

The Disengagement Plan: The Day After

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The disengagement plan is the focus of public debate in Israel, with attention centered on questions of implementation: will the prime minister overcome the internal political problems and deflect attempts to scuttle the plan? How violent will the reaction of the settlers and their supporters be to the evacuation process? Will there be a significant level of refusal to obey orders in the IDF? Will the disengagement plan be implemented under fire from the Palestinians? These and other related issues are important, but they pale in significance compared with the main question: what will Israel face the day after the disengagement? Will it have embarked on a route to reconciliation with the Palestinians and a solution to – or at least a moderation of – the decades-long conflict, or not?

The Scenario

For the purposes of analyzing this issue, assume the disengagement plan is successfully implemented. Overall the ceasefire is maintained before and during the plan's implementation, the level of Israeli–Palestinian violence is low, and cooperation between the sides is substantive. We will also assume the disengagement is not an overly traumatic experience for Israel such that society ceases to function on a fairly regular basis. This scenario is important as it prompts the question of the day after. In a failed situation in which disengagement occurs under Palestinian fire and leads solely to an increase in the violent confrontation one can say, with a high degree of certainty, that there is only one possible outcome. The Israeli public will conclude that since there is no pos-

sibility of avoiding violent confrontation, there is no point in trying to make more concessions that would mitigate the conflict.

On the other hand, successful implementation of the disengagement plan will generate a new level of expectation on both sides. Heightened expectations are already reflected in public opinion polls conducted among both sides since Yasir Arafat's death recast the arena. The Israeli public will likely expect that the Gaza Strip "concession" will yield benefits, the suspension of the violent intifada will become permanent, and the political process will resume and advance Israel toward a resolution of the conflict. The Palestinian public will look for a tangible improvement in their living conditions, marked primarily by unrestricted freedom of

movement, a stop to the violence, restoration of law and order, an improvement in their economic situation, and renewed possibility of realizing their basic national aspirations to establish a state based on the 1967 borders.

Experience of the Israeli–Palestinian political process that began with the publicizing of the September 1993 Declaration of Principles indicates that the level of disappointment becomes proportionate to the unfulfilled expectations. The result of unmet expectations is normally not a return to the previous baseline, but involves far more serious conditions. The best example of this phenomenon is the collapse of the Oslo process reflected in the failure at Camp David in 2000. Had there not been such high expectations it is doubtful whether the crisis that followed the failure

would have been so severe. Thus, the question arises whether a similar crisis in Israeli–Palestinian relations is expected after the disengagement, or in other words, if current expectations are destined for disappointment.

The Israeli Side

Upon completion of the disengagement Israel will face the question of what to do next. In view of the government's current political composition it is likely there will be several opposing stances on the subject. At one end there will be those who objected to disengagement from the start, joined by those who opposed the disengagement plan in their hearts but were coerced into supporting it for political considerations. This group will probably endeavor to reconcile with the disengagement that occurred, but not much more. They will argue that Israel has done its part but has been traumatized in the process, and therefore Israel should adjust to and maintain the new situation, even if it is essentially a long term interim situation. During this interim period, the Palestinians will be under scrutiny and the settlements that remain under Israeli control should be reinforced. If stability is maintained during this long interim period it will then be possible to consider further progress with the Palestinians in the future.

At the other end of the spectrum will be leaders of Sharon's principal coalition partner, the Labor party. They will demand renewal of the full political process with the Palestinians, based on the roadmap and negotiations with the Palestinians. Some

may even support bypassing phase two of the roadmap, as part of which a Palestinian state is to be established with temporary borders. They would argue that this constitutes a superfluous stage that only serves the interests of those looking to block the political process.

The middle ground will be occupied by those who believe the current disengagement plan is inadequate, as it only addresses the problem of the Gaza Strip. Israel should strive to achieve full disengagement in Judea and Samaria too, involving the dismantling of additional settlements and redeploying along a line that relieves Israel of the Palestinian demographic problem, serves as a convenient line of defense, and allows Israel to keep most of the settlements in Judea and Samaria. There may be debate within this group between those who would prefer to execute this unilaterally, like Ehud Olmert in Likud and Haim Ramon of the Labor party, and those who want to use phase two of the roadmap and a Palestinian state with temporary borders as a means of achieving this objective.

At this stage, it is difficult to assess Sharon's own platform. Since it is clear that he does not espouse conducting negotiations on a permanent settlement, it is likely that he is somewhere between those looking for a complete halt after disengagement and those who are willing to attempt additional disengagement. Sharon is already laying the foundations for shunning further movement after the disengagement, saying that progress in implementing the roadmap is not

automatic and depends on the Palestinians' full implementation of their obligations under phase one of the roadmap, which, according to the Israeli interpretation, means complete dismantling of the terror infrastructure. The Israeli side can always claim the Palestinians did not meet this obligation. In any case, it is likely that the government, in its present guise, will find it hard to reach agreement on the way forward, and consequently the disintegration of the coalition and new elections after the disengagement is a reasonable prognosis.

