

The Many Faces of Unilateral Disengagement

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The Oslo process has been deadlocked since attempts to reach a permanent settlement fell through, and were followed by the violence that has raged since September 2000. This deadlock has triggered thinking on possible unilateral policy steps that could improve Israel's strategic and political situation. These ideas, which are generally referred to as "unilateral disengagement" or "unilateral separation," are based on two fundamental assumptions. The first is that, in the foreseeable future, there is no prospect of renewing the political negotiations with the Palestinians and reaching an agreement with them. The second assumption is that there is no possibility of subduing the Palestinians militarily and imposing a solution upon them, or motivating them to suspend the use of violence and acquiesce to the existing situation. Those who favor one of the various unilateral separation options assume that, given the ease with which would-be terrorists can reach Israeli population centers, it would not be possible to assure the personal security of Israelis as long as there is no physical separation between them and the Palestinians.

The continuing Palestinian violence has proved resistant to both military attempts at suppression and political attempts to achieve a cease-fire and renew the political process.

This difficulty, when compounded with the complex political developments that have taken place on each side, indeed justifies a perception that Israel's ongoing security problems cannot be resolved without in some way changing the

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situation on the ground. This, in turn, provides a justification for an in-depth discussion regarding the potential for unilateral action to improve Israel's security situation. However, the debate has been hampered by the fact that various elements within Israel are all using the same term – "unilateral separation" – to refer to very different concepts and agendas. It is important, therefore, to clarify the various schools of thought that exist in this regard.

Four overall types of unilateral disengagement have come up in public debate:

1. *Unilateral security disengagement.* This plan would not change the existing geographical division of areas controlled by the Israelis and the Palestinians. It would involve setting up a series of physical barriers and force concentrations along the Green Line (the pre-1967 border between Israel and the West Bank/Gaza), in order to make it more difficult for would-be attackers to enter Israel proper. For their part, settlements in the West Bank would continue to be protected by the same means used at the present.
2. *Total unilateral disengagement, while keeping Israeli settlements in place.* The goal of this would be to establish a physical separation between all the areas controlled by Israel (including areas under full Israeli security and civil control, defined in the Oslo agreements as 'C' areas) in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and those controlled by the Palestinians.
3. *Unilateral disengagement to a self-declared permanent border.* In this option, the government would unilaterally declare what it believes Israel's final borders should be, and then withdraw to them. This border would be based upon the Green Line, perhaps with some minor adjustments to enable the inclusion of Jewish neighborhoods in the Jerusalem area

and large settlements near the Green Line. Israel would then withdraw to this line, declare it its permanent border, and establish physical emplacements along it to separate Israeli and Palestinian territory.

4. *Unilateral disengagement to an interim line.* This proposal is similar to the previous one, except that the demarcation of territories would be somewhere between what exists presently and Israel's concept of what would serve as an acceptable permanent border.

Aside from the shared desire to increase the personal safety of Israel's citizens, the logic underlying these plans are very different. Israel's defense establishment favors the first scenario, security disengagement, based on the assessment that the most severe problem posed by Palestinian violence is terrorist attacks, and particularly suicide bombings, on the Israeli side of the Green Line. The goal of this disengagement would be to create a set of conditions that reduce the risk of terrorist infiltration by limiting the ability of the Palestinians to cross into Israeli territory, while simultaneously avoiding thorny political issues such as borders and settlements.

Rather than effect changes in the apportionment of areas controlled by Israelis and Palestinians, this plan would deploy a variety of barriers and forces along the areas of the Green Line, so as to prevent Palestinians from crossing into Israeli territory

without authorization. Entry permits to travel or work in Israel would be sharply limited in number, and crossing would be possible only at formal transit points. The types of barriers to be set up, and the extent of personnel deployed in a given area, would be in accordance with its particular sensitivities (i.e., proximity to population centers), availability of personnel, and budgets at the disposal of the defense establishment.

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Despite its attempt to circumvent a number of political 'hot potatoes', the plan for security disengagement has two major domestic political difficulties. First, fortifications and force deployments along the Green Line might imply that Israel regards this line as its future border. To overcome this problem, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) program suggests that barriers and forces not be deployed exactly on the Green Line. Rather, the IDF would deploy along a band inside the West Bank whose width would vary on the basis of conditions along each segment. For

this purpose, the respective regional commanders would declare certain areas east of the Green Line as closed military zones. The use of a band of this sort also derives from recognition that a barrier that has no depth would not be completely effective.

