

Sharon and Buffer Zones

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Brief Analysis

Recriminations between Israelis and Palestinians on whether Israel sufficiently eased restrictions yesterday on the movement of Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasir Arafat within Ramallah (in return for the arrest of three Palestinians involved in the killing of an Israeli cabinet minister) have overshadowed Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's declaration on Thursday to establish buffer zones in the West Bank.

In fact, during secret meetings between top Israeli and Palestinian security and economic officials last week, Israel offered—among other things—to lift roadblocks around some Palestinian areas in order to ease the humanitarian situation for the Palestinian public. The buffer zone idea seemed clearly designed as an alternative method to ensure Israeli security if roadblocks are in fact lifted.

An agreement on easing the situation on the ground was reached on the eve of both the Jewish festival of Purim and the Muslim holiday of Id al-Adha, but it remains unclear whether it will be activated. In the wake of Israel's cabinet decision on Sunday to remove tanks from Arafat's compound and not interfere with his movements within the city, while still confining him to Ramallah, the Palestinians have called off planned security cooperation meetings. However, it is clear that the buffer zone idea marks a change of policy for Sharon.

Sharon's Shift and Risk

The idea of buffer zones is an effort by Sharon to balance three different needs: the safety of Israeli citizens inside sovereign Israel (known as the Green Line, pre-1967 war borders); the safety of Israeli settlers inside the West Bank; and humanitarian conditions for Palestinians who have roadblocks surrounding their cities. Since the buffer zones are to be located close to the Green Line—albeit inside the West Bank—the move poses an ideological change for Sharon. The Israeli prime minister had traditionally opposed the idea of buffer zones, fearing it would be seen as a first step in legitimizing the establishment of an Israel-Palestine border close to the 1967 lines. This policy shift by Sharon is matched by a political risk—namely, if settlers prove to be more vulnerable as a result and are killed in substantial numbers, Sharon's position among the Israeli right is likely to falter further vis-a-vis his rivalry with Binyamin Netanyahu for leadership of the Likud party. In the latest polls, Sharon already trails Netanyahu among right-wing voters by a considerable 48 percent to 33 percent margin.

Defining Buffer Zones

Israeli military sources say they will be moving some of their troops surrounding Palestinian cities to buffer zones that will run parallel (a few kilometers eastward) to the current Green Line dividing sovereign Israel from the West Bank. The buffer area will not establish a line per se, but will roughly correspond to Route 446, which is the large West Bank road closest to the Green Line. The area will consist of a patchwork of measures ranging from mobile patrols, roadblocks, electronic sensors, and drones designed collectively to insulate the Israeli urban areas inside the Green Line from the infiltration of suicide bombers and other terrorists. Jerusalem presents its own problems, and in the southern part of the West Bank the buffer is supposed to run fairly close to the Green Line. (It should be pointed out that unlike centers of violence in the northern part of the territories, Bethlehem and Hebron have been relatively, although not completely, quiet.)

Sharon's Rationale for Buffers

The idea for "security separation" was raised by Shin Bet chief Avi Dichter in an appearance before the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee two weeks ago, as a measure he and other security officials have been working on. It is cautiously supported by the Israel Defense Forces. Sharon reversed his opposition to the idea for a number of reasons.

First, a variety of other methods to stop the violence had been tried, but to no avail. Furthermore, the recently high level of Palestinian violence has created Israeli public clamor for such measures. In specific areas where Israelis and Palestinians live close to each other around the Green Line and where violence has proliferated, Israeli citizens have demanded a fence. Such fences are currently being established between Kfar Saba and Kalkilya, as well as around the Tulkarm area.

Last month, the unremitting violence in Jerusalem forced Sharon to establish barriers between the West Bank and Jerusalem. Gaza has been enclosed by a fence, and, as a result, there has been little infiltration into Israel from there. The West Bank is much more difficult to enclose due to the proliferation of settlements, the openness of a mixed population in Jerusalem, the presence of Israeli Arabs, and the fragile nature of the 144 settlements.

