

# Assessing Sharon's Gaza Settlement Evacuation Proposal

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

Feb 9, 2004

## 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.



## Brief Analysis

Less than a year ago, Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon rejected the idea of a unilateral pullback from Gaza, telling Labor Party leader Amram Mitzna that isolated settlements such as Netzarim were equal to Tel Aviv in his eyes. Last week, however, Sharon—a leading architect of Israel's settlement movement—declared his intention to authorize plans for a unilateral evacuation of at least seventeen of the twenty Israeli settlements in Gaza. Although some remain unsure whether the prime minister will follow through on this pledge, skepticism regarding Sharon's intentions should be balanced by other considerations.

## Domestic and International Reactions

Israeli public support for unilateral action has picked up steam over the past several months amid growing awareness of demographic trends. Specifically, many commentators (including Sharon's own deputy, Ehud Olmert) have asserted that, within a decade, Jews will no longer constitute the majority population in the area (i.e., Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza combined). The September 2003 resignation of Palestinian prime minister Mahmoud Abbas was a turning point as well, causing many Israelis to lose hope that Palestinian reformers would outflank Yasir Arafat. That development also constituted an admission that Palestinian violence could not be quelled and that a sustained war of attrition is likely.

Sharon's announcement has generated much interest even while leaving many questions open. The declaration was well received by UN secretary-general Kofi Annan, who called it a "welcome development." It was initially welcomed by Palestinian prime minister Ahmed Qurei as well, who stated that any evacuation of settlements is good news. Yet, he subsequently qualified his remarks by stating that Israel must withdraw from the West Bank, too. Predictably, Arafat dismissed Sharon's declaration as inconsequential.

Israeli domestic support for the plan was immediate. According to a Dahaf poll taken just after Sharon's statement, his proposal was supported by 59 percent of Israelis, who have generally favored the idea of removing the approximately 7,500 Israeli settlers living in Gaza, an area populated by 1.1 million Palestinians. Traditionally, the question of withdrawal from Gaza has been raised in the context of a possible peace agreement. This time, however, the Israeli public voiced support for unilateral evacuation. Hence, Sharon's comments have enabled him to assert himself immediately in shaping the Israeli national political agenda, halting a long slide in his approval ratings. According to various Gallup polls, his approval rating stood at 53 percent after the war in Iraq and plunged to a low of

33 percent the week before his withdrawal remarks. Mere days after these remarks, however, his rating climbed to 39 percent. Moreover, many Israelis believe that Sharon is uniquely positioned to evacuate settlements, given his stature as a leader of the settlement movement.

Even the liberal Israeli daily Ha'aretz, often a fierce critic of Sharon, has called on the world to support the proposal (albeit while expressing certain reservations). For example, an editorial published today stated the following:

"The removal of Israeli civilians and soldiers from densely crowded, hostile districts in Gaza will bring about a welcome saving of human life and state resources. Contradicting the message of Zionist prophets of doom, the move would prove that there is still cause for hope that Israel can rectify the historic mistake that threatens its vitality. By withdrawing from the Gaza Strip, Israel will prove that it has the strength and courage to dismantle settlements."

Curiously, critics of the proposal have come from both ends of the Israeli political spectrum. Supporters of the settler movement charge that Sharon is primarily concerned with political survival, making a bold statement on settlements in order to divert public attention from an ongoing investigation of his participation in a bribery scandal (the investigation has already led to the indictment of an Israeli real estate developer on charges of paying \$700,000 to Sharon's son Gilad in the hope of gaining the prime minister's influence in two land deals). According to this view, Sharon's statement was made in the hope of influencing Israelis to gloss over the scandal in light of the fact that a potential evacuation of Gaza settlements is hanging in the balance. Indeed, Zvi Hendel, a Gaza settler and deputy minister in Sharon's government, denounced the prime minister's remarks in these terms, alleging that "the depth of the uprooting [of Gaza settlements] is determined by the depth of the [scandal] investigation."

These critics are joined by skeptics who are in favor of evacuating Gaza settlements but question whether Sharon will implement his pledge. Although they acknowledge that it will be difficult to "put the genie back in the bottle" in light of Sharon's unambiguous statement, they also argue that his plans could be derailed by anything from terrorist attacks to a lack of coalition support. Still others speculate that Sharon may be yielding Gaza in the short term in order to hold on to the West Bank for the foreseeable future. This concern was deepened by Sharon's claim that it may take up to two years to implement a Gaza evacuation. It is unclear whether Sharon made this claim as a kind of bargaining gesture toward the United States; in any case, Washington may well wonder whether the prime minister is attempting to postpone dealing with the West Bank.

The State Department's public reaction to the proposal has thus far been tepid. The White House's public reaction has been more upbeat, with spokesman Scott McClellan calling it "encouraging that Israel is considering bold steps to reduce tensions between Israelis and Palestinians." Privately, however, major questions remain. Sharon hopes to visit the White House in the coming weeks. The likelihood of such an invitation is implicitly linked to Sharon's ability to persuade three senior U.S. officials—Stephen Hadley and Elliot Abrams from the National Security Council and William Burns from the State Department, all of whom will be visiting Jerusalem next week—that his proposal for evacuating settlements is not only sincere, but also well planned. Specifically, Washington is likely to seek assurances that an Israeli evacuation will not create a vacuum in the area and that "Gaza First" is not a recipe for retaining virtually all of the West Bank. Accordingly, Sharon must address these two particularly critical issues.