The second political difficulty is manifested in how this form of separation would be perceived among various groups within Israeli society. This is because it leaves the settlements in the West Bank and Gaza on the less-protected side of the separation zone, and makes a distinction between their security and the security of Israelis living within the Green Line.

The plan for full unilateral disengagement (option number two), which would be based on the present division of territory between of Israel and the Palestinians, is supported by some politicians on the Israeli right, such as Likud Member of Knesset Michael Eitan. According to this concept, no settlement or area under Israeli control would be ceded. In order to achieve security for the Israeli residents of the West Bank, full physical separation would have to be created between them and the Palestinians, based on the existing distribution of the two populations.

The main problem of this plan is that, due to the broad dispersal of settlements throughout the West Bank, separation of this sort is not entirely feasible. For such separation to be effective, it would be necessary to prevent Palestinians from using, or even coming into the vicinity of, any

road used by Israelis. The difficulty in doing this has been clearly shown over the last year of Palestinian-Israeli violence: paved roads can be accessed by vehicles via any number of unpaved side-roads, or approached on foot with no need of any path whatsoever. The political implication of this plan is also clear: it would perpetuate the Israeli presence in the Occupied Territories, and hence the conflict with the Palestinians, particularly if it were to include retaining and enlarging the settlements.

The plan for unilaterally disengaging to a permanent border on or adjacent to the Green Line (option three) would seek to implement a fundamental change in the division of territory between Israel and the Palestinians, in the hopes of creating conditions conducive to stability. Its supporters, generally members of the Israeli left, are united in the belief that Israel's presence in the Occupied Territories is not an asset, but rather a burden. They believe that such a separation, despite being taken unilaterally and leaving a small number of disputed issues unresolved, could create a situation that would be politically acceptable to the Palestinians. Despite not being part of a negotiated settlement, such a separation would enable the Palestinians to establish a viable, territorially contiguous state. From the security viewpoint, this plan would create a relatively short disengagement line, which could be policed more efficiently.

With that, the implementation of such a plan would carry an extremely high domestic political price, since it would dictate vacating a majority of the settlements. It leaves difficult points of dispute between Israel and the Palestinians unresolved, particularly regarding Jerusalem and Palestinian refugees. It risks creating an armed and hostile Palestinian state aligned in a coalition with other enemies of Israel in the Arab world,

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while the move to borders along the Green Line would deprive the country of much of its strategic depth. Moreover, so large a withdrawal could be interpreted by the Palestinians as an Israeli capitulation in the face of their use of violence. Were this to be the case, Israel's withdrawal might actually prove counterproductive to the goal of contributing to stability, since it would appear to reward violence. Finally, Israel would be leaving itself with almost no bargaining chips for future negotiations with the Palestinians, in which difficult issues (Jerusalem,

refugees) would need to be resolved.

The principles underlying support for withdrawing to an interim line (option four) are similar to those calling for withdrawal to Israel's permanent border. They seek, however, to avoid paying the high political and strategic price for such a far-reaching withdrawal, even if this comes at the expense of making the ultimate situation less acceptable to the Palestinians (a significant consideration, since that this would ostensibly reduce the chances of increasing stability). However, those supporting such a move hope that it would be possible to create a situation in which the Palestinians could carry on normal lives within a viable geographic unit. This, it is hoped, would ultimately reduce their motivation for continuing violent actions. The assumption is that withdrawal to an interim position would establish a relatively short disengagement line that could make separation more practicable, while still preserving some territorial assets for use in future negotiations. Such a withdrawal would necessitate vacating a smaller number of settlements, but would also facilitate closer supervision of the arming of the Palestinian entity. There are, of course, a number of variations to this plan, based on the location of the interim line: some are closer to option two and others to option three.

Having delineated the various types of disengagement, the practicality of their implementation, and their potential to serve the goals

set out for them, can now be assessed by means of various standards. The ramifications of each form of disengagement must be examined on the basis of these standards, in both the short and long term. These should include the following:

- *Political feasibility.* To what extent is a given unilateral disengagement plan feasible, given current and future political realities?
- *Operational feasibility.* Would a given unilateral disengagement plan provide a line that could be effectively policed?
- *Political/diplomatic prospects.* Does a given form of disengagement leave room for renewing negotiations, should conditions prove ripe for this?
- *Expected effects on the level of violence.* Would disengagement likely increase or decrease levels of violence among the Palestinians?
- *Expected reactions.* How would the region, and the international community, respond to a given disengagement plan?

