Domestic Effects of the Disengagement

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Introduction

The implementation of Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and four settlements in northern Samaria was seen by many as a formative event in Israeli foreign policy, especially in relations with the Palestinians, and in the domestic arena. For the first time since the Six Day War, Israel officially recognized that one of its cardinal strategic tenets was counterproductive to its interests. As Prime Minister Sharon stated on August 15, 2005, the day the withdrawal began, "It is no secret that I, like many others, believed and hoped that we could forever hold on to Netzarim and Kfar Darom. However, the changing reality in this country, in this region, and in the world required another reassessment and changing positions."[1] Shimon Peres was blunter in his definition of events, when he declared on September 12, 2005 that, "remaining in the Gaza Strip was an historical mistake from start to finish."

The implementation of the disengagement plan was undoubtedly an operational success. Despite the potential internal and external dangers and the bleak scenarios that loomed on the eve of the disengagement, the exceedingly problematic evacuation of thousands of citizens took place without serious casualties, without any major blunders, and with commendable speed. The motto that the IDF coined for the operation – "sensitivity and determination" – reflected the careful operational planning and emotional preparation for the disengagement. In the complex campaign over Israeli public opinion – which may have been the more important operation – those behind the disengagement plan had the upper hand. Facing them were the settlers and their supporters who strove to influence the public, first in order to foil the evacuation plan, and second to create a basis for preventing its repetition in the West Bank. Whether the clear failure of the first dimension will be matched by failure of the secondary goal remains to be seen.

Had the disengagement not been implemented smoothly, and this was certainly a possibility, the domestic implications would necessarily have been completely different, with tangible effects perhaps already evident. In what was perceived as a contest between Israel's national political system and its challengers, the former clearly emerged the victor. Nevertheless, even if the state and its agents achieved a definite victory, it is not certain whether this was also an ultimate, decisive outcome.

This article does not deal with the security or foreign policy ramifications of Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip to the 1967 lines. Rather, the aim here is to focus on the end to the settlement enterprise in Gaza and assess the domestic implications of the disengagement and their potential impact on national security. Given the storm that Israel weathered during the evacuation of the settlers from their homes, the intense public debate the evacuation awakened, and the glaring media exposure it received, there is room, even at this early stage, to examine a number of the related central issues that may have a formative influence on Israeli society.

The Trauma that Was(n't)

In the weeks leading up to the disengagement, the impressions were that it would be an extremely difficult operation that could escalate easily to include physical injury and extreme violations of Israeli law and social norms. This impression was intentionally created. It seems that from the outset, both sides, the government and its enforcement branches on the one hand and its opponents on the other, wanted to heighten the sense of a fracture that would bear

particular significance for future developments. Yet the reality of the evacuation was far smoother than the widespread predictions in the media. During the week of the disengagement, forty-seven incidents were defined as "extremism cases" (forty in the Gaza Strip and seven in Samaria)[2] in which the IDF employed professional, specially trained negotiating teams (created when dealing with terrorists holding hostages). With the hindsight of the weeks and months since the disengagement, even if the storm has not completely dissipated, it seems in general that the public discourse has turned to other subjects. Those who were evacuated from their homes have unquestionably undergone a severe personal trauma that may require years of physical and psychological rehabilitation. But the general public that witnessed the evacuation through the unprecedentedly intense media coverage resumed its routine – if it had ever abandoned it. In the not too distant future will it be possible to say that the fading memory of Gush Katif resembles that of Yamit (not to mention that of the *Altalena*)?

At the same time, the state's success in carrying out its policy, even by force, should not mask the difficulties in the evacuation of settlers and the destruction of settlements, and the distress it caused to parts of the public. As Brig. Gen. Gershon Hacohen, the commander of the division that implemented the evacuation in the Gaza Strip, stated after the event, "There was a real danger of bloodshed. There was a possibility that a violent rebellion would develop in Gush Katif. What tipped the scales against the danger of bloodshed was the way we operated with the presence of a large force, and the unique method of operation that we developed for this sensitive context . . . There were weapons there. There was a potential for severe violence. . . . There was an event here that had the potential for developing into a civil war . . . There was a very profound conflict here. A conflict that can blow up a nation and crush a state. But through open and secret cooperation, we

Head of Operations Maj. Gen. Yisrael Ziv (r) with a resident of Gush Katif

managed to prevent it. We built a bridge over the abyss."[3]

The strength of the bridge and state of the abyss remain to be evaluated. Furthermore, the question arises whether the frightening scenarios that were presented to the public had in fact any solid basis at the outset, or were rather the reflection of multi-directional manipulation. Whatever the case, the public perceived the evacuation, at least prior to and during the event, as an enormous menacing process that would be difficult to carry out.

