

Israel and the Palestinians: An End-of-Year Assessment (Part II)

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Brief Analysis

Although neither the Israeli mainstream nor the Palestinian public has accepted the Geneva Accord, its principles have had a profound effect on both societies. For the Palestinians, core existential issues are now subject to debate in an unprecedented way. For example, as one Fatah official pointed out, Palestinians have been incapable of raising the issue of refugees since at least 1965 because it was taboo. Today, however, this issue is being debated from campus to campus and village to village. The fact that the public does not necessarily support the Accord's details regarding refugees is less important than the conditioning process now underway—a process that never took place at Oslo.

An equally significant change has occurred on the Israeli side. Although the government and public reject the Accord, its creation has spurred them to seek out an appropriate alternative strategy. In remarks published in a recent edition of *Yediot Aharonot*, Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert explicitly addressed the issue of demographics. Highlighting the fact that Jews will be a minority between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea within ten years, he asserted that partition and withdrawal from most of the occupied territories are necessary in order to maintain the Jewish, democratic character of Israel. More recently, in a speech in Herzliya, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon offered remarks that were akin to Olmert's, albeit not nearly as forthcoming. Despite his status as one of the chief architects of the settler movement, Sharon signaled that some of the settlements must be taken down. His actual speech—one of many drafts—did not include what many had expected: the names of particular settlements from which Israel would withdraw, such as those beyond the West Bank blocs and those in Gaza. Nevertheless, his remarks indicated a new direction. Sharon's Herzliya speech—coupled with the Geneva Accord, the One Voice initiative, and the principles outlined by Ami Ayalon and Sari Nusseibeh—is creating a new dynamic of discussion among Israelis and Palestinians. These discussions, even if they do not translate to a new reality on the ground in the near future, do portend something significant in the long run.

New Convergence, Persistent Gaps

Sharon clearly stated that, although he will move unilaterally if left with no choice, his preference is to negotiate. Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei wants to negotiate as well. The two leaders may indeed be able to reach an

agreement; whether they do so will depend on several factors.

On the one hand, the two sides have converged in their definition of ceasefire, agreeing that it requires the Palestinians to halt attacks on Israelis both inside and outside of the Green Line, with the Israelis in turn halting targeted killings and arrests. They have also converged in their proposed means of enforcing such a ceasefire, although they use different terminology to describe these means. While the Israelis call for the dismantling of the terrorist infrastructure, the Palestinians seek to "end chaos," which they acknowledge can be accomplished by shutting down the Qassam rocket workshops, the bombmaking labs, and the tunnels used for smuggling arms and explosives.

On the other hand, there may be a gap between how far the Palestinians will go to end the chaos and Israel's desire to see that groups such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad are stripped of their capacity to wage terror. Moreover, in order to take action against terrorism, Prime Minister Qurei has indicated that all checkpoints must be lifted and all settlement activity frozen. Israel's willingness to abandon all checkpoints is unclear, but Sharon did speak of doing so, in addition to his unprecedented declaration that there would be no further outward expansion of settlements. Indeed, the latter declaration may prove to be crucial, as land is the most important issue for the Palestinians. Finally, the two sides remain divided over what Israel calls its security fence. Sharon has declared that construction will be accelerated, but Qurei is sure to demand some kind of freeze or limitation.

In truth, the gaps between the two sides are bridgeable. The real question remains whether Yasir Arafat will go along with an agreement that bridges those gaps. Anyone who has watched or dealt with Arafat over the years knows that he never closes a door or forecloses an option. When the Palestinian Authority does decide that it must confront Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, will Arafat permit such action or block it?

Unilateral Scenarios

If an agreement cannot be reached—or, more likely, cannot be sustained over the long term—then Israel will take a unilateral approach, as indicated in Sharon's Herzliya speech. Although unilateralism is often regarded as inherently bad, it could in fact prove useful in a situation in which the Palestinians lack the will or ability to deal with the security situation. Under such a scenario, the Israelis would have two choices. The first is a siege—that is, a massive Israeli presence in the territories, with even more checkpoints, making it impossible for Palestinians to go about their daily lives and guaranteeing their enduring hostility. This choice would be bad for Israelis as well, not least because it precludes a two-state solution. As indicated previously, glaring demographic trends have led Israel to acknowledge its increased stake in such a solution.

The alternative to siege is the Israeli security barrier. If Israel withdrew from outlying settlements and removed checkpoints, both parties would be better off than they would be in a siege situation, even if the former scenario gives Palestinians control of 75 to 80 percent of the West Bank. Under such circumstances, the environment would change dramatically for the Palestinians.

Negotiation remains the ideal route. Yet, if unilateral action does prove necessary, it could pave the way for future negotiations. Under such a scenario, the United States could employ creative diplomacy to advance a policy of parallel unilateralism: that is, working with the Israelis to determine a route for the separation barrier that ensures security while minimizing Palestinian hardship; and simultaneously helping the Palestinians take responsibility for the evacuated areas. Washington could also coordinate large-scale international investment in the West Bank and Gaza. As long as unilateralism is not the end of the road, it can, over time, contribute to the ultimate goal of achieving peace.

The debate regarding the separation barrier should not focus on whether it will be built, but rather on where it will be built. If the barrier is built on the western side of the West Bank, then it can be viewed as an acceptable buffer that

is necessary for security. If, however, Israel builds a fence on the eastern side of the West Bank as well, then it will become an encirclement fence. In this scenario, the fence will be seen as a political move rather than a security measure. Ultimately, partition is inevitable; even if it is born of coordinated, unilateral steps, it may eventually provide the basis for the coexistence of two states.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Anna Robinowitz.

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