

# Prospects of Israeli Disengagement:

## A View from the Opposition

by [Shimon Peres \(/experts/shimon-peres\)](#)

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Shimon Peres \(/experts/shimon-peres\)](#)

Shimon Peres was a leading Israeli statesman and Nobel laureate whose political career spanned seven decades and included service as president, prime minister, defense minister, and foreign minister of the State of Israel.



Brief Analysis

**O**n February 23, 2004, Shimon Peres addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Current chairman of Israel's Labor Party, Mr. Peres previously served as that country's prime minister, foreign minister, and defense minister, as well as in numerous other positions during a career that has spanned six decades. For his contributions to Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking, he received the 1994 Nobel Peace Prize along with the late Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

### **Pulling Out of Gaza**

In the past, Israelis were divided into right and left camps with regard to the issue of land. The right sought a greater Israel, while the left supported a territorial compromise. Today, however, most of the right has come to support territorial compromise, acknowledging that a two-state solution is the only solution.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's recent decision to begin withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, although correct, came a bit too late. Establishing Israeli settlements in Gaza was a political, moral, and military mistake. Gaza has long been plagued by numerous problems, including overcrowding and poverty. Israel's presence there did not help the locals; it only created more bitterness. Hence, the sooner Israel withdraws, the better.

The evacuation must be comprehensive. Sharon understands this reality, although it has not been easy for him to acknowledge it. At least two parties have already claimed that they will leave his coalition government if he acts upon his decision to pull out of Gaza. Indeed, if withdrawal does occur, it will bring the current configuration of the government to an end. Public opinion in Israel supports a pull-out, but this does not necessarily mean that the Knesset supports it as well.

### **War on Terror**

The world is no longer divided between East and West or North and South. Today, it is divided between terror and anti-terror. The United States is defending the lives, liberty, and future of all people. It will win this war on terror because terrorists have no message for the future.

For example, most terrorists wish to prevent people from leading anything besides traditional lives, which are dependent on agriculture. This is impossible, however, because agriculture constitutes only a marginal portion of the world's economy. Many terrorists also wish to continue the terrible tradition of discriminating against women. The greatest achievement of the twentieth century was the liberation of women. A society that does not liberate its women inevitably hurts its children. In the traditional way of life, many women marry young and produce ten children by the time they are twenty-six years old. More often than not, this way of life is utterly exhausting, leaving the women who lead it unable to invest in their children's future. Most of these sorts of families would benefit from having fewer children and greater investment in each child. Such changes are a necessary condition for progress.

Most terrorists are also led by unelected leaders, which is the greatest corruption of society. Fortunately, this way of life would not last very long if terrorists attempted to force people to accept it; much like the young generation in the latter days of the former Soviet Union, the young generation of today will not tolerate unelected leaders.

### **Israeli Domestic Politics**

Although the Labor Party will not join forces with the current government, it will support any efforts toward peace. Sharon will likely attempt to keep his government afloat for as long as he can. The ideology of this government is at odds with its most recently formulated policy, however, and one of the two will inevitably fall. If the policy of withdrawal from Gaza is indeed carried out, the government will be changed.

The Labor Party suffered a great defeat in the previous elections, and it must now rebuild itself in earnest. In Israel, elections are not won by parties—they are lost. Hence, the last election was not so much won by the Likud as lost by Labor. The Labor Party has a viable future, however, particularly given the fact that Israel is blessed with many young leaders. Nevertheless, one of the greatest flaws in Israeli politics is the overabundance of parties in the government. Therefore, the required thresholds for election to the Knesset should be raised. Moreover, there should be no religious parties, but rather religious individuals within various secular parties.

### **Democratization and Modernization**

The goal of the Bush administration's Greater Middle East Initiative is to democratize the region. Democratization is complicated, however—people do not become democrats overnight. Accordingly, the Middle East should be modernized first. For the sake of the region's Muslims in general, and the Palestinians in particular, all parties should undertake economic modernization. A modern economy leads to democracy because it is impossible for a truly modern economy to survive under an authoritarian government.

The United States and Europe can contribute greatly to the advancement of the region not by demanding democracy, but rather by encouraging the adoption of the rules and regulations of modern economies. The potential benefits of such modernization can already be seen in China and India. In order to facilitate this process, the United States and Europe should combine forces and offer incentives that do not necessarily require large financial or military investments. One potent example of this phenomenon is the case of Cyprus, where the prospect of European Union (EU) membership is leading to the resolution of a longstanding conflict. Similarly, the EU could offer to extend membership to the Palestinians and the Israelis if they agree to peace. Such an initiative would expand the EU's already-burgeoning involvement in the Mediterranean.

The war in Iraq has carried the winds of change to the Middle East. Although changes were brought about by force of arms in Iraq, they have occurred by force of reason in other countries. Positive changes have been seen in Libya, Sudan, and Algeria, while Jordan is undergoing modernization and Cyprus is headed toward unification. Given these signs of progress, the new map of the Middle East should be drawn with Qualified Industrial Zones instead of fortresses and barriers.

### **The Peace Process**

Israelis and Palestinians need each other if they are to improve the current situation. The Palestinians need Israel's help in fighting terrorism, and Israel needs the Palestinians' understanding in order to solve the problem of settlements. Neither side has much time. The Palestinians face the prospect that the international community will not tolerate terrorism for much longer, with the result that they may lose the foreign aid on which they depend. For its part, Israel faces a tight demographic calendar; if the country fails to make key decisions soon, it will lose its Jewish majority.

Only Israelis and Palestinians can make these decisions. Although Israel must continue to fight terrorism, it should negotiate at the same time; negotiation is a weapon against terrorism, one that provides hope in the face of violence.

Meanwhile, the United States should tell both parties that the borders they agree on will be permanent, not transitional. Palestinians and Israelis alike are nervous about this issue, and such anxiety can be remedied only by security. Terms such as "progress," "hope," and "vision" should be used in place of "retreat" and "withdrawal."

Winston Churchill once said that optimists see opportunity in every risk while pessimists see risk in every opportunity. In the case of Middle East peacemaking, it is far better to see the opportunity.

*This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Ben Thein.* ❖

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