The Palestinian Side

Statements by Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) since his election as chairman of the Palestinian Authority (PA) indicate that he opposes continuing a phased Israeli–Palestinian diplomatic process. His approach is that the option of establishing a Palestinian state with provisional borders as it appears in the roadmap should be discarded (and indeed, a Palestinian state of this nature is, according to the roadmap, an "option" only) and talks on a permanent agreement should be launched immediately. Abu Mazen is in fact the most prominent representative of the Palestinian delegation to the Geneva initiative, even though he did not take an active role in its formulation, and one may assume he believes it is possible to reach agreement with Israel within the general framework of the Geneva initiative. There may of course be circumstances in which Abu Mazen will be ready to consider adopting an interim phase of a Palestinian state with provisional

borders, but this would be contingent on a defined timetable that moves quickly to phase three, the permanent settlement. If there is a preliminary understanding between the two sides with regard to the principles of the permanent settlement it will be easier for Abu Mazen to agree to an interim phase.

Elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) are scheduled for July 2005. Hamas will take part in these elections for the first time, despite its previous fundamental opposition to institutions established by the Oslo anathema. Hamas understands, however, that since Arafat's death, the majority of the Palestinian public supports Abu Mazen's political path and wants an end to the violence. That is why Hamas agreed to a ceasefire or, in its new name, a *tahadiya*, and is progressing toward assuming an official place on the Palestinian political stage. The very participation by Hamas in the elections brings it closer to adopting a negotiated two state solution of the conflict. However, if Hamas does well in the elections it will be able to limit Abu Mazen's ability to maneuver and may indeed dictate tough positions on talks with Israel.

Hamas decided to take part in the elections following its success in the local elections in the Gaza Strip and West Bank. Will this success have any bearing on its chances in the elections to the national parliamentary body? Voting by the Palestinian public in the local elections was primarily a protest vote against the mainstream Fatah candidates, who were consid-

ered corrupt, certainly in contrast to the Hamas candidates, who benefited from a clean image. Thus, most who voted for Abu Mazen and his political approach in the elections for a Pales-

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tinian leader voted against the candidates of his party, Fatah, in the local elections. If this protest voting pattern is repeated in the parliamentary elections, Fatah may experience similar losses. Reformists in Fatah are very concerned with the possibility of such a development and consequently are demanding high visibility reforms in Fatah, including ousting the older generation and "the Tunisians" who came to the territories with Arafat at the start of the Oslo process. It is they who are reputed – often correctly – of being corrupt. It is unclear whether Abu Mazen will be prepared to carry out these steps, and this uncertainty is the source of much frustration for Fatah reformists.

Even if one assumes that Abu Mazen's intentions are good, in the sense that he genuinely wants to resolve the conflict with Israel in a non-violent manner, his ability to realize these intentions is highly doubtful. Dur-

ing the intifada the PA underwent a process of disintegration that first and foremost damaged its security apparatuses. At the same time, the central national-secular Palestinian political stream, which is built on Fatah, also experienced a similar process of disintegration and loss of power. Abu Mazen's ability to implement his policy is largely contingent on his ability to revitalize the central political body and rebuild the PA, particularly its security apparatuses, yet so far, his *modus operandi* has slowed the implementation of essential reforms. He steers clear of confrontation and prefers to progress through dialogue and generating consensus. This approach may offer many long term advantages, but considering the tight schedule of the coming year it may prevent him from executing the necessary reforms in Fatah before the July elections and delay the required security reforms, which call for amalgamating the various units into three bodies subordinate to a single entity. Non-implementation of the security reforms is liable to lead to ongoing instability. More urgent, however, is the current ceasefire, which in the absence of viable PA power is based solely on the will of the Islamic organizations. If the current pace of reform continues, the PA's ability to enforce law and order at Palestinian street level may not occur in the foreseeable future.

As for the feelings among the Palestinian populace at large, the Palestinians are heavily concerned with issues related to their daily lives, freedom of movement, economic well-being, and the fate of the prisoners

– almost all families have one or more relatives in Israeli prisons. For now, there is a sense of dissatisfaction that change is not taking place, or is unfolding too slowly. This feeling may intensify during the disengagement period, which would accelerate the already-brewing crisis.

The International Arena

The important international players, headed by the US and the European Union (EU), have agreed to back the disengagement plan on condition that it serves as a stage in the process and not as an independent move. They will be looking for renewal of talks between Israel and the Palestinians based on the roadmap after implementation of the disengagement. Specifically, it is clear that the EU will adhere firmly to this demand, although Europe's position will only have limited impact on the positions of the two sides, as the main international player is still the United States.

