

Will Israel Withdraw from Gaza?

A Labor Perspective

Feb 27, 2004



Brief Analysis

The Israeli government must base its policies on a simple but important vision: that of Israel as a democratic, Jewish state. Although Israel will continue to have a large Muslim minority, it must be a Jewish state, one that can live peacefully alongside a Palestinian state. Three simultaneous steps are needed to realize this vision:

1. **Fight terrorism.** For many years, Israel was forced to face terrorism alone. Today, however, terrorism has become a problem that the entire Western world must confront. This problem is much more complicated than it seems at first glance, and much effort will be needed to solve it. Moreover, Israel must remember that fighting terrorism is not a panacea; the other policies in this troika must be carried out at the same time.
2. **Talk to the Palestinians.** During the Israeli national elections of 2001, the country was swept up by a profoundly mistaken slogan, "Let the IDF win." Military force is not enough to defeat terrorism, much less to ensure Israel's future as a democratic, Jewish state. At the same time that the IDF fights terrorism, Israel must find a way to talk to the Palestinians, and vice versa. True progress can only be made at the negotiation table. Fortunately, some Palestinian leaders—the new guard rather than Yasir Arafat—understand that they cannot achieve anything through terrorism.
3. **Separate.** Israelis and Palestinians need to be separated by a fence. Such a measure will lead to a two-state solution. Without separation, Palestinians will become second-class citizens while the vision of a democratic Jewish state will disintegrate. Israel needs a Palestinian state just as much as the Palestinians do—its identity and security are dependent on this outcome.

Unilateral Withdrawal?

Israel should withdraw completely from the Gaza Strip, civilians and military forces alike. For the first time, an Israeli prime minister has stated that Israel should not remain in Gaza; not even former prime minister Yitzhak Rabin dared to say that. Indeed, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has talked about removing settlements as well as creating a Palestinian state, two points that did not appear in the Oslo Accords.

Although these are positive developments, it must be remembered that withdrawal can never be truly unilateral. Security cannot be achieved through withdrawal without the agreement of the other side. In fact, leaving Gaza in an entirely unilateral fashion could lead to unexpected and undesirable outcomes. Without an agreement on withdrawal terms, the Palestinians might choose to depict Israel's departure as a sign of weakness. They could even invite the world's press to celebrate their "victory" as Israel withdraws its forces—a scene that could easily get out of hand and force Israel to respond (e.g., if Palestinians attacked exiting soldiers). Failure to reach an agreement of some sort would also put an end to the checkpoints along the Egyptian border once Israeli forces were withdrawn. As a result, Palestinians would be able to freely smuggle weapons into Gaza almost immediately, including rockets capable of reaching Israeli towns. This, too, would force Israel to retaliate. Hence, if Sharon has already offered to negotiate with the United States regarding a unilateral pullback, why not coordinate the details of this hand-over with the

Palestinians?

The Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000 was a good strategic decision. Yet, it was carried out in a very poor manner. As a result, Hizballah has been able to use the Shebaa Farms issue as an excuse to keep its military capabilities. Israel must consider this fact as it makes decisions regarding unilateral withdrawal from Gaza.

Labor's Stance

If Prime Minister Sharon chooses to dismantle settlements in the Gaza Strip, he will receive Labor's support in the Knesset. Problems will arise, however, if dismantling these settlements is the only step he is willing to take. If Sharon declares that the Gaza settlements are only the beginning, and if Labor is convinced that he will in fact continue dismantling settlements, then the party will give him its full support and, perhaps, join his government. If Sharon seems hesitant to continue the process, Labor will not join the government because such hesitance would be against the vision of a democratic, Jewish Israel. Withdrawing from Gaza is a good decision, but it cannot by itself unify the government.

The Labor Party has faced a leadership crisis ever since Prime Minister Rabin was assassinated in November 1995. Labor has the right ideas in both the strategic arena and the socioeconomic realm. For the moment, however, the party lacks a leader who can take the country out of its current crisis. Moreover, Israeli politics needs a solid center formed by Labor, Likud, and Shinui, with some minute fraction of other, smaller parties. Such a core would prevent Israel from falling into radicalism on either the right or the left.

Next Steps in the Peace Process

All parties must endeavor to find moderate Palestinian leaders who have the authority and the will to conduct peace negotiations. The ideas presented in the unofficial Geneva Accord initiative have much merit, but the conflict cannot be solved by people who have no governmental authority or responsibility. Such individuals can suggest most any course of action they like without thinking about the consequences. Indeed, the Israelis involved in the Geneva negotiations made too many concessions. For example, they agreed to the Palestinian right of return to Israel, which is untenable. On this point, the initiative previously offered by Ami Ayalon and Sari Nusseibeh—who support Palestinian return to a new Palestinian state, not to Israel—is much more appropriate than the Geneva Accord.

The peace process also requires the support of an international umbrella. The only relevant plan currently being floated outside the Israeli-Palestinian arena is the Quartet's Roadmap, the cornerstone of which is a two-state solution. Although Israeli popular opinion has swung dramatically to the right since September 2000, the majority of Israelis still believe in a permanent two-state solution. The only way to achieve such a solution, however, is via coordination with the Palestinians, not wholly unilateral steps.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Ben Thein.

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