

Sharon Has Big Stake in Gaza Plan

by [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations.



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This week, President George W. Bush is scheduled to hold summit meetings with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. The heart of both meetings will likely contain discussions surrounding Sharon's plan for Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and from a symbolic four settlements in the West Bank.

A potential convergence of interests among Israel, the Palestinians, Egypt and the United States could make the Gaza withdrawal a reality.

Sharon sees several advantages to withdrawal. First, Israeli polls show at least 60-percent support for a unilateral pullout from Gaza. The Israeli public views this withdrawal as part of a broader strategy that includes the erection of a West Bank security barrier.

This strategy reflects the desire to obtain partition at a time when a lack of trust has made true partnership impossible. Indeed, the public senses that no military option exists to quell the intifada, and that Yasser Arafat has outflanked any prospect of reformers assuming Palestinian leadership.

Although Sharon rarely acknowledges Israel's demographic challenge, leaving Gaza would also improve - from Israel's point of view - the overall ratio between Jews and Palestinians in the territories.

Moreover, if Hamas grows stronger and continues launching rocket attacks against Israel, Sharon would prefer that Israel retaliate when it is internationally perceived as acting in self-defense, rather than as an occupier of Gaza.

From the political perspective, Sharon has declared that if Israel does not initiate action, other initiatives may crop up elsewhere. This would especially be so after U.S. elections when Sharon could be faced with either a John Kerry administration that he knows little about or a second-term Bush who would be bound by fewer political constraints (since he could not seek a third term).

It is also difficult to dismiss the wide speculation that Sharon views the Gaza withdrawal as a means of distracting domestic political attention from his possible indictment on charges of bribery.

For their part, Palestinian officials are nervous that Sharon may seek to trade Gaza for consolidated control over the West Bank. At the same time, those officials realize that the decision by Sharon - the historic architect of the settlement movement - to take down Gaza settlements shatters a taboo and creates a political precedent for his

successors that could facilitate more withdrawals.

While Palestinians remain suspicious of unilateralism, this Israeli withdrawal is, somewhat ironically, the first peace plan in years whose implementation is not contingent upon Palestinian performance.

For their part, Egyptian officials are uncomfortable with the growth of Hamas in Gaza at the expense of the Palestinian Authority, as Egypt does not want a "Muslim Brotherhood" state on its eastern border. Mubarak has made clear that he does not want responsibility for the Strip, but rather an advisory role for retraining PA security forces there.

Washington recognizes that Sharon is uniquely positioned to initiate the process of withdrawal. Moreover, it recognizes that Sharon is the first Israeli prime minister since the Oslo process willing to evacuate settlements before a final status agreement is imminent.

In terms of political benefit, if Bush could choreograph an Israeli exit from Gaza, it may help insulate him politically from campaign charges by Kerry that Bush has paid insufficient attention to the Israeli-Palestinian arena during his tenure.

Among the challenges facing the Gaza withdrawal is that Israel's killing of Hamas founder Sheik Ahmed Yassin has raised the prospect of more killings. The Sharon government believes that targeting the Hamas leadership may lead to a short-term increase in terror attacks, but over time would weaken the organization.

Sharon had been counting on winning a U.S. imprimatur for his idea, which would lay the basis for approval by the Israeli cabinet. He has called for an unprecedented party referendum of 200,000 rank-and-file members of his Likud Party, hoping that the result would reflect mainstream support for the Gaza exit and bolster support from smaller, more ideological party forums.

Some wonder if the net effect of Sharon's bid to win the backing of a hawkish Likud, combined with his desire to stave off an indictment, will lead him to escalate the status quo upon his return from the United States.

Needless to say, a ratcheting-up strategy would also pose profound risks for Israel. But Sharon is gambling his political future, and this could lead to unpredictable actions and consequences in the coming months.

David Makovsky is a senior fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at the Washington Institute.



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