During President Bush's first term in office the US generally abstained from pressuring Israel to implement difficult political moves. It is possible that for several reasons the Bush administration will behave differently during the second term:

- Re-election is not a factor. Although there is still the issue of not wanting to affect adversely the power of the Republican party, that is less of a consideration.
- The need for reform in the Middle East based on democratization is a central element of President Bush's agenda. In terms of the American administration, the free elections

in the PA after Arafat's death and the election of Abu Mazen – a moderate pro-Western candidate who supports democratic reforms – exemplify the viability of American policy and offer a positive example to the rest of the Arab world. In this context the US government has a strong interest in supporting and strengthening Abu Mazen.

- The new administration is willing to do as much as it can to improve its negative image in the Arab world. Because of this image, the chances of realizing American political aims in Iraq and in the Middle East as a whole are slim. Similarly, the messages of reform and democratization are treated with widespread mistrust in the Arab world, with limited possibilities for influence. The policymakers in the Bush administration clearly understand that the American stand on the Israel–Palestinian issue contributes heavily to the negative image in the Arab world.

- The administration is investing significant efforts to redress the European–American rift generated by the Iraq War. The Israel–Palestinian issue could be perceived by the administration as an area for possible American–European collaboration. This thinking may push the administration towards the European policy.

- During his second term of office an American president has a tendency to adopt ambitious projects based on his desire to influence his place in history.

- Finally, the administration was reluctant to invest too much in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict because

it viewed the chances of success of such involvement as low, and therefore saw it as a political burden on the administration. Arafat's death, the subsequent changes in the PA, and Prime Minister Sharon's disengagement plan could persuade the Americans that the chances of successful involvement have greatly improved, and thus investing the necessary resources makes political sense.

On the other hand, the fundamental empathy of President Bush and other central figures in his administration for the Israeli government will join the awareness that current Israeli and Palestinian politics make it very difficult to achieve further progress after disengagement, with success by no means assured.

The Bush administration is making every effort not to intervene in the implementation of the disengagement plan and therefore has avoided any serious friction with the Israeli government. The administration is also abiding the Israeli behavior of dragging its feet on commitments to freeze settlement building and dismantle outposts. These issues will surface once again after disengagement, especially for this US administration, which does not generally show much understanding towards non-fulfillment of commitments.

Based on all these considerations, it is likely that after disengagement the US, in collaboration with Europe, will strive to push the Israeli–Palestinian process forward based on the roadmap, whose advantage lies in the fact that it is a document accepted by all the sides, despite various qualifi-

cations from the respective parties. The international players will strive through the disengagement period to enable the plan by contributing to the PA's rehabilitation and the building of its institutions, including its security organizations, and providing financial aid. They will also exert their influence on Israel to take steps that will help revive the Palestinian economy and Abu Mazen's government and allow freer movement of people and goods within and outside the Palestinian autonomy areas. However, past experience suggests that international bureaucratic obstacles and Israeli security considerations will slow improvement of the situation for the Palestinians, and therefore the day after the disengagement, the Palestinian people will still not feel the fruits of disengagement or any fundamental change in their situation.

The Probable Crisis

Analysis thus indicates that the most likely scenario after disengagement is a crisis in which the Palestinians demand renewed talks on a permanent settlement; the Israeli side hinges its consent to holding talks on phase two of the roadmap and a Palestinian state with temporary borders on full implementation of phase one of the roadmap and a complete dismantling of the terror infrastructure. Meanwhile the US and Europe will pressure the two sides to start negotiations based on the roadmap. The EU will likely incline toward the Palestinian wish to bypass phase two of the roadmap, while the US may support Israel on an additional interim phase.

It is not clear what the impact of a collapse of the government in Israel and early elections would have on this crisis. The Palestinian leadership, which is familiar with the Israeli political system, will probably understand that it has no choice but to wait for the internal Israeli process to run its course. However, for the general Palestinian public such a development may strengthen the sense of crisis and the feeling of having reached a dead end. Consequently, there is a risk that this process may lead to Abu Mazen losing his legitimacy and leaving his post, which he did not hesitate to do during his first term as prime minister. If his place is taken by more militant elements, it would strengthen Hamas, which at this stage may very well be in a position of political power as a result of its performance in the PLC elections.

In such a situation the chances of an outbreak of violence that would renew the intifada would be greatly increased. Whether or not there is a tangible reason for a resumption of the intifada is of secondary importance. Nor does this mean that the Palestinian leadership would make a strategic decision to renew the violence. Rather, internal processes might lead to the collapse of the Palestinian leadership, its loss of control, and a rise of the supporters of violence who would initiate the escalation.

