

Limited-Term Agreements Vs. Unilateral Disengagement

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The escalation of violence in the conflict between the Palestinians and Israel has made unilateral disengagement increasingly appealing to many Israelis, even if support for the idea diminishes when concrete implications on the territorial concessions involved are spelled out. There are also psychological factors that help promote the idea. Israelis feel “fed up” with the Palestinians: they want nothing from them, nor any contact with them. Consequently, there is strong appeal to a proposal that requires nothing of the Palestinian side. A more thorough examination of the advantages and disadvantages of unilateral disengagement versus a limited agreement based on the same territorial contours, however, reveals that there are strong, inherent advantages to a partial agreement. Therefore, the reluctance to engage in new attempts to reach an agreement with the Palestinians must be overcome, notwithstanding any fundamental doubt as to the feasibility of reaching such an agreement.

Since the term “unilateral disengagement” has a variety of meanings, (see *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 4, No. 3), the ideas presented here must be defined prior to any

examination of strengths and weaknesses. This article only considers only those unilateral disengagement plans that involve changes in the territorial reality — that is, Israeli withdrawal from certain areas of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in order to create lines that are more easily defended, and that allow for separation between Israelis and Palestinians. Within this type of framework, isolated settlements not part of settlement blocs would be dismantled, since they prevent the possibility of redeploying along these new lines.

Clearly, then, this article does not address the notion of security disengagement along the Green Line, including Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s proposal of buffer zones designed to improve the defense of residents within Israel proper without any territorial change whatsoever. Nor does this article consider the concept of total unilateral disengagement within the territories while preserving the existing settlement map. Neither of these options offers real disengagement from the Palestinians; the first proposal offers at best a partial solution, as it leaves the settlements unprotected, while the second depends on an entirely unworkable

map that perpetuates both control over the Palestinians and territorial intermingling of Palestinians and Israelis.

The underlying assumption is that in implementing a unilateral disengagement, Israel attempts to create a more pragmatic reality for itself, without being contingent upon Palestinian approval or cooperation. Under such circumstances, however, the Palestinians would be especially motivated to demonstrate to Israel that it cannot simply choose a solution that it finds convenient and impose it upon them. They might also conclude that the Israeli withdrawal from certain areas was thanks to the violent pressure they had exerted. If so, they would likely conclude that such pressure should be maintained until all Palestinian national goals are attained (the ‘Lebanon paradigm’). It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that implementing a unilateral disengagement would not bring an end to the violence; rather, it is more likely that disengagement would have to be carried out under fire. It is also possible that terrorist organizations would make a concerted effort to attack exactly those areas where the disengagement had been implemented, in order to prove that the concept is flawed. The

continuation of violence and its potential escalation would likely also impede any possibility (limited though it may be) that territorial change might lead to a renewal of the political process. Finally, if a sizeable number of casualties were to be incurred during the disengagement process, Israel might well decide to suspend the process.

Presumably, proponents of unilateral disengagement would counter that while violent confrontation would likely continue, an effective disengagement plan would make it easier for Israel to deal with the situation, and that hence, the overall situation would probably improve. Further, many proponents of disengagement would argue that since the possibility of any political process leading to an agreement with the Palestinians is low in any case, the goal of renewing the political process need not be taken into consideration.

Pros and Cons: Unilateral Separation vs. Short-Term Agreements

As an intellectual exercise, and in order to evaluate these claims, let us suppose that the Israeli leadership has considered a plan for unilateral disengagement, and that it has already determined how the optimal map should be drawn. Let us now imagine that, prior to immediately implementing any unilateral disengagement, Israel turned first to the Palestinian leadership and proposed returning to the track of implementing the Oslo accords. Under this framework, Israel would

propose to implement the third Oslo further redeployment (FRD). This would include a “generous” territorial offer (identical to the unilateral disengagement map alluded to above), which would assure Palestinian territorial contiguity in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In exchange, Israel would demand Palestinian fulfillment of its commitments as required by the Oslo

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accords – ceasing violence, fighting terror, and so on – with a more effective means of supervision than those under existing agreements. International involvement might also be considered as part of the supervisory arrangement.

Is there any reason for the Palestinians not to accept this proposal of a partial agreement within the framework of Oslo and its successor agreements? They would undoubtedly fear that Israel intended to perpetuate the new reality emerging from a partial agreement, wherein they would receive less territory than was offered by the Barak government. Moreover,

Jerusalem would remain under full Israeli control, and there would be no consideration whatsoever of the refugee problem. The Palestinians would therefore likely seek to link the agreement to a commitment that such an arrangement was indeed temporary, and to continued negotiations for a permanent solution under a timetable not unduly long. If these conditions were met, the Palestinians would stand to lose nothing from accepting the agreement. They would gain control of significant territories, as well as much greater territorial contiguity, with all that this entails *vis-à-vis* freedom of movement both in and between areas under Palestinian control. In addition, a precedent for dismantling settlements would have been set. This would be significant for the Palestinians, since it would likely have a deeply transforming effect on Israeli attitudes regarding the issue, and in turn on Israel’s willingness to remove further settlements in the future. Finally, agreeing to such an offer would in no way prejudice the Palestinians’ options in the future: were it to become evident that negotiations for a permanent agreement had stalled, the Palestinians could always consider renewing the violent struggle.

From Israel’s standpoint, the advantage of an agreed-upon process would be in easing the conditions under which the disengagement process would be carried out. Israel would still withdraw to areas of its own choosing, and would erect buffer

zones according to the unilateral disengagement plan, but with fewer disturbances along the way. From a strategic outlook, the potential to create a more positive dynamic with the Palestinians exists, which in the best scenario could lead to a renewal of the political process (whose prospects for success should be reserved for a separate discussion). On a narrower level, there would at least be a noticeable drop in the level of violence. In the worst-case scenario, were violence to erupt again due to a failure in the political talks, Israel would still have achieved its interim goal of implementing unilateral disengagement. Indeed, it would have garnered certain gains along the way, even if these proved limited in scope and duration.

