

Security, Peace, and Israel's Strategy of Disengagement

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In-Depth Reports

My initial intention was to give a lengthy presentation of the Israeli disengagement plan. The pace of changing circumstances, however, means that no one can guarantee the chances of the plan's being implemented in the near future. I can only say that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is truly committed to the implementation of the disengagement plan; that, of the options presently open to him, he believes it is the most feasible plan at this moment in time. But he faces considerable difficulties back home, and I do not know whether he can find a political solution that will enable him to move forward. Therefore, I prefer to speak more widely on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to ask certain questions.

Over the past year, Prime Minister Sharon has reached the conclusion that any stagnation was against the interests of the state of Israel. Because he believes that, at the moment, it would be impossible to move forward with a Palestinian partner to implement the Roadmap or any similar plan, Israel was stranded if stagnation was its only other option. It was therefore vital for Israel to take the initiative, even if that meant taking a unilateral step. Over the past three years, we have spent hundreds of hours talking with our Palestinian counterparts about the possibilities for moving forward. We tried to persuade them to take more action against terrorism. But they always had two explanations for why it would be hard or even impossible to do so.

Their first explanation was that fighting terrorism meant fighting other Palestinians. This was a risky thing to do, and in order to do it, the Palestinian Authority (PA) needed legitimacy. Legitimacy could not be gained as long as Israeli military forces were present in the area. "You want us to fight our brothers in the presence of Israeli tanks," they said. "You want us to take all of the risk while our people are humiliated at Israeli checkpoints. We cannot do it because we do not have the legitimacy to take these actions." If and when Israel withdraws from Gaza, then this excuse will disappear. Israeli troops will not be present there, so there will be no reason for Palestinians not to take the necessary actions.

The second explanation for Palestinian inaction was more political. They said that fighting terror might lead to a civil war among the Palestinians. In this vein, our Palestinian counterparts asked, "Why should we take such a risk and fight against other Palestinians when we know that, in the end, you will never evacuate civilian settlements?" If and when Israel does withdraw from Gaza, it will be proof that we will evacuate civilian settlements despite all of the difficulties involved in doing so. Now it should be the Palestinians' turn to show what they can do.

What do the Palestinians want? It seems intuitive that what the Palestinians want is a Palestinian state; that that is what they fight for, that they want to get rid of the Israeli occupation, that they want independence, that they want to be just like any other people. During the Oslo process, this was the basic belief on the Israeli side. Over the past three and a half years, however, heavy doubts have been raised about whether this is what the Palestinians really want. Maybe what the Palestinians really want is not to have a Palestinian state and not to solve the conflict. Maybe what the Palestinians really want is something different.

Historically, whenever there were two options on the table -- either to have a Palestinian state alongside a Jewish state or to have neither -- the Palestinians always preferred the latter. This was the case in 1937, in 1947, and in

1967, after the Six Day War, with the famous "Three No's" of the Khartoum Conference. And when, during summer 2000, a proposal was put on the table by Prime Minister Ehud Barak, the same position was again repeated by the Palestinian leadership. Yasser Arafat could not officially reject Barak's offer because President Bill Clinton considered it a fair and generous proposal. But neither could he accept it as the basis for further negotiations because the end of the conflict is not what the Palestinian leadership really wanted. What do Palestinian leaders say that they want? If we turn to Hamas, then the answer is clear. The leaders of Hamas explicitly say that the only solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the complete destruction of the state of Israel. They say more than that. They ask, why should the Palestinians make hasty decisions? Given the situation, its history, dynamics, and demographics, they argue, the state of Israel will collapse by the year 2027.