Recommendations for Israel

Among the strong supporters in Israel of unilateral disengagement there are those who will claim that there was never any chance of reaching effective

dialogue with the Palestinians, and that the crisis was unavoidable. Indeed, herein lay the background to the disengagement plan, and as Israel's basic interest is to disengage from the Palestinians in order to preserve Israel as a Jewish democratic state, there is no alternative to continuing with unilateral separation in Judea and Samaria while confronting Palestinian violence.

This is a deterministic approach that precludes any intention of reaching agreed separation with the Palestinians and ignores the enormous impact the disengagement will have on public opinion in Israel. If the disengagement plan leads to prolonged violence one can assume that the disappointment of the Israeli public will create opposition to any further step interpreted as a concession to the Palestinians, including further unilateral withdrawals. Israel thus has an interest in generating a mechanism that will allow it to avoid the crisis period. This mechanism should be based on dialogue with the Palestinians, in which the US and EU play a central role.

The present Palestinian leadership views violent confrontation not as a vehicle for realizing its political aims, rather as an obstacle. Israel must therefore do its utmost to reach an understanding with the Palestinians on a political process that will prevent the expected crisis from erupting. Based on the shared interest in preventing this crisis, it is essential that the Israeli leadership already engage in a strategic dialogue with the Palestinian leadership. The goal of the dialogue will

be for both sides to clarify their constraints and room for maneuver with the purpose of drafting a formula capable of accommodating coordinated unilateral moves alongside staged negotiations. Thus, for example, the process may include a later stage of coordinated unilateral disengagement in Judea and Samaria that will allow the creation of the Palestinian state with temporary borders, along with the agreement of both sides with regard to dialogue on the principles of a permanent agreement to start at a later date, to be set in advance or at the same time. The process should incorporate flexibility as an integral part. It is also important to generate a feeling of sustained progress.

It is possible that it will be convenient for both sides to rely on elements of the roadmap. However, in practice they will have to build a new and more realistic formula, and thereby not repeat the errors of the Camp David summit whereby the two sides did not hold advance talks on a joint strategy that would enable them to overcome a crisis were the summit to fail. Perhaps such talks could not have been held in any case prior to Camp David due to Arafat's difficult personality. Today, however, it appears that such dialogue is possible and that there is openness on the Palestinian side regarding the idea. The main problem is concern on the Israeli side that such talks may increase opposition to the disengagement plan if it already entails what will be perceived as additional concessions. Yet

following approval of the budget and rejection of the referendum this concern is no longer an issue. There is currently no political way to stop implementation of disengagement and such dialogue will not reduce the Israeli public's support for disengagement. Indeed, according to all public opinion polls, the majority of the Israeli public supports dialogue and negotiations with the Palestinians. This support will only grow if disengagement is successful. Moreover, Likud opponents of disengagement include a sector led by MK Michael Ratzon who opposes disengagement because it is unilateral and not because he objects fundamentally to dismantling settlements as part of an agreement with the Palestinians.

Another conclusion is the importance of measures and confidence building steps that will improve the situation of the Palestinian public. If the Palestinians feel there is significant improvement in their economic conditions and freedom of movement, this could greatly quell feelings of frustration generated by the lack of a political process and vision, and reduce the chance of a spontaneous outburst of violence. To this end it is worthwhile for Israel to take greater risks than those it currently takes. As long as the ceasefire holds it is possible to take risks relating to the Palestinian public's freedom of movement and the release of prisoners.

The US and EU have important support roles to play in both areas. First, they must facilitate dialogue be-

tween the sides by exerting pressure on them when required and, when necessary, by providing guarantees for both sides. A good example of this is the letter from the national security advisor given to Dov Weisglass when support for the disengagement plan was needed. There may be a need for a similar letter to Abu Mazen in order to provide the Palestinians with the necessary guarantees that the US will not allow the process to stall after implementation of the disengagement plan, and that the president is determined to bring about the creation of a Palestinian state that will realize the Palestinians' basic national aims. In addition, Abu Mazen will not be able to carry out the necessary reforms in the PA and to rebuild the security facilities without the support of the European Union and the United States. Without urgent and massive financial aid from the international community it will not be possible to improve the Palestinians' economic conditions to the extent and at the pace needed to prevent the re-emergence of feelings of disappointment and frustration.

If the two sides, with the help of the third parties, manage to build the mechanism that will initially defer and then obviate the expected crisis in Israeli-Palestinians relations, there will be a greater chance that realization of the disengagement plan and Arafat's departure from the arena will be marked as a positive turning point in the Israeli-Palestinian process and not as just another episode with limited effect.