

Disengagement Offshoots: Strategic Implications for Israeli Society

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Introduction

The plan for disengagement from the Gaza Strip and northern Samaria, the preparations for its implementation, and the public debate surrounding the initiative compose the main story of the Israeli social and political scenes of 2005. If the disengagement plan is carried out on schedule, how it is implemented will impact on many important components of Israeli society.

Prime Minister Sharon's disengagement plan has created a new political reality. It is unclear whether the plan reflects a genuine conceptual volte-face in the prime minister's political agenda for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or whether the plan is primarily a tactical step designed to gain time for Israel to bolster its control over the West Bank. Either way, however, for the first time Israel is withdrawing unilaterally and on its own initiative from large sections of mandatory Palestine. True, the withdrawal from Sinai and the dismantlement of the Yamit settlements serve as a precedent, and an important one at that, for the current withdrawal. But the two cases are clearly dissimilar from the point of view of the national ethos. Sinai was never considered part of the historic

Land of Israel, and the withdrawal was part of a peace agreement with Egypt that was of critical historical importance. As such, an ethos that Sharon himself cultivated for many years – that “the fate of Netzarim [an isolated Jewish settlement in the Gaza Strip] is the fate of Tel Aviv” – is being shattered. This ethos is based on the strategic-historic assertion that present-day Jewish settlement in the territories determines Israel's future borders. The shattering of the myth is even more pronounced by linking the withdrawal from the entire Gaza Strip to the evacuation of four settlements in northern Samaria, a political decision with far-reaching symbolic significance. This may be a harbinger of what to expect in the future.

According to surveys conducted by the Tami Steimetz Center at Tel Aviv University, the disengagement plan has registered consistent solid support in the Israeli public since its announcement in late 2003. For many months the level of support remained stable at around 60 percent. Surveys by the Dahaf Institute show an even higher percentage of support for the disengagement policy: in October 2004, 70 percent of respondents strongly or somewhat supported it, in February 2005, 66 percent were

strongly or somewhat supportive of it, and in May 2005, 60 percent strongly or somewhat supported it. Since February 2005 a slight downward trend can be seen in public support for the plan. According to the Tami Steimetz Center, in late May 2005, 57.5 percent of the Jewish respondents supported disengagement and 35.3 percent opposed. One month later, support among the Jewish population dropped to 54 percent and opposition rose to 41 percent. Other surveys of June show support dropping to even closer to 50 percent.

The decline in support in recent months may be attributed to statements about the lack of suitable solutions for evacuating the settlers. A majority (56 percent) of those who support the disengagement and a majority (64 percent) of those who oppose the disengagement estimated that with only weeks before implementation, the government and relevant institutions are not prepared. The drop in support may also be due to the government's decision to postpone withdrawal from July to August. A poll conducted in early May 2005 revealed that only 35 percent of the public believed that the disengagement would take place on time. By the end of June, however,

their number rose to 42 percent. In May, 36.7 percent thought it would be postponed again (32 percent in late June), and 11.8 percent were convinced (13.5 percent in June) that the disengagement plan would not be implemented at all.

Against the background of these trends, the article below examines some of the ramifications of the disengagement plan for Israeli society. The issues discussed include concern for the possible dissolution of the national consensus, the IDF and the refusal problem, and the legitimacy of the army's intensive involvement in the disengagement process.

The Ideological and Religious Dimension

The prime minister's announcement of the disengagement plan aroused a deep public debate regarding the Land of Israel and its borders. The debate has widened to reach the realm of certain values linked to Israeli society's fundamental ethos and myths. Perhaps because of the ideological and emotional weight of the issues, the debate early on evolved into a full-blown social and political struggle. As such, it challenges one of the country's cardinal myths: the unity of Israeli society, or more precisely, of Jewish Israeli society, as a key factor in the country's strength and its ability to cope with adversity.

The religious dimension became its own salient component in the public debate on disengagement due to deep-rooted beliefs on the Land of Israel. This dimension has created – not

for the first time, but with new intensity – a situation in which key figures in the religious public find themselves opposed to decisions made by the state's highest power on crucial issues, with their most prominent political representatives consistently and unequivocally voicing such a position. According to a survey conducted by the Tami Steimetz Center in May 2005, the religious parties' support of the disengagement plan is well below the national average: National Religious Party – 36 percent; Shas – 25 percent; United Torah Judaism – 16 percent.

The vehement opposition by many among the religious public to the disengagement is rooted not only in their understanding of the Gaza area as part of the historical Land of Israel, "the land of our forefathers." It seems that it is also linked to concern that this serves as a precedent for further withdrawals from Judea and Samaria. Furthermore, much of the resistance of the religious camp and their religious and political leaders extends to other issues, relating specifically to the alienation between the religious and secular sectors in Israel: secular society is deemed by some in the religious sector as a society that has distanced itself from fundamental Jewish values. But whatever its driving ideology, the opposition has searched for a variety of means to obstruct the plan. Some of these measures are deemed unacceptable to the secular community and as threatening to the socio-political fabric of Israeli democratic society.

