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A National Moment of Truth?

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At the outset of 2004, Israel appears close to reaching an historic national decision that would affirm and strengthen its character as a Jewish democratic state. This momentous decision might emerge from two principal factors within Israel's overall strategic position. The first is the strengthening of Israel's status as a regional superpower after nearly all its neighboring opponents have – at least temporarily – vanished from the scene, have been significantly weakened, or have changed their policy in a way that reduces the danger they present to Israel. The second factor is Israel's inability to use its overall strategic superiority to impose of its will over the Palestinians and in this manner bring an end to the ongoing conflict. The overall significance of these factors is that Israel currently enjoys very broad security margins that enable it to take steps that, in the past, seemed too dangerous. At the same time, it has no alternative other than to disengage from control of the Palestinians living in Judea, Samaria, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip.

Will Israel take the path now unfolding? Will its leaders rise to the occasion and exploit the historic opportunity available to them? Will they have the courage to detach themselves from the patterns of behavior in vogue for decades, and adopt a creative approach towards the new regional reality? Will these leaders be capable of abandoning enterprises that were of major importance to them for decades and to which they are still strongly attached, both ideologically and emotionally? These questions, which lie at the intersection of the strategic-political picture and the domestic psychological-personal politics of Israel's leaders, still lack a clear answer.

The Strategic Environment

The war in Iraq accelerated some processes in the Middle East that had begun before the war, and sparked some other, new processes, with a joint effect of sweeping changes to Israel's strategic environment. Iraq, which was considerably weakened as a result of its war with Iran (1980-88) and the Gulf War (1991), has been removed, at least temporarily, from the Middle East order of battle following its conquest by the coalition forces in April 2003. Thus, a major component of any possible "eastern front" threatening Israel has disappeared, certainly for the foreseeable future. It has also become clear that the residual threat of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons that perhaps remained in Iraq's possession after the 1991 war no longer exists. This by itself has made a major contribution to improving Israel's overall strategic situation.

As a result of the war, Iran also found itself in a highly altered strategic environment. Its neighbor Iraq, which had waged a bloody war against it for nearly a decade and which was suspected of continued development of non-conventional weapons, is vanquished. Furthermore, the US, which de facto has become Iran's new neighbor following its proven determination to act against a designated member of the Axis of Evil, has now underscored that it will not allow Iran to become a nuclear power. At the same time, West European countries, led by Germany, France, and Britain, attempting to forestall further American military force in the Middle East, have closed ranks with the US, and applied pressure on Iran to abandon its efforts to develop nuclear weapons.

The convergence of developments forced Tehran to suspend its activities related to production of fissile material – enriched uranium and plutonium – and to sign the

Additional Protocol, which permits the International Atomic Energy Agency more intrusive verification measures, in order to ensure that the supervised states are in fact not producing nuclear weapons. These measures do not entirely prevent a country from covertly producing fissile material, but they make it extremely difficult and thus reduce the probability that any such efforts will be successful.

At the same time that Iran officially decided to ratify the Additional Protocol, Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi announced his decision to dismantle his country's non-conventional weapons capabilities: nuclear, chemical, and biological weaponry and long-range missiles (exceeding 350 km). Interestingly, the decision was in contravention of the Arab League's 1992 resolution that called on members to avoid signing the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) as long as Israel did not sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

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(NPT). Qaddafi's announcement followed the agreement reached by Libya with the US and Britain ending the dispute over the Pan Am airliner that exploded over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988. It was also preceded by visits of British and American intelligence personnel to Libyan installations where weapons of mass destruction were produced. These events represent an overall reversal of Libyan policy, and in early January 2004 Qaddafi's son Saif-el Islam even went so far as to declare that Libya no longer regarded Israel as a threat to its security.

The removal of Iraq from the regional order of battle along with the dramatic change in Libyan policy signals the collapse of the radical camp in the Arab world. This is of great importance to the regional status of Syria, which until now has sat firmly on the fence between moderate Arab countries, led by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan, on the one hand, and the radical camp, headed by Iraq and Libya, on the other. Damascus suddenly finds itself unwittingly marking the extremist edge of the Arab world, and may therefore become the focus of Bush administration efforts to impose regional order. The strategic difficulty confronting Syrian president Bashar Assad caused him to send numerous messages as to his readiness to renew political negotiations with Israel. During his visit to Turkey in January 2004, Assad likewise avoided any attempt to impugn Ankara's close relations with Israel. These relations, which represent a major component

of the strategic threats to Syria, are now accepted in Damascus as a fait accompli.

The cumulative effect of the pivotal developments that have taken place recently in Iraq, Iran, Libya, and Syria is a sweeping change to Israel's strategic setting. These developments bolster the existing influence of the peace agreements signed by Israel with Egypt nearly twenty-five years ago and Jordan more than nine years

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ago. The stability of these agreements has been tested over the years and found capable of withstanding intense pressures, from the war in Lebanon to the more than three years of Palestinian violence that began in September 2000. Taken together, these changes substantially reduce the overall threat facing Israel.