Israeli Concessions?

There are two concessions that the Israeli government would allegedly have to make, on points that it presently regards as central to its policy. The first relates to Israel's refusal to negotiate under fire. Yet upon closer examination, this seems a moot point: Is withdrawing under fire preferable to negotiating under fire? Moreover, in practice the Israeli government has already begun to retreat from a staunch commitment on this point, and is prepared to negotiate the terms and process of restoring calm while under fire.

The second concession, on a principle supported vehemently by Prime Minister Sharon, relates to Israel's insistence that any interim agreement be long-term in nature, and

that final-status negotiations take place only after a protracted period of calm. The problem, however, is that this condition seems untenable: it would be unreasonable to expect the Palestinians to sign a long-term interim agreement which, in their eyes, perpetuated an unacceptable situation in exchange for vague Israeli promises of future gains. Therefore, the reality in which the Israeli

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government could seriously consider unilateral disengagement presents only two viable alternatives: unilateral disengagement, or a short-term limited agreement, such as proposed in this essay.

It is also worth discussing whether an arrangement that drafts a roadmap for renewing permanent agreement negotiations, according to a timetable that would begin immediately upon implementing the limited agreement, would be counter to Israel's interests. Ultimately, the greatest drawback in all unilateral options, as with any partial agreement, is the fact that Israel would ostensibly concede tangible assets – territory – while

gaining nothing tangible, sizable, or durable in return. Therefore, it would be in Israel's interest that any positive dynamic that might emerge from implementing the partial agreement described above be used to revive permanent settlement negotiations. Ultimately, a permanent agreement that leads to the resolution of the conflict is the principle tangible compensation that Israel seeks of the Palestinians. This is not to say that there is much likelihood that the two sides would reach a permanent agreement, but a partial agreement offers greater potential for reaching some resolution. If the parties failed to reach an agreement, Israel would in any case find itself back at square one, albeit better prepared and more capable of withstanding a protracted struggle.

Is an Agreement Feasible?

The above analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of a short-term limited agreement suggests that the Palestinians would stand to gain from accepting such an offer from Israel. However, it remains possible that the destructive dynamic that has characterized Israeli-Palestinian relations over recent months might fell any effort to achieve an agreement, no matter how advantageous. The Palestinians might feel that they are riding on a wave of success, and that pressure (i.e., in the form of continuing terrorist activity) would yield greater returns, and without exacting any concessions at all. The total lack of trust between the two sides may doom any attempt to reach

an agreement, and internal Palestinian political dynamics could also make any agreement more difficult to achieve.

Furthermore, neither side is necessarily operating in an entirely rational fashion. The blood spilled on both sides has created emotional burdens; people on both sides have shown a readiness to seek policies that provide an emotional release, even if they understand that such actions harm their own interests. This contradiction emerges, for example, in public opinion polls among Israelis: on the one hand, most Israelis support targeted killings; on the other, a similar majority believes that such killings spur heightened Palestinian terrorism. Similar and even more intense paradoxes exist on the Palestinian side. Therefore, a situation is entirely possible in which the official Palestinian leadership understands and opts for a limited agreement, yet cannot withstand the opposition of activists in the field who are engaged in a struggle of national liberation. Such activists would likely feel they will eventually emerge victorious, and would likely have little faith in Israel's intention to fulfill its commitments. In this case, Palestinian decisions could be made that might appear to outsiders to be contrary to their long-term national interests.

To complete the present analysis, we must examine the implications of

a situation wherein Israel were to offer a limited agreement, and be rebuffed. Would Israel's interests be harmed by such an outcome?

Were Israel's limited agreement to be offered and rejected, it would be easier to "sell" a unilateral disengagement as a necessary evil, on a variety of levels. Domestically, it would be easier to persuade a broad segment of the Israeli public that there was no possibility of reaching any solution with the Palestinians, and that unilateral solutions were to be preferred instead. Internationally, Israel's job would also be easier: a Palestinian refusal would make it easier to explain to the international community why Israel chose a unilateral solution, and would preempt negative responses to its actions. Such a course would improve Israel's image internationally, and would bolster its credibility with the US and Europe, as Israel would have demonstrated yet again that it was the *Palestinians* who had thwarted any chance of a negotiated resolution to the conflict.

Conclusions

In conclusion, from the comparison of the two alternatives – unilateral disengagement and a short-term limited agreement – it is clear that proponents of unilateral disengagement should favor the offer of a short-term limited agreement to the Palestinians. Such an agreement would be based

on the same territorial outlines as would be included in a unilateral disengagement plan, along with a roadmap for negotiations for a permanent solution. In the worst case, the outcome of such an offer would be identical to that of a unilateral disengagement, while still providing some limited and temporary tactical gains. In the best case, the dynamics could be created for a return to a viable political process. Were Israel's proposal to be rebuffed, it would still have lost nothing from the attempt, and would stand to reap certain tactical benefits.

This conclusion does not necessarily endorse the claim that proposing a short-term partial solution is the best way to end the present cycle of violence. The merits of such a policy would still need to be weighed against other possible options, such as seeking a long-term interim agreement, or attempting to renew the path to a permanent final-status solution. However, many Israelis have concluded that in the current political situation, neither of these latter alternatives are viable, nor is a military solution and renewed control of the territories an acceptable alternative. If so, then they must conclude from this analysis that there is no justification in opting for a unilateral disengagement before there is a serious attempt at a short-term limited agreement based on the same territorial contours.