The Gaza border, along with most of the separation fence's route, has reinforced the new national narrative on Israel's future borders, namely, "we are here and they are there."

The success of the implementation may contribute to shaping a number of the following important trends that in themselves are neither inevitable nor immediate. Many forces in the political system and the territories actively oppose them. However, political developments of the coming months will build on the following fruits of the disengagement:

■ The strengthened legitimacy of the democratic government and its executive arms. In the face of increasing public criticism of the "politicians" – some of it certainly justified and by no means an exhausted issue – Israel's government system proved that when it leads with a clear message and with the support of the majority, however silent the majority, it is capable of making painful decisions and taking bold steps that change historical trends, even in the face of legitimate political and sectoral opposition as well as illegitimate threats. This in itself is an auspicious outcome.

■ Undermining national myths that have been instilled in the

Israeli public for years and that threatened (and perhaps for this reason were created in the first place) to cement patterns that may have been correct in their day but that have failed the test of time: the perception of security as a function of retention of the territories; the viability of the occupation and control over another nation; the ultimate function of the settlements as the main marker of Israel's borders; and the impossibility of evacuating Jewish settlements in the territories. In other words, what had been considered in the Israeli mindset as "unthinkable" may now have become "thinkable." The first test will be the illegal outposts, at least some of them. A survey conducted by *Yediot Ahronot* and Mina Tzemah in late August found that 68 percent of those questioned believed that the illegal outposts should be dismantled; 54 percent thought that after the Gaza disengagement the peace process should be renewed and Israel should display willingness to withdraw from additional territories in Judea and Samaria.

In the national religious camp, a heated debate is taking place on its future political direction.

■ The shaping of a new national narrative regarding Israel's future borders through a political settlement or by a unilateral move. With the pullout from Gaza, the 1967 lines were reaffirmed with new strength and legitimacy. The Gaza border, along with most of the separation fence's route and against the background of the peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan and the pullback from Lebanon to the international border, has reinforced the principle growing among the public, "we are here and they are there." Contributing to this narrative are the West Bank settlement blocs, which, the prime minister has emphasized, will muster popular support for drawing the borders with the future Palestinian state.

Protesters at Kfar Darom; signs read "Kfar Darom will not fall again" (top) and "God will not forsake His people" (bottom)

Between this position and the concession of lands east of the separation fence route (including the Jordan Valley and Hebron) is a wide divide. Nevertheless, the new narrative is taking greater hold in the public consciousness, which will bolster the ability to translate it into practical measures.

Polarities in the Religious Zionist Camp

Perhaps the leading social issue of the disengagement was the division between civic and religious discourse. Many in the general public opposed the disengagement (even after the disengagement was completed, 37.8 percent of the Israeli public and 41.3 percent of the Jewish public remained opposed[4]), including the prime minister's political representatives and influential members of his own party. In practice, however, those who actively supported the settlers during the evacuation did not come primarily from the general public that opposed the disengagement, and were not the politicians in and outside the Likud who derided the prime minister's initiative. The vast majority of the activists came from the religious Zionist camp (to be distinguished from the religious public as a whole), although they too did not account for the entire religious Zionist population. Even at the large protest in Kfar Maimon on July 25, which included tens of thousands of protestors and was the last sizable physical standoff between the security forces and the opponents of disengagement that had any potential chance of reversing the disengagement course, most National Religious Party voters stayed home.