The Public Debate in Israel

The dramatic improvement in Israel's strategic environment has been accompanied by an increasing awareness within Israel that superior strength does not suffice to impose Israel's will on the Palestinian nation

and forcibly end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This recognition, coupled with the understanding that greater strength permits steps that were deemed dangerous in the past, has given rise to a majority supporting unilateral action, largely intended to maintain Israel's character as a Jewish democratic state. The plan calls for disengagement from control of the Palestinians living in Judea, Samaria, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip.

The majority in Israel now in favor of unilateral disengagement reflects several premises and assumptions that have crystallized in recent years in the public debate. These premises have not escaped some Likud leaders, who have incorporated them either in a less binding manner (as in the case of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon), or in a clear and emphatic way (by Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert).

■ The first premise is that Israel lacks the capability to impose or even effect an end to the bloody conflict. It appears that Israel's technological advantage, its successful attempts – both the targeted and the less targeted – at foiling terrorist attacks, and the containment methods and checkpoints that it operates, or even the separation fence under construction, are all incapable of convincing the Palestinians that continuing their violent struggle is futile and that, therefore, they should lay down their arms.

■ The second critical fact is that the demographic trends between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River indicate that Jews are close to becoming a minority in the area. Once this happens Israel will be exposed to

a demand for “one man, one vote.” The legitimacy of this demand in the international community means that any attempt to preserve Israel’s character as a Jewish state at the expense of the Palestinians’ political rights will cause Israel to be compared with the apartheid regime that collapsed in South Africa. Furthermore, the Israeli public learned during the 1990s to recognize the economic advantages that accrued both from the relatively stable security situation then enjoyed by Israel, and from its becoming part of the global economy. Should the international financial community regard Israel as a security risk or should Israel be seen as an apartheid state, the economic cost would be enormous.

■ The third premise concerns the impossibility of achieving peaceful co-existence with the Palestinians within a single state. The public drew this conclusion mainly from witnessing the response of Israeli Arabs to the eruption of Palestinian violence in September 2000, particularly the violent demonstrations among Israeli Arabs at the beginning of intifada, and the positions adopted by the Arab Members of Knesset (MKs) over the last three years. Many in Israel have reached the conclusion that if the attempts at co-existence failed within the Green Line, there is no chance of building such relations with the majority of Palestinians living on the other side of this line. Consequently, an increasing percentage of the public in Israel regards the Greater Land of Israel as more a nightmare than a dream.

■ The fourth premise is that it is impossible to find a Palestinian leader who meets the two prerequisites that might allow him to become a real partner for negotiations with Israel: a commitment to seek an agreement leading to peaceful co-existence between the Palestinian state and Israel, and the ability to generate sufficient support for this potential agreement among the Palestinians and ward off those wishing to torpedo

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it. In this context, major importance is ascribed to the failed attempts of former prime minister Ehud Barak to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As a leader of the Labor Party, his testimony to the effect that there was no chance of reaching an agreement through negotiations with Yasir Arafat convinced many, even those active in the peace camp, that no such partner exists, at least as long as Arafat remains on the scene.

This assessment, prevalent within the Israeli political center, gained impetus after the failed efforts of Abu Mazen, the first Palestinian prime minister, to halt the violence and

renew political negotiations. The developments since Abu Ala’a replaced Abu Mazen as Palestinian prime minister have not improved the chances of renewing these negotiations.

The feeling that there is no peace partner has changed the nature of the public debate, from an argument about whether it is possible to satisfy the Palestinians at a price acceptable to Israel and reach a joint understanding with them – an issue that divided the Israeli public since the Six Day War – to a debate about what can be done, in the absence of such a partner, to safeguard Israel’s vital interests. From this point onwards, the public has ceased to be equally divided and now almost three quarters support disengagement from the Palestinians, even if various interpretations are placed on the meaning of terms such as “separation” or “disengagement” and their ramifications.

■ The fifth premise is that an agreement with the Palestinians would in any case be worthless, since the attempts to implement the Oslo Accords already demonstrated the Palestinians’ readiness to violate any agreement they sign. The loss of trust between Israel and the Palestinians since the eruption of violence at the end of September 2000 has led many to believe that there is no point in making any further payment as part of a consensual separation from the Palestinians – that is, beyond the costs involved in unilateral separation. In their view the Palestinians in any case have no intention of fulfilling the

commitments they undertake as part of an agreement.

■ The sixth premise among the Israeli public is that for a variety of reasons, mainly the US involvement in the Iraqi theater – an involvement that absorbs most of the time and energy that the Bush administration can devote to the Middle East – as well as American domestic considerations in an election year, the Bush administration will not be driven to jumpstart the negotiation process in the Middle East. Washington will continue to condemn Palestinian acts of terror and to express its disapproval of Israeli measures that it opposes. However, it will also continue to evade specific attempts to resolve the conflict in the style of the heroic efforts of Presidents Carter and Clinton. Israel will consequently have no alternative but to assume the responsibility for solving its problems with its Palestinian neighbors.