We believe that this is the policy of Yasser Arafat as well. His basic policy is never to reach an agreement. That policy rests on four immovable pillars of principle. The first principle is to present to the world a front of diplomacy, to speak outwardly of peaceful processes and gain points in the international arena. Why not have a political process? The second principle is never to abandon the use of terrorism. Palestinian terror began a hundred years ago and has never stopped, not even during the good days of Oslo. The Palestinian leadership will not let go of this strategy. The third principle is to maintain the feeling of Palestinian victimhood. Arafat wants the international community to believe that the Palestinian problem should be solved before any other matter. This sense of victimhood is a very effective -- and deceptive -- tool. The fourth principle is demography. Given time, demography will win. The Palestinians will both outnumber Israelis and, in a very sophisticated way, manage to implement the right of return even if there is no agreement. During the "good days of Oslo," approximately 130,000 Palestinians managed to get Israeli identification papers, whether by marriage or other means. Many other Palestinians live in Israel, and no one knows exactly where they are or what they are doing.

If all four principles are upheld simultaneously, then the state of Israel will not be able to survive in the long term. The result will be similar to what Hamas says are its goals. This was the official policy of the former Palestinian leader, Haj Amin al- Husseini, and we believe it is the true policy of Arafat.

Are there Palestinians who think differently? I believe the answer is yes. Are they powerful enough to change Palestinian policy? I do not know. But that is the real question that should be on the table. At the moment, increasing numbers of Israelis do not believe there could be a different Palestinian policy. The key question about Arafat concerns not the man himself, but whether or not he has managed to create a legacy of Arafatism that will prevent any solution in the future. If the Palestinians in general choose to adopt a policy of never reaching an agreement, then the cycle will continue as it has, with conflict itself as the goal. As long as there is conflict, the right to reject any proposal persists. As long as the Palestinians reject any proposal, Israel will remain in the West Bank and Gaza, and the Israeli presence will continue to be considered an occupation. And as long as there is occupation, there is the right to fight against occupation and to use terrorist methods.

Even while we were drafting the unilateral disengagement plan, some people argued that if the Palestinians were not willing to perform what the Roadmap expected them to, then they would see the fulfillment of their ambition to have a state delayed; in other words, that they would pay a price. But the opposite is true. The creation of a Palestinian state is not what the Palestinian leadership wants. Rather than being a desired end, the prospect of statehood is a threat. According to this logic, keeping the threat of a Palestinian state from becoming a reality is better for the Palestinian cause.

It has become common currency in Arab exchanges with the international community that all of the problems between Israel and the Palestinians, between Israel and Lebanon, and between Israel and Syria are caused by the Israeli occupation. As soon as the Israeli occupation ends, then all other problems will be solved. Well, we have a test case for this argument. Four years ago, Israel withdrew all of its forces from Lebanon to the exact line determined by

the UN -- not exactly a pro-Israeli organization. (Laughter.) It was understood that an Israeli withdrawal to that line would be considered a full implementation of Security Council Resolution 425, and that the Israeli occupation of Lebanon would, officially, be no more. We expected that, if occupation was the cause of all of the problems in Lebanon, then we were removing the only obstacle to peace along the Israeli-Lebanese border by withdrawing.

What happened? According to Resolution 425, the government of Lebanon was obligated to take responsibility for security along the border. Beirut never did that. Instead, Hizballah, a well-known terrorist organization operated by Syria and Iran, took official responsibility and became the only armed force on the other side of the border. The distance between civilian Israeli villages and Hizballah positions is sometimes a few hundred meters, sometimes a few dozen meters, and sometimes only a few meters. So an Israeli civilian can open his or her window and be within a few dozen meters of a Hizballah position. Over the past four years, there have been dozens, if not hundreds, of violent incidents along the border. When there are no casualties, no one hears about them, but at least seventeen Israelis -- half of them civilians -- have been killed in such incidents since the Israeli evacuation of Lebanon.

Hizballah represents something more than a terrorist threat. Over the past four years, it has become a real military organization with a real military capacity. Hizballah has about 12,000 rockets of different kinds that can reach about half of Israel, making it a military threat to the existence of the state of Israel. If this terrorist organization decides to operate at its full capacity, what should the Israeli response be? There is no effective direct response against every missile. So how should Israel defend itself? The only way would be to do something against the Syrians, who are largely responsible for the development and activation of Hizballah. But if Israel takes action against Syria, then the two countries might be dragged into a full military confrontation, although neither really wants it.