By most accounts, the heart of the religious Zionist camp suffered a profound shock during the disengagement process. Many expressed a sense of their ideological identification with the national Zionist enterprise, at whose center stood the settling of Mandatory Israel, succumbing to a sense of betrayal and alienation. One example is the statement by Rabbi Yaakov Meidan, one of the designated future heads of the Har Etzion hesder yeshiva [combin-

ing military service with religious study]: "Decades ago, our public, the religious-Zionist public, made a strategic decision to live together with secular Zionism. . . . We decided to forge an alliance . . . based on love for this land. On the desire for the revival of the state. . . . Those who went with us hand in hand to every place, including into the fire, have plunged a knife in our back . . . My complaints are not against the secular public as a whole . . . .The problem is with the secular elites. In the attitude of those elites I have the feeling of a knife in the back."[5]

The disengagement heightened sentiments long present within this public, a public that has vacillated for years between integration with the secular state and insulation from it. The question here, which leading spokespersons in the national religious camp have also posed, is whether the apparent disregard by the secular public and the government (perhaps the state, too?) of the national religious public's values and needs will hasten incipient trends toward separation and perhaps even bring the national religious camp closer to a moral, social (and political?) pact with the ultra-orthodox camp. Rabbi Meidan discussed this issue, claiming that, "In order to forge an alliance with the secular elites, we neglected our more natural union with the Haredi [ultra-orthodox] public. Today I think that was a mistake. In the future we will behave differently."

It is too early to assess where the introspection spurred by the disengagement is leading. In the national religious camp, not a monolithic ideological bloc but with deep roots to the state and the state's values, a heated debate is taking place on its future political direction. Key figures in the camp attribute Jewish religious values to the state and its strengthened position, as established early on by Rabbi Kook: "The State of Israel is the foundation of God's throne in the world." The integration of the national religious camp in the civilian state has also yielded common benefits and stands to continue to do so. According to Rabbi Yuval Sherlo, "It is true that the state is not administered according to Torah considerations. We must take the responsibility and ask what we have done that has led to this and what

we can do that we have not done yet. There is so vast a space for activity, and instead of wallowing in deep despair we should be strengthened by a great faith and plunge into the immense tasks before us. There is no reality that cannot be influenced. There is always [a way], if the path is found, and since we are filled with the boundless energies that have been revealed in this struggle, we are forbidden to lead these energies to a reality of despair and retribution rather than moving forward."[6]

The army emerged from a challenging civilian task as the supreme champion of the nation, its unity, and its values.

Commenting on the soul-searching within the national religious community, Professor Avi Ravitzky of the Hebrew University predicts that the crisis will lead to certain elements in the national religious camp being drawn more to the ultra-orthodox, with others preferring to overcome the gap and reestablish their ties to the secular public.[7] Shai Binyamini, head of the movement Realistic Religious Zionism, observes that the national religious public is being divided by a deep crisis: "People will spit on the flag, vilify IDF soldiers, and the state. Religious Zionism will split into two [parts] – one, no longer Zionist, will lack identification with state . . . It will identify with the classic ultra-orthodox position . . . and the other part will preserve classic religious Zionism. This is the moderate stream, and proportionally – it is in the minority."[8] Rabbi Shlomo Aviner claims that perhaps "the time has come to appear as a party that moves forward, that speaks in the name of Torah, that instead of being divided marches forth to greater unity, and that binds within it all the different people that proclaim the name of God, from the national religious to national ultra-orthodox, from Habad to Meimad."[9]

This internal debate will also probably have considerable influence on the government's position. The state has a keen interest in seeing that impor-

tant strong forces such as the national religious camp continue to be active and integrated in the state and its enterprises. The importance of this lies not only in safeguarding the abstract value of unity in Israeli society as an obligatory ingredient for strengthening the state and advancing its ability to meet internal and external challenges. It also has practical significance for everything connected with this sector's contribution to the state, particularly the army and other resources. For the last generation the national religious public's proportional representation has grown in the voluntary elite combat units, command positions, and service in the standing army. This has been a practical contribution as well as a message of ethical leadership. In Israeli society, which is characterized by increasing divisions in the social, moral, and political spheres, the detachment from the mainstream – not to mention insulation and alienation – of such a prominent camp will severely impair the value of national unity and its practical expressions in the realm of security.

The IDF and the Police

If there were "winners" and "losers" in the dramatic story of the evacuation, then the IDF, and perhaps surprisingly the Israeli police too, emerged as the winners. From this practical, political, complicated, and problematic affair, these two official groups succeeded in advancing their institutional interests. Polls indicated overwhelming public approval of the performance of the security forces, even among those who opposed the disengagement.[10] Indeed, the IDF won an immense degree of legitimacy as the state's leading body, presumably the only one that could manage the disengagement's specific difficult challenges. This was especially apparent when compared with the criticism – though not always justified – of the ineptitude within the special authority set up to help the evacuees and coordinate its activity with civilian government ministries. Thus, on the heels of the army's success in ending the second intifada – praise that was accompanied by significant criticism and questions – the army emerged from a challenging civilian task as the supreme champion

of the nation, its unity, and its values.

