

Partition without Partnership?

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

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Four basic assumptions have passed away. The first is the assumption that peace will bring security. Many believed that, once peace was achieved, the motivation behind attacks against Israel would vanish. If we could just reach a peace agreement, some argued, there would be no more terror. Peace, we believed during the decade-long Oslo process, is a tool to defeat terror. These assumptions proved false. Israelis now understand that we need security first. Security will bring peace, not the other way around.

The second dead assumption from the Oslo process was that a solution could be facilitated by close interactions between the two societies. Although both sides spoke of two independent entities, the relations between the two societies were to be open, with no fence. Two hundred thousand Palestinians used to come to Israel to work every day -- 120,000 legally, and about 80,000 illegally -- and Israel felt no need to take measures to minimize that number. Israelis used to go to Palestinian areas to shop or play. We thought that this was the kind of relationship our two societies could have. You will not see such an arrangement again in the near future, however. A fence is being built. Israelis will live on one side, the Palestinians on the other.

The third dead assumption concerns leadership. Yasser Arafat was never an easy partner. It was not easy to negotiate with him after 1993. Nevertheless, Israelis believed that he could deliver. We thought of him as a leader who sought the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. We mistakenly believed that, after forty years, he could change his state of mind from that of a revolutionary leader. Today, Israelis understand that Arafat is neither a peace-seeker nor a state-builder. We understand that he is not the kind of leader with whom we can work. Now we must look for different leaders who truly care about the Palestinian people, about security, about their economy, and about day-to-day life -- about the things that support both Palestinian interests and Israeli interests.

The fourth dead assumption was that we could reach a final-status agreement in one step. Today we understand that any final settlement will require more than one step. Israeli society is much better prepared for such a settlement, yet we will need to allow time for many changes to occur before we can reach a lasting agreement.

Once we understand that these four assumptions have passed away, what different strategies can we adopt based on new assumptions? Some would say, "Do nothing. Keep going the way we are, and trust that things will happen on their own." Yet, that approach would be unbearably slow, with many people paying a heavy price. We already have more than 3,000 people killed over the past three and a half years. Usually, Israelis talk about the 900 dead Israelis; I count the Palestinians, too. Thousands more have been injured, and people's hopes and economic prospects have

been casualties as well. We cannot continue doing nothing and hoping that something will happen by itself. That is not a strategy. Yes, Israel is strong enough. The Israel Defense Forces have done fairly well in fighting terrorism, and the level of terrorist attacks has declined. But we cannot bring this conflict to an end if we do nothing politically.

A second strategy would be to resume the old negotiating approach. Many advocate this strategy, including some in the Israeli administration. "Let us resume mutual negotiation with the Palestinians," they say. "Let us listen to what the Palestinians need. We will put our proposals on the table and see if they work." We have been pursuing that strategy for nearly a decade, however, and it has failed. In particular, it has failed to foster reforms in the areas of security and education. Moreover, Palestinian hatred toward Israel remains very strong. There is no reason to repeat this failure. Israelis are looking not only for security, but also for good neighbors.

And so we come to the third strategy, one that requires real leadership and aims to bring about real change. This strategy is disengagement. Who would have believed that Ariel Sharon would legitimize the evacuation of Gaza? But he has, and there is no doubt that it will happen.

The disengagement plan incorporates an understanding of all of these new assumptions. It is based on the argument that we need not stay where we are -- bleeding, killing, and dying -- simply because we cannot move to a final-status agreement in one step. Instead, we can make incremental progress toward a point where security, the economy, and the political situation are better. We can dramatically increase freedom of movement for people and goods on the Palestinian side. We can minimize friction between the two societies. We can use the fence to redeploy Israeli troops and defend Israel on that line. With disengagement, Israel can begin to get out of the territories and make its presence there invisible. Once we evacuate the settlers, there will be no need for a military presence. If we can carry out these steps, perhaps it would create the conditions the Palestinians need to move the process forward and implement the necessary reforms in security, economics, finances, and government. That is the logic behind the disengagement plan.

Israelis do not support disengagement out of some notion that Israel should be able to do whatever it wants to do. Israel has repeatedly sought peace, not victory. In 1992, Arafat was weak and isolated in Tunisia. He did not even participate in the Madrid talks. Yet, Israel chose to pursue peace, bringing Arafat to the territories. We failed. When the government of Mahmoud Abbas (a.k.a. Abu Mazen) took office, we tried again. And when the government of Ahmed Qurei (a.k.a. Abu Ala) took office, we tried again. But we never had a partner. Abu Ala refused to meet Sharon. I was part of the preparation team that tried to arrange such a meeting. Abu Ala refused. He did not profess a desire to meet Sharon until after the latter announced that he would act unilaterally. Only then did Abu Ala say, "I am ready to speak to you." That is not real leadership.

One cannot ignore the Likud Party vote on the Gaza disengagement plan. Sharon thought a party referendum would be the quickest way to make the plan happen, but it failed. No one is as committed to this plan as Sharon. He wants to move forward. It will take some time, perhaps two or three months, to restructure the plan and make the changes necessary to gain Israeli public support. By the end of 2005, everything Israel promised the Bush administration it would do under the disengagement plan will be done. That includes redeploying Israeli troops, evacuating settlements, and changing the entire structure of the Palestinian territory. It means ending the occupation. Israel neither wants nor needs to be there.

Israel will not negotiate with the Palestinian Authority, however. We will not be held hostage again by Yasser Arafat or whoever represents him. He will not prevent this plan from moving forward. But Israel will coordinate its disengagement with the Palestinians at the professional, bureaucratic, and regional levels. We already have many channels for coordination on the ground. We will keep them open.

If I could propose one thing to my Palestinian colleagues, I would ask them to develop a Palestinian unilateral plan.

They must understand that the Israeli plan will be implemented. Disengagement is the right strategy. It is a win-win scenario that will improve the situation for Israelis and Palestinians alike. Israel is not looking to make the lives of Palestinians miserable. The question remains, what will the Palestinians do as the Israeli plan moves forward? If Israel evacuates Gaza, who will take over? Who will establish law and order? Who will be responsible for the settlements that will be evacuated? Where is the Palestinian plan?

If I were advising Abu Ala, I would tell him not to focus on making so many demands on the United States, Europe, Israel, Egypt, or Jordan. Look internally. You have been the prime minister of the Palestinian people for six months. What have you done? Propose a Palestinian unilateral plan, coordinate it with the Israeli plan, and implement it at every step to create a positive dynamic on the Palestinian side. If Abu Ala does not take the lead, Arafat will. His plan, as we all know, will be to destroy the process.

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

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