The Gaza Withdrawal:

Implications for Israel and the Region

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Brief Analysis

In mid-April, President George W. Bush will be holding 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.

Advantages—and Disadvantages—of Withdrawal

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

Israel. Sharon sees several advantages to withdrawal. First, Israeli polls show at least 60 percent support for a unilateral pullout from Gaza. The Israeli public sees 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 Yasir 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 Qassam 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," other initiatives may crop up elsewhere, especially after U.S. elections when Sharon could be faced with either a Kerry administration that he knows little about, or a second-term Bush administration that would be bound by fewer political constraints (since it 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.

Palestinians. 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. Moreover, Palestinian officials believe the myriad of technicalities surrounding a Gaza handover could be so complex that Israel will have to "coordinate" even as Sharon pledges not to "negotiate" (Sharon charges that it is futile to negotiate with a Palestinian Authority [PA] that consistently makes demands without demonstrating performance). Palestinians say the net effect of such coordination could make the PA more relevant to Palestinians, especially if the international community injects funds into the new Gaza.

Egypt. Egyptian officials are uncomfortable with the growth of Hamas in Gaza at the expense of the PA, as Egypt does not want a "Muslim Brotherhood" state on its eastern border. Although an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza offers the potential to reverse Hamas's growing strength, Mubarak has made clear that he does not want responsibility for the Strip, but rather an advisory role for retraining PA security forces there. As Washington presses Egypt and other Arab states for greater political reform, support for the Gaza withdrawal would demonstrate that Cairo retains political utility for the United States in the region.

United States. 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 of presumptive Democratic nominee John Kerry alleging that Bush has paid insufficient attention to the Israeli-Palestinian arena during his tenure.

Challenges to the Gaza Withdrawal

Escalatory cycle with Hamas. Israel's killing of Hamas founder Shaykh 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—particularly after the Gaza pullout—and undercut the Hamas argument that an Israeli withdrawal is attributable to the group's use of violence. Critics disagree, saying it could lead to an escalation that could derail the pullout.

Monitoring entry places. Concerned about the risk of weapons flow into Gaza, Israel fears turning over sensitive points of entry such as the destroyed Gaza airport, an unbuilt seaport, and a road (known as the "Philadelphia Road") connecting the Egyptian border crossing with Gaza. However, Israel also seeks international confirmation that its control over Gaza has ended. Creative solutions will likely be required.

Sharon's Twin Dynamics

Sharon had been counting on winning a U.S. imprimatur for his idea, which would lay the basis for approval by the Israeli cabinet. At that point, 13 Knesset members, representing two right-wing parties, would likely bolt from his 68-member coalition, to be replaced by at least 14, and possibly 16, of the 19-member Labor faction. However, this sequence has already encountered a stumbling block. The leaked report that State Prosecutor Edna Arbel favors indicting Sharon has led the Labor representatives to temporarily pull back their support.

The net effect of Labor hesitancy is that Sharon must place a higher premium on retaining Likud parliamentary rebels. The number of Likud members actually bolting may represent fewer than 14 of the 40-member faction that has made grumbling noises. Although Sharon's rival and party heir-apparent, Binyamin Netanyahu, has pointedly avoided leading the rebels (while at the same time setting conditions for his support), Sharon is taking no chances. Last week he called for an unprecedented party referendum of 200,000 rank-and-file members, hoping that the result would reflect mainstream support for the Gaza exit and bolster support from smaller, more ideological party forums. Early Likud polling, however, suggests that the vote will be close.

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. Just before Passover, Sharon declared that the pledge he made to Washington not to harm Yasir Arafat was no longer valid, since Arafat enjoys less international acceptance than at the time of that promise. For Sharon, attacking Arafat—or Hizballah's Hassan Nasrallah, for that matter—may yield several benefits: 1) persuading hawkish Likud voters on the eve of the Gaza referendum that Sharon remains a hawk, 2) creating a public mood that would view the indictment of a sitting prime minister as irresponsible at such a perilous time, and 3) ensuring that if Sharon is forced to resign, the legacy of his nemeses would not outlast his own. Needless to say, a ratcheting-up strategy would also pose profound risks for Israel. However, Sharon is gambling his political future, and this could lead to unpredictable actions and consequences in the coming months.

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