#### Politically Viable?

Sharon's domestic political situation is somewhat complex. Within the prime minister's governing coalition, opposition to his idea has arisen from two right-wing parties and from within his own Likud Party. Currently, his coalition comprises 68 of the 120 members of the Knesset. If Sharon implements his pledge, however, two pro-settler parties—the National Religious Party (NRP) and the National Union (NU) Party—would likely bolt, thus depriving the prime minister of his 61-member majority. Indeed, NRP leader Effi Eitam has stated that his party will leave Sharon's government if any such measure passes the cabinet. For the time being, however, neither NRP nor

NU is eager to leave the government. The Israeli right no doubt remembers what happened after right-wing parties left two past Likud-dominated governments over mild peace concessions not to their liking; in both instances, subsequent elections brought their Labor rivals to power. They have pledged not to make the same mistake again.

Opposition has also come from within Likud. At least eight (and possibly as many as fourteen) members of Sharon's 40-member Likud faction oppose his evacuation plan. These eight individuals recently signed a public letter to Sharon voicing their opposition. At the same time, Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz and Sharon deputy Olmert have voiced support for the move, and the prime minister is holding consultations with other cabinet members in order to marshal their support. Sharon has not ruled out holding a national referendum on the issue, a move that he could use to mobilize a supportive public and thus insulate himself against opposition from within his party.

Sharon has also announced that he will seek to configure a new government if there are defections within his cabinet. This would entail cooperation with the Labor Party. In the wake of Sharon's evacuation proposal, Labor leader Shimon Peres pledged a "safety net" for Likud in the Knesset, meaning, at a minimum, that Labor would cooperate with Likud so that the current coalition does not lose its majority over the withdrawal issue. Moreover, many are predicting Labor's return to a "national unity" government of the sort seen in 2001-2002. (Some even charge that Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom's opposition to Sharon's proposal is rooted in fears that he would lose out to Peres as foreign minister in a post-evacuation cabinet reshuffle.)

In addition to the effect that settlement evacuation could have on the composition of Sharon's coalition, some have questioned whether the prime minister's proposal would reinforce the view that "terror pays," emboldening rejectionists to continue employing tactics such as suicide bombings. In response, Sharon could well argue that Palestinian suicide bombers have been unable to infiltrate Israel from Gaza since the bolstering of the Gaza security fence in early 2001. He could also claim that, by retaining settlements in Gaza, Israel would play into the hands of rejectionists, since they may view time as their ally in the demographic war with Israel. On the domestic front, Sharon might look for a way to demonstrate that evacuating settlements would not equal weakness. And, as mentioned previously, there have been reports that he seeks to use a Gaza evacuation to gain U.S. support for either retaining West Bank settlement blocs/clusters near the pre-1967 boundaries, permitting Gaza settlers to relocate there, or both.

Some have also questioned whether Sharon's proposal would bolster Hamas at the Palestinian Authority's expense. Accordingly, Israel, the United States, and even Prime Minister Qurei may have an interest in coordinated unilateralism (brokered by Washington), which could help ensure a smooth transition of authority. If such an approach were adopted, Israel would need to decide whether to maintain its security authority over Gaza even as it evacuated the settlements. Otherwise, Israel would need to identify an alternative authority to fill the security vacuum. Indeed, this is a major issue with far-reaching consequences. Early signs indicate that Israel would in fact want to retain such authority. In this context, it is noteworthy that Qurei has suddenly changed his policy and called for a meeting with Sharon later this month; aides to the two leaders are expected to hold talks in the coming days to prepare for this meeting.

#### Operationally Viable?

Sharon has tasked his new national security advisor, Maj. Gen. Giora Eiland, with organizing an interministerial and military team to flesh out the evacuation idea. Indeed, the government will need to address a wide range of questions in the coming weeks. For example, apart from the issues addressed above, Sharon must clarify his implication that Israel will not evacuate three of the settlements adjoining Gaza's northeast border with Israel (most likely Aili Sinai, Dugit, and Nisanit), which have a miniscule number of settlers. At the same time, three West Bank settlements are slated for evacuation, apparently in the Jenin area, but the names of the specific settlements to be evacuated have not been officially announced.

Questions also surround the eventual destination of relocated Gaza settlers and the process of relocation itself. Israeli infrastructure minister Yosef Paritzky told Sharon that more than 13,000 empty apartments in the Negev Desert could be used to house the 7,500 settlers who would be evacuated from Gaza. Yet, who would pay for their relocation? Would Sharon seek to demolish homes as he did when he spearheaded Israel's pullout from the Sinai settlement of Yamit? Or would he evacuate the settlers and leave the dwellings intact? How would he react if Hamas sought to ensure that the evacuation occurred under fire? Indeed, there are many questions left to be answered regarding all aspects of the evacuation proposal.

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

Policy #442

---

## RECOMMENDED

---

### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



### ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

#### [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

## TOPICS

Peace Process (/policy-analysis/peace-process)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)