Why do Israel and Syria find themselves in this position? Because there is a terrorist organization between them that strengthened its capacity following an Israeli withdrawal. Is there any good reason to believe that Hamas will be different from Hizballah, and that the PA will be different from the government of Lebanon? The occupation is not, to say the least, the only source of problems in the Middle East.

Another key issue is that of international military forces. If Israel implements the disengagement plan, then international involvement is not only possible, but desirable. Israel welcomes any involvement by the European Union and others in certain matters, especially the economic and humanitarian dimensions. Yet, many assume that whenever there is a conflict between two sides that do not trust each other, the best solution is to place an international military force between the parties to separate them and, by doing so, to solve the problem. Again, the Israeli-Lebanese arena serves as a valuable test case for this assumption.

The UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) consisted of 4,000 troops from various countries deployed along the border. From the very beginning, however, UNIFIL stated that it had no intention of fighting Hizballah. UNIFIL's official mandate was to restore security and peace along the border, but it was not willing to try to prevent aggression against Israel. In fact, in some cases, whether deliberately or not, UNIFIL has provided cover for activities against Israel.

A somewhat different picture emerges, however, when one compares UNIFIL's track record to that of another force deployed in the Golan Heights between Israel and Syria. There, the significantly smaller UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) monitors the ceasefire agreement between Israel and Syria. Whenever any minor violation by either side takes place, UNDOF knows how to coordinate and correct. It has thus, over the years, earned the respect and trust of both sides.

How does one explain the different outcomes of UNIFIL and UNDOF? The difference lies in the fact that, in order for an international force to be effective on the ground, two conditions must be met. First, there must be a real intent by the parties to maintain the ceasefire. If both sides want to keep the truce, then a third party should indeed be present

to help them to facilitate the procedures that can make it work. Yet, if one side wants to reduce the violence while the other side wants to escalate it, then no outside force can solve the problem. Second, and more important, someone must be accountable on both sides. But who is accountable in Lebanon? Who is accountable for what is occurring along the Israeli-Lebanese border? No one.

Accountability needs to be the focus in any analysis of why certain things do not work well in the Middle East. Perhaps not every institution or process has to be democratic in nature, but accountability is essential. There are too many places in the Middle East where everybody tries to avoid accountability. If there is no accountability on the other side, then there is no use in deploying an international force between the parties.

On what basis, then, should we believe that an international force between Israel and the Palestinians would be more effective than UNIFIL has been along the Israeli-Lebanese border? Based on the performance of the Palestinian security services over the past three to four years? Despite the fact that their mission is to prevent terrorism, in many cases these security forces have been actively involved in terrorism. For example, the most recent suicide attack on a bus in Jerusalem -- which killed eleven Israelis -- was coordinated by a colonel from the Palestinian security services in Bethlehem. He operated out of a new office that had been built by the British, who argued that we could improve the performance of the security services by building better offices for them. He collected one salary from the Palestinian security services and another salary from other groups, and he was responsible for the attack in Jerusalem. Fortunately, we managed to capture him. Unfortunately, we caught him only after the attack.

Another key question is, what does the Arab world want? At every conference of Arab nations, representatives say something like the following: "We in the Arab world understand the international expectations that certain changes occur in our societies. We understand that we need to implement some reforms and to be more open according to different initiatives. Unfortunately, however, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict prevents any reforms. As long as there is an Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we cannot deliver. Before anything else, then, the Israeli-Palestinian problem must be solved." Does this argument hold up? Is the poverty in Egypt a result of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Is the lack of human rights in Saudi Arabia a result of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Maybe the nineteen people who carried out the September 11 attacks were also merely trying to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict serves as the eternal scapegoat for Arab leaders, the perfect excuse for not instituting reforms. As long as the conflict continues, international pressure for reform is held back. After all, what contribution has the Arab world made to solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? The Arab states have initiated resolution after resolution in the UN, where they have an automatic majority that condemns Israel for everything. What other measures have they taken in the past four years?