Little can detract its from the army's success in the superb planning, preparation, and implementation of the disengagement. Significant for the future, however, is how this esteem impacts on Israel's civil society and its relationship to the IDF. It seems increasingly likely that if and when the government has need of a large and efficient implementation body, even for missions that lack popular consensus, it would turn mainly to the IDF. Yet any future civilian scenarios that require a large mobilized force are liable to muster new reservations among IDF leaders, even if they naturally take responsibility for carrying out the task assigned by the political level. Moreover, because the success of the disengagement model does not guarantee similar successes in the future, the army's intense involvement in a civilian operation is likely to call the socio-military balance into question.

Some people claim that the army's successful implementation of the disengagement will result, sooner or later, in the abolishment of the IDF's main feature as a "people's army."[11] This characterization of the IDF and its questionable relevance for the future has headed the national agenda for many years. However, even assuming that the IDF continues the trend toward professionalism, together with the privatization of non-core processes such as the reforms in its reserve system, it will still remain in essence a "people's army," in the sense of general mandatory service, and it will retain its image as an organization standing above political, class, ethnic, and gender differences in Israel's Jewish society. Such an image earns the army prestige, resources, and political influence. Neither the evacuation of settlers nor the encounter with similar challenges in the future will lessen the interest of the IDF and the decision-makers to preserve the army as it is for years to come.

Yet in light of the lessons of the disengagement, is the IDF's strength likely to be built in a difference form? As yet, there is no sign of this. On the contrary, the military proved that when given a clearly defined task and sufficient time for planning and

organization, it knew how to improvise and build the necessary task forces. The construction of large ad hoc forces on the basis of the standing army and rear echelon units not only proved itself in the specific assignment, but also proved that the pool is not depleted and can be used in the future, even for non-standard military tasks. Moreover, the IDF demonstrated again that it has to build itself in a generic structure for a wide variety of assignments, different from one another in character and requirement without enlarging the force. The IDF learned this lesson a long time ago, especially in the transition from involvement in linear, structured wars to asymmetric low-level conflicts. The current task that required dealing with an internal civilian object emphasized the necessity of this versatility.

Overall, insubordination and the refusal of military orders has figured minimally within the IDF. With the disengagement, the issue surfaced in context of a conflict of national vs. religious allegiances. According to army reports,[12] in the course of the disengagement sixty-three soldiers refused to obey orders. Of these, fifty were conscripts, eight were in the standing army, and five were reservists; twenty-four were hesder yeshiva students. Five of those who refused were officers in the standing army; the most senior officer among them was a captain in the logistics branch. This does not mean that the danger of a much larger wave of disobedience was not real. At any rate, the army soberly weighed this contingency and made a serious informational and organizational effort to counter it in time. Thus, the chief of staff stated in an Army Radio interview on August 14 that disobedience is "one if the more dangerous phenomena in the army . . . that if not properly handled when nominal can become a destructive phenomenon. Disobedience contains something that is unacceptable to us – the creation of militias within the IDF." Whatever the case, it seems that the relatively small number of "refusers" was also linked to the fact that the first circle of evacuation, which was in immediate contact with the evacuees, was made up primarily of police, conscripts, and regular soldiers from improvised units, whereas the infantry units, with a large proportion of religious soldiers, were deployed at a greater distance in security envelopes to protect against a possible Palestinian attack.

At any rate, because of the relatively low number of those who refused to obey orders, the IDF decided not to confront the basic issue of the special service track for religious troops who study in the yeshivas. The army's relationship with the hesder yeshivas was already on the agenda of the IDF and the public prior to the latest crisis. Yet in the current highly charged relationship between the IDF and the national religious camp, it is important to support those who call for the ongoing integration of the national religious camp into Israeli state institutions.[13] The same idea was strongly implied in the statement of Brigadier General Tal Russo, the commander of the division that was responsible for evacuating the four settlements in northern Samaria, in an interview in *Maariv* on August 26, 2005. Asked if, as a commander, he was willing to accept new companies of hesder students, Russo said that "personally I would accept them because I think it is important to bring them into the IDF. But I imagine that in the present situation most brigade commanders, if they had the choice, would prefer not to take yeshiva students. This is something we have to correct."