The strengthening of the Israeli right following the election of Ariel Sharon leads to the conclusion that the greater the extent to which a disengagement plan requires vacating settlements, the less its political feasibility, at least in the short term. Over the longer term, the continuation of violence, the price that the Israeli public would suffer as a result of that violence, and generalized feelings of hopelessness could increase the preference for improved personal security over the retention of certain settlements.

Public-opinion surveys conducted during the past year have indicated that there is willingness among large portions of the Israeli public to concede on settlements, even though this is not fully reflected in the composition of the country's political leadership.

The operational feasibility of each of the programs for unilateral disengagement involves certain difficulties: completely preventing

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incursions by lone attackers along a long and winding border, the topography of which affords convenient hiding places, will not necessarily be easy. Moreover, there are difficulties involved in establishing barriers around Jerusalem. In addition, there is the high cost, both in money and in personnel, of effective physical barriers. Some also point to the likelihood that separation would sever economic ties between Israel and the Palestinians, creating a socioeconomic disaster in the territories which, in the long run, would run counter to Israel's interests.

Moreover, when examining the various types of disengagement, it becomes clear that any program which calls for leaving a large number of settlements in place and including them in the separated area creates progressively longer, more tortuous separation lines. Hence, the easier a given plan is politically, the less its operational feasibility, and the more its potential for actually enhancing the personal security of Israelis.

The desire to preserve the possibility of a negotiated settlement in the future also creates a dilemma. On the one hand, it can be argued that, unless unilateral disengagement gives the Palestinians some benefit and demonstrates Israel's willingness to seek a solution acceptable to them, it would diminish the chances of renewing a constructive political process. On the other hand, it can be argued that, if a disengagement were to overly benefit the Palestinians, particularly in terms of territories handed over to their control, it might lead them to the conclusion that violence pays off. Rather than encouraging a return to the peace process, this could signal to them to redouble their military efforts until all Palestinian national goals are achieved.

It is fair to assume that, the more a given disengagement plan perpetuates the current situation on the ground, reinforcing the "bars" of the cage in which the Palestinians feel they are trapped, the more their feelings of despair and entrapment will grow. Increased anti-Israeli

violence would likely result from this, including attempts at carrying out attacks within Israel, breaching the disengagement line at weak points along it, or opening fire from the Palestinian side of it — especially if such plans are perceived as a guise for increasing settlement activity — and international and regional reaction is likely to be harsh. The US and the European states already regard the concept of separation with some suspicion. It is likely that reactions in the Arab world would be even more skeptical.

Consideration also must be given to the connection between the form of implementation and reactions to it. A unilateral disengagement plan could either be implemented using a 'one fell swoop' approach, or else by gradual implementation over a long period of time. Moreover, if Israel were to employ a graduated approach, it could do so without necessarily making any public declaration at all, preferring instead to effect substantial changes in

the existing situation slowly and quietly. The more gradual and understated the adoption and implementation of a unilateral separation policy would be, the greater the chances that it could be carried out without engendering harsh regional and international reactions. However, it is highly questionable whether such a significant policy shift could be implemented quietly and gradually, given that it would be essential for policymakers to create public support for it. Another problem is that by taking gradual steps, policymakers risk watering down the plan to such an extent that, by the end of the process, nothing would be left of its original intent.

The above discussion represents only the beginnings of an orderly discourse on the subject of unilateral disengagement. In the interim, it appears that it would be extremely difficult to find a unilateral

disengagement plan that could serve all of Israel's needs simultaneously. Such a plan would have to be both politically and operationally feasible, improve personal safety in the short to medium term, and avoid longer-term difficulties from a political or security standpoint. However, it is clear that there is a definite difference between security disengagement (option one) and all the other three scenarios presented above, because it has fewer political ramifications. That is the reason that the present government has already started implementation of some limited initial disengagement steps in some parts of the West Bank and along some parts of the Green Line. However, these steps have been reluctant, half-hearted, and not in the framework of a comprehensive plan. Even so, the government will likely find it difficult to continue taking such steps while avoiding serious discussion of the different options of unilateral disengagement.

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