My final questions concern two particularly sensitive issues. First, it has become universally accepted that the resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must be a two-state solution. In spite of Israel's own domestic rift on this issue, the Israeli government has also accepted the two-state view. Prime Minister Sharon publicly accepted the idea of establishing a Palestinian state more than a year ago, and the government officially recognized it by adopting the Roadmap as the main means of solving the conflict. Although I am not sure that the Palestinian leadership wants a Palestinian state, I know that the state of Israel recognizes that this part of the solution is unavoidable.

I do not question whether a Palestinian state should emerge. Yet, is there really enough space between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea for two viable states? Look at the Gaza Strip, for example. Gaza comprises 365 square kilometers. Currently, about 1.3 million Palestinians live there. That population will double in one generation. Does anyone truly believe that, in the year 2025, 2.5 million Gaza Palestinians will be able to improve their economic and cultural lives within this area? Has anyone made an assessment of the economic conditions necessary to make this possible? Some people speak of building a new seaport in Gaza. Does anyone know what environmental consequences would result if another large port were built just ten miles from the existing port in

Ashdod?

So I am not sure that a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a just solution or the only solution. If you look at Israel from the city of Beer Sheba to the north, and at the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, you will find that the average population per square kilometer is 586, the highest in the developed world. Are two states the only reasonable solution, then? Based on the history and origins of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, I am not sure that the only solution will be found within this framework alone. Perhaps other states in the region could contribute their share.

My last question concerns whether a peace agreement is always the best solution to conflict. After all, in solving certain problems, one can easily create others. Twenty-five years after Israel reached a peace agreement with Egypt, I have certain qualms about it. Israel has no claims against the Egyptians. Our peace agreement reflected the interests of both sides, and the Egyptians of course tried to maximize their interests. But in examining the results for the state of Israel, I am not sure that all of our expectations have been fulfilled.

First, we expected Egypt to be a bridge between Israel and the rest of the Arab world. Specifically, we expected that Egypt would facilitate the resumption of negotiations and peace agreements with other Arab states. Egypt has in no way fulfilled this expectation. Second, signing a peace agreement is meant to reduce the military threat to the signatory. Yet, Egypt, with massive military support from the United States, has maintained significant armed forces that, in many respects, cause Israel more concern than Syria's. What, then, were the long-term security benefits of the peace treaty?

Moreover, the Israeli-Egyptian agreement is not necessarily a sound precedent for other possible agreements. For example, in giving up 100 percent of Sinai, Israel believed that it could do so and still have a secure border with Egypt. Yet, there cannot be secure borders in the West Bank along the 1967 lines. So the precedent set by one agreement can cause problems in future agreements. The treaty with Egypt solved one problem, but created others. A few weeks ago I watched a television program on the History Channel that analyzed this treaty. The program examined the process from 1967 to 1979. Many U.S., Egyptian, and Israeli officials spoke, but I found that the person I agreed with most was also the only Palestinian who participated in the program. He said, "All I can say about the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement is that they forgot to talk about the Palestinian cause." That Palestinian was none other than Yasser Arafat. Israel did in fact make a mistake in the peace agreement with Egypt by ignoring the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is impossible to know how things would have turned out had this issue been addressed, but sometimes one's eagerness to sign a peace agreement for the sake of signing a peace agreement can create a mass of problems that will be even more difficult to untangle in the future.

These are a few of my many questions about the Israeli-Palestinian situation. For some, I think you can guess my answers; for others, I do not know the right answer. Whenever we discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is important not only to concentrate on the details of this or that plan, but also to analyze the core problems.

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