

The Israeli Exodus from Gaza: A Moment of Truth for the International Community

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Brief Analysis

Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon arrives in Washington on April 14 to present President George W. Bush with his plan for "unilateral disengagement" from the Gaza Strip. Details of the plan still need to be nailed down, while the fate of Sharon (facing the possibility of bribery charges) and that of his ruling coalition (facing potential collapse if he moves forward with disengagement) are uncertain. Yet, one thing remains clear: unilateral disengagement from Gaza, which seems to enjoy broad public support in Israel, has altered the terms of the domestic political debate on how to move forward with the Palestinians. Indeed, the terms of the plan's implementation are likely to dominate Israeli public discourse for the foreseeable future. The key U.S. policy challenge will be finding a way to use the withdrawal as a means of getting the Arabs and Europeans to play a constructive and substantive role in Israeli-Palestinian conflict management, and as a means of reviving Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations.

The 'Plan'

Facing public pressure to confront ongoing Palestinian violence but lacking a Palestinian partner with which to achieve a "land for peace" deal, Sharon has opted to implement his disengagement plan, which he first unveiled in a December 2003 speech to the annual Herzliya Conference on Israeli national security. The plan consists of two elements: a unilateral withdrawal from Gaza and the construction of a security barrier in the West Bank. Both elements would ostensibly reduce friction with the Palestinians and create a new status quo that could be sustained indefinitely—at least until serious Israeli-Palestinian negotiations could be resumed. Construction of the security barrier began several months ago and is ongoing. A plan for unilateral withdrawal from Gaza is currently being formulated with a number of details remaining:

Extent of withdrawal. Sharon has signaled that he intends to withdraw completely from Gaza, although the Israeli military continues to argue for retention of the so-called "Philadelphia Road" along the Egypt-Gaza border, to enable the interdiction of arms smuggling from Sinai to Gaza.

Linkage to the West Bank. Sharon is seeking U.S. approval of his plan to dismantle four relatively small settlements in the northern West Bank, which would convey the message "Gaza first, not Gaza only" and retain a symbolic linkage to the Quartet Roadmap.

Status of Gaza settlers and settlements. Sharon has solicited U.S. approval for the resettlement of some Gaza settlers (there are 7,500 in all) to parts of the West Bank that Israel plans to retain. Details to be determined include possible compensation packages for the settlers. Over the weekend, Sharon announced that Israel would not raze houses and buildings belonging to the Gaza settlements (as it did the town of Yamit in 1982, prior to the return of Sinai to Egypt); instead, it plans to coordinate with international organizations that would take responsibility for the structures in return for compensation.

U.S. 'sweeteners.' In return for an Israeli withdrawal, Sharon is seeking U.S. recognition of Israel's permanent retention of several West bank settlement blocs (Ariel, Maaleh Adumim, Gush Etzion), U.S. endorsement of the West Bank separation barrier route, and a possible American statement rejecting the right of return for Palestinian refugees.

The political environment in Israel does not allow for definitive predictions concerning when Israel may leave Gaza. While the Israeli public and military (which will likely face mounting casualties as Palestinian groups intensify attacks in Gaza in the attempt to take credit for the withdrawal) incline toward an early timeframe, political and legal complexities (particularly regarding the uprooting and compensation of the settlers) militate toward later implementation.

Challenges

While the terms of unilateral disengagement from Gaza are yet to be determined, the challenges it poses are clear: Filling the power vacuum. The disintegration of the Palestinian Authority (PA) during more than three years of intifada, the steady rise in the popularity of Hamas, and the withdrawal of Israeli forces are likely to intensify the ongoing power struggle in Gaza between Fatah and Hamas, granting extremists greater latitude to attack Israel. The key elements of any effort to stabilize Gaza will be marginalizing PA president Yasir Arafat (who has encouraged chaos in the territories), managing rivalries among competing senior PA officials (e.g., Mohamed Dahlan and Jibril Rajoub), rebuilding the institutional capacities of a reformed PA in the social-welfare and internal security arenas, and reducing the popular appeal of Hamas by creating alternatives to its social-welfare network. There is also an important role to be played by outside actors: Egypt and Jordan (neither of which have an interest in the emergence of a Hamas-dominated entity in Gaza) could help keep the peace among contentious PA officials (Egypt is already playing such a role) and help reform, retrain, and reorganize PA security services; the Saudis could fund the reconstruction of Gaza's crumbling infrastructure; and the European Union could bolster social-welfare organizations that remain free of ties to extremist groups.

Border security: tunnels, crossing points, air and sea access. The Israeli withdrawal will remove the main impediment to ongoing arms smuggling from Egypt to the Gaza Strip. For this reason, it would be highly desirable to create security arrangements to prevent such smuggling. Although Egypt has indicated that it is willing to replace its civilian police with two battalions of border guards, it has proven unwilling or unable to prevent the smuggling of arms from Sinai to Gaza in recent years, and there is no reason to believe that Egyptian performance will improve once Israel leaves. More problematic is the matter of monitoring Gaza air and sea access, as it is not clear that a workable solution involving either Palestinians or third parties can be found. Absent an arrangement, Israel is likely to both prevent the reopening of the Dahaniyya airport and blockade the Gaza coast. (The continued routing of cargo through Israeli ports will preserve Israeli leverage over the Palestinians.)

Outlook

It is unrealistic to expect unilateral disengagement from Gaza to lead directly to a resumption of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations; it is, however, possible for Washington to use the Israeli withdrawal as a means of involving third parties to prevent a further deterioration in Gaza's socioeconomic and security conditions. The United States could

also use withdrawal to create conditions in Gaza that would be conducive to political change in the PA, confidence-building between the parties, and the development of conditions favorable to an eventual resumption of negotiations.

Much remains to be accomplished before Sharon can implement unilateral disengagement in the Gaza Strip. Implementation, however, will be a major test of the willingness of third parties—Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the European Union—to assume responsibility for ensuring the success of a move that, if it backfires, will only postpone, perhaps for years to come, efforts to restart negotiations. If it succeeds, implementation could help save lives on both sides and bring closer the day when negotiations may be resumed. Unilateral disengagement should thus be seen as an opportunity for the international community to do what is necessary, on a broader scale, to bring about peace between Israelis and Palestinians. For if the United States, the Arabs, and the Europeans cannot succeed in conflict management, there is no reason to believe that they will be able to succeed in peacemaking—or that they will have an opportunity to do so anytime soon.

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