Government authorities dealing with the pullout have been forced to plan for extremist contingencies. In a survey carried out by the Tami Steimetz Center in January 2005, 46.5 percent of those questioned believed that there was a high or quite high danger of civil war in Israel if the unilateral disengagement plan is implemented. Perhaps the context for this belief lies in statements by certain rabbis and other spokespeople of the settler community who have called for physical resistance to evacuation. In late June, 50.7 percent of Jewish respondents thought there was a real danger of political assassination to supporters of the disengagement, and 72.8 percent thought there was a real danger of violence and bloodshed in the areas marked for evacuation. Seventy-five percent of those polled in a Dahaf Institute survey in February 2005 were very or quite concerned that clashes between the settlers and the soldiers who come to implement the evacuation might lead to an exchange of fire.

Indeed, under the present circumstances of mutual suspicion and alienation, physical opposition to evacuation, whether passive, or certainly if active, could lead to casualties and perhaps fatalities. Such a worst-case scenario, even if the forces participating in the evacuation make a supreme effort to avoid it, will have momentous consequences for the future. This is true to a great degree regarding the government's legitimacy or freedom of action to decide on the steps for withdrawal from other parts

Open Questions apropos the Disengagement / Shlomo Brom

The implementation of the disengagement plan in the Gaza Strip and northern Samaria will be a precedent-setting event, with immense potential influence on Israeli-Palestinian relations and political developments in Israel. Though the implementation is scheduled to begin in mid-August, many open questions remain regarding the plan's key features that are likely to impact on the attainment of its objectives.

The first question is whether the Gaza withdrawal will be a comprehensive withdrawal. If Israel maintains control of the outer envelope of the Gaza Strip by leaving a military presence on the Philadelphi route (which divides the Gaza Strip from Egypt), retaining control of the border crossings at Rafiah, and preventing the opening of the sea and airports, there is deep concern that friction with the Palestinians will continue. International recognition that Israel's occupation of the Gaza Strip has come to an end will also be harder to gain.

On the other hand, if Israel relinquishes its control of the outer envelope without alternative solutions that guarantee the supervision of goods entering Gaza and prevention of weapons smuggling, then the security threat to Israel is apt to increase significantly. Under these circumstances, it will be impossible to maintain a joint Israeli-Palestinian customs arrangement according to the 1994 Paris agreement, and it is doubtful that different customs arrangements can be set up in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

The potential role of a third party is relevant here: can solutions be devised for monitoring the outer envelope of the Gaza Strip by introducing a third party – such as an Arab state like Egypt or other international players – to solve the problem of smuggling on the Philadelphi route.

What should be the role of the Quartet's security team headed by General Ward? Is it to assist the Palestinians in introducing reforms into their security agencies and strengthening them, or is Israel interested in having this team act as a monitoring mechanism for the two sides' reciprocal fulfillment of obligations that was supposed to have been established according to the road-map?

What will happen to the buildings in the settlements after the evacuation has yet to be decided. According to the government's original decision, the settlers' homes are to be razed, though there is a willingness to transfer the economic infrastructure – mainly the hothouses – to the Palestinians on condition that an international party will supervise their orderly transfer. So far adequate arrangements for transferring the economic infrastructure to the Palestinians have not been found. In the meantime much opposition has developed in Israel against the leveling of homes because of the likely damage to Israel's international image. The demolition and removal of debris will also require much time,

thus considerably lengthening the disengagement timetable and jeopardizing the forces involved.

Another question still open is the legal status of the areas that will be evacuated in northern Samaria. Regarding the Gaza Strip this question is a non-issue. Israel is withdrawing from the Gaza Strip and has no desire to maintain any links whatsoever in the area. The only issue that will continue to plague Israel is the security threat emanating from the Strip, which it will tackle regardless of the area's status. The situation in northern Samaria is different. There the area to be evacuated is not separated from the rest of the West Bank by a physical obstacle, nor are all the settlements in northern Samaria being evacuated. Therefore it will be difficult to separate this region from the rest of Judea and Samaria. This situation will probably induce Israel to retain maximum flexibility by maintaining the current legal status of the evacuated area – defined as Area C – in which Israel has complete authority. However, the Palestinians cannot assume any control in these areas without at least having civilian authority transferred to them. The question then becomes whether it would be possible to grant the Palestinians civilian control without changing the area's status to that of Area B (whereby Israel retains security control and the Palestinians have civil jurisdiction).

How will movement between the Gaza Strip and Judea and Samaria take place? Will a kind of "safe passage" be set up according to an interim agreement or other arrangement? Moreover, what passage between northern Samaria and the rest of Judea and Samaria will be devised for people and commercial goods? If northern Samaria receives a different status, then a partition might divide it from the rest of the West Bank, strengthening Palestinian suspicions that Israel's only intention is to set up separate cantons so that it can frustrate the chances to establish a viable Palestinian state.

What will be the economic ties between the Gaza Strip, northern Samaria, and Israel? According to the Israeli government's decision, Israel is to cease employing Palestinians by 2008. At the same time, it is in Israel's interest that economic conditions in these territories improve because economic oppression and its consequences are liable to spill over into Israel. Yet economic conditions cannot improve quickly without strengthening economic ties with Israel, which includes issuing work permits to Palestinian laborers and allowing the movement of