Second, Sharon is aware that disengagement from the Palestinian areas has strong electoral appeal. According to a Ma'ariv poll taken on February 15, a solid 66 percent of the public supports it. Adherents cross party lines, partly due to the fact that the term "disengagement" (or "separation") has different meanings to different people. Those on the Israeli left consider the term to mean both disengagement from virtually the entire West Bank and dismantlement of most settlements; those at the other end of the Israeli political spectrum (such as Interior Security Minister Uzi Landau) consider the same term to mean the besieging of Palestinian cities. There are modified conceptions on each side, the most prominent being the centrist idea put forward by the Council for Peace and Security, a group of hundreds of ex-generals and army officers. This group calls for disengaging from most isolated settlements, while retaining settlement blocs and security areas such as the Jordan Valley.

Dichter's idea, which Sharon has now publicly embraced, involves setting up a "security separation" buffer close to the Green Line, but not exactly on it due to the political resonance of such a delineation. The Dichter approach is to both avoid encircling Palestinian cities as Landau favors, and avoid the dismantling of settlements favored by the left.

Third, during his trip to Washington, Sharon met with a Bush administration official who wanted him to take more humanitarian actions for the sake of the Palestinian public, in the hope of preventing the Palestinians from identifying further with extremists. This would mean establishing a different sort of defense other than encircling Palestinian cities.

Fourth, the approach fits Sharon's vision of future tension with the Palestinians. His Thursday night message did not please too many Israelis: he told the Israeli left that there was no real peace option now, and he told the Israeli right

that there was no full-blown war option either. As a result, both sides were disappointed. Rather, Sharon discussed the issue in terms of a protracted battle of attrition inside the West Bank.

In this context, Sharon views a buffer as providing the best prospect of insulation for the overwhelming majority of the Israeli public that lives inside the Green Line. If physically secure, the buffer zones will also insulate Sharon politically, he hopes. Sharon wants Israeli society to retain its capacity to withstand a long period of attrition inside the West Bank, and he hopes that if Israelis living inside Israel proper are out of harm's way, the net effect will be that they will remain committed to his course of action. But with violence everywhere, support for the prime minister has plummeted from a stratospheric 75 percent during the latter half of 2001, to Friday's poll of 49 percent.

Viable?

As Sharon balances three forces—Israelis within the Green Line, settlers, and the Palestinian public—the question remains whether the buffer zones will be viable in helping all three. Otherwise, it will not work.

Israeli civilians inside the Green Line. Avoiding attacks inside Israel could serve not just Sharon's interests, but also Arafat's. A stream of foreign visitors have told Arafat that such attacks raise the specter that the Palestinians want to destroy Israel. Therefore, it is not coincidental that Fatah Tanzim head Marwan Barghouti has publicly declared in recent days that his group is out to attack soldiers and settlers in the West Bank, not Israelis inside the Green Line. (This comes despite both U.S. and Israeli officials saying that ample evidence points to Barghouti's personal responsibility for an attack last month against Bat Mitzva celebrants inside Israel proper.) But even if the Palestinians are genuine in their motives, it remains unclear whether they will want to impose their will on Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

Settlers. Even if Israelis inside the Green Line are out of play, Israeli-Palestinian strain inside the West Bank is likely to continue. As odd bedfellows, settlers and Palestinians have voiced concerns about Sharon's approach. The settlers fear that if the Palestinian cities were opened up, it would enable the Palestinians to plot ambushes on West Bank roads. Settlers point to a pattern over the last year and a half in which roadblocks are often lifted in the West Bank as an Israeli gesture to the Palestinians, immediately followed by a shooting spree claiming Israeli lives. Clearly, the settlers believe it is far more viable to surround three big cities like Jenin, Nablus, and Ramallah, than to devote greater military effort in protecting 144 settlements (albeit on a fraction of the land but dispersed—some in isolated pockets) and patrolling a myriad of West Bank roads.

Palestinians. The Palestinian public is concerned that due to the clout of the settlers, the net effect of the new policy will not be to ease travel between Palestinian urban areas. Rather, they believe that the buffer zones will add a new layer of security checks that will make mobility more difficult than it is today.

Sharon's hope of squaring the circle is a drop in West Bank violence, which would ease the contradictory tension in a policy designed to satisfy both the Palestinians and the settlers—not to mention Israeli civilians inside the Green Line. Invariably, some Palestinian extremists may seek to test this policy in order to force Sharon to choose.

David Makovsky is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute.

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