Sharon himself yearns. Had Sharon secured the Likud vote, would he also have succeeded in the subsequent steps without a legal partner that could agree to the deal? Sharon may have left the door open for a partner of some sort -- a partner he agrees to and whom he permits to endorse his unilateral disengagement plan. Under such a scenario, difficult questions would emerge regarding the fairness of any agreement signed by a partner who did not negotiate it.

Sharon will not find a serious partner with these characteristics. So to whom is he marketing his plan? And what does he hope to achieve with it, especially regarding permanent-status issues? Sharon wants to incorporate Arab parties in a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, but he proposes a strange kind of partnership. Sharon proposes to decide what the partner's role is, when he will bestow this role upon the partner, and when he can withdraw it. This is what he said of Israel's relationship with Egypt when talking about a unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. And this is what he will say about Israel's relationship with Jordan if he makes a similar proposal regarding the West Bank.

Palestinians and Israelis agree on the need for an American role. In fact, the United States must take steps to maintain its influence in the region, especially after President Bush outlined a comprehensive vision for a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and engineered a Roadmap for implementing this vision. A significant effort must also be made to encourage America's Quartet partners -- Russia, the European Union, and the UN -- to take part in implementing the Roadmap. A regional vacuum, in which negative scenarios could develop, must not be allowed to form. Currently, the United States is trying to please all parties by offering specific assurances to each party. This is not harmful per se, but it is not a solution, even in the short term.

In any case, no matter how hard Israel tries to act unilaterally, it still needs a Palestinian partner. The Palestinian National Authority is that partner. Sharon can work with the Palestinian prime minister if he will not deal with

Yasser Arafat. Israel must provide the faculties necessary to give credibility to the Palestinian premier and to provide a ray of hope so that Palestinians can support a solution. The Palestinians will inevitably carry out their Roadmap commitments to Israeli-Palestinian peace. But the Palestinians' current inability to carry out these responsibilities has been used to exempt others from carrying out their own. This practice should be changed. The United States, along with the rest of the Quartet, must make continuous efforts to facilitate the process.

A comprehensive peace in accordance with President Bush's vision, the Roadmap, and international resolutions is possible when we work together to find practical ways to achieve it -- and when we work on the basis of what we can do, not what we must do.

Eival Gilady addressed the symposium on this same topic. [Read his remarks.](#)

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