Is a National Decision in Sight?

Hence the apparent formation of a strong majority in Israel in support of unilateral separation or disengagement from the Palestinians, with the aim of improving Israelis' personal security and preserving Israel's character as a Jewish democratic state. At the same time, the significance of the dramatic change that has taken place in Israel's strategic environment is that Israel currently enjoys broad security margins that permit it to incur the risks involved in the far-reaching steps required to achieve such separation. In other words,

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Furthermore, the dramatic reduction in the threats facing Israel permits its leaders greater flexibility than in the past regarding specific issues that were formerly at the center of its negotiations with the Palestinians. For example, the negligible chance of resurrecting the "eastern

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front" means that Israel can now separate from the Palestinians without insisting on maintaining permanent control of the Jordan Valley, a step that would prompt the certain accusation in the international theater of an intent to trim the size of the Palestinian state and to predetermine the results of any future negotiations.

These possibilities still leave the question open of whether Israel's leaders will rise to the occasion and know how to realize the historic opportunity available to them. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is apparently ready to take a dramatic step

involving disengagement from the Palestinian population of Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip. In his speeches at the Herzliya Conference in mid-December 2003 and at the Likud Convention in early January 2004, he announced that Israel faced "an extremely difficult process," namely, the establishment of a Palestinian state "having territorial contiguity," which involves disengagement from most of the Palestinian population – disengagement that will obligate not only evacuation of the outposts set up since the violence began in September 2000, but also "changes to the location of settlements" established over the last thirty-five years. In order to permit the establishment of a Palestinian state it would be necessary to "resituate" settlements whose very location was originally intended to prevent the creation of such a state.

However, it seems that several factors are liable to sabotage Israel's capability of implementing the prime minister's new vision. First, it is not at all clear whether Sharon is indeed prepared to abandon the settlement enterprise that he helped create, in which he invested massive efforts and resources, and with which he has been identified throughout his political career. In addition, it is not clear whether he still has the energy required to implement this historic step. Indeed, the legal difficulties in which his family is currently embroiled are unlikely to make such measures easier for him.

Furthermore, it is not certain that the prime minister truly appreciates

that it is impossible to separate the issue of control over the Palestinians from control over the land on which they live, and therefore that it would be impossible to disengage from the Palestinians without withdrawing from most of Judea and Samaria. Thus, the prime minister may try to implement a partial separation, which means the continuation of the IDF's hold over about half the area of Judea and Samaria. Such an attempt would no doubt have grave consequences, similar to those resulting from the government's decisions regarding the demarcation of the security fence. On the one hand, the measure would be deemed as a "withdrawal under fire," and on the other hand it would not lead to an improvement in relations with the Palestinians. It would be condemned in the international arena, including the White House, as a unilateral attempt to make permanent Israel's hold over territories beyond the Green Line.

However, even if Sharon has recognized the need to implement in full the policy he outlined recently and which represents a dramatic change in his viewpoint, and even if this step enjoys the support of a solid majority of the Israeli public, it is not at all clear whether Sharon can muster enough support for it among Likud ministers and Knesset members. In particular it is unclear what would be

the position of his senior ministers. Will he receive the support of Binyamin Netanyahu, Shaul Mofaz, and Silvan Shalom, or would the senior ministers exploit the rift that will almost inevitably be created in the Likud in order to advance their personal political interests to succeed the prime minister?

If Sharon fails to obtain the support required from the leadership of his party, he will be forced to exchange

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the support of most of the Likud ministers and MKs for support by the Labor Party leadership. Will the prime minister be prepared to risk such a radical political move regarding an issue so central to his party's ideology? After all, this is a far more significant about-face than that required when Menahem Begin signed the Camp David Accords and ceded Israel's control of the Sinai

desert – an issue that was never central to his party's ideology.

Finally, it is by no means certain that the majority of the Israeli public would demonstrate its support for Sharon actively enough to offset the determination of the political Right to obstruct his plan. The numerical majority comprises a less cohesive and less intensive sector than its minority counterpart. This is particularly true in light of the fact that even among the majority who support separation from the Palestinians there is still hesitation regarding the wisdom of unilateral disengagement, that is, without the Palestinians committed to any reciprocal measures.

In conclusion, Israel's strategic surroundings permit it today, more than ever before, to disengage from the territories in which the majority of the Palestinian population of Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip are located. Such a move would preserve the Jewish democratic character of Israel and may well also increase the personal safety of its residents. However, it is not at all clear whether Israel's political leadership will seize the opportunity before them. If they fail and squander the opportunity presented to them by the current international and regional circumstances, this will be a source of perpetual lament with far-reaching ramifications.