Another important issue is the IDF-Israeli police integration and cooperation. It is no secret that at the beginning of the disengagement operation the heads of the two bodies tried to cast the bulk of the assignment on the other. However, due to order of battle limitations and the efficiency of the system, the job of implementing the disengagement plan was given to the IDF, while the police organized itself for effective systems integration. The lesson here is clear and important. After the IDF's success in combating terror during the second intifada, to a large extent thanks to close operational coordination with the General Security Services,

the disengagement operation proved that a systems benefit could be derived from operational cooperation with the police. Many people in the IDF saw this as a revelation and innovation. In the future, given the proper meticulous preparation, effective systems integration can be employed again in civilian and semi-civilian missions, while relying on the professionalism demonstrated by some of the police units – the border police and special task force – that took part in the operation.

A completely different question concerns security itself and the success and prestige that the police won in the wake of its performance during the evacuation. Will the police be able to channel this success to special tasks especially in the war on crime? There may be hope that in future thinking on the transfer of priorities at the national level, the Israeli police too will reap the benefits from its achievements during the disengagement. At any rate, the more diversified and flexible the police's ability to employ its strength for law enforcement assignments and public order, the less that Israel will have to call on the IDF for civilian tasks that are lie on the borders of the consensus. This is a trend worth encouraging.

Cautious Optimism

In his speech to the nation on August 15, the prime minister declared: "The disengagement will allow us to look inward. Our national agenda will change. In our economic policy we will be free to turn to closing the social gaps and engaging in a genuine struggle against poverty. We will advance education and increase the personal security of every citizen in the country."[14] If Israel takes advantage of the disengagement to try to realize these strategic objectives, then the disengagement initiative will be registered as a major turning point in the history of Israel. On the other hand, if it turns out that the prime minister's statements were merely empty words, then Israeli society's ultimate impression of the disengagement and the way it was handled will be much less favorable.

Notes

1. For a translated transcript of the entire speech, see www.pmo.gov.il/PMOEng/Communication/PMSpeaks/speech150805.htm.
2. *Haaretz*, August 25, 2005.
3. *Haaretz*, September 9, 2005; translated English article, September 16, 2005.
4. According to a survey in August 2005 by the Tami Steinmetz Center at Tel Aviv University.
5. *Haaretz*, July 22, 2005.
6. The Moreshet site's "Questions and Answers," September 11, 2005.
7. Yair Sheleg in *Haaretz*, July 22, 2005.
8. www.ynet.co.il, August 19, 2005.
9. *Hatzofeh*, September 22, 2005.
10. A Mina Tzemah poll found that 89 percent of those questioned gave a mark of "very good" or "good" to the police and army on its handling of the evacuation of Gush Katif (*Yediot Ahronot*, August 19, 2005). According to a *Maariv/Telsar* survey published on August 24, 2005, those questioned rated the soldiers and police 8.8 out of 10 for their role in carrying out the disengagement plan. A survey by the Tami Steimetz Center at Tel Aviv University in August 2005 found that 77.3 percent believed that the security forces displayed a large or very large degree of consideration during the evacuation, whereas 9.1 percent felt that the security forces' degree of consideration was negligible or very negligible. Hence even among those who opposed the unilateral disengagement, approximately 41 percent of the Jewish population, there were many who thought the security forces' behavior commendable.
11. See for example Yagil Levy's article in *Haaretz*, August 31, 2005, in which he states that, "it would not be unquestionable to assume that the success of disengagement will only hasten reforms that are already planned for the regular army and reserve systems. These reforms are gradually being based on a conscription model of professional, selective, and even partially voluntary foundations. In this way the army will try to advance professionalism so as to limit its exposure to political pressures that permeate its ranks."
12. From the Chief of Staff and head of Manpower to the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, September 8.
13. See, for example, Rabbi Yuval Sherlo's remarks on the Moreshet site's "Questions and Answers," September 17 2005, where he declared that "the starting point is attendance at a hesder yeshiva, which will influence military service for better and the world of Torah for the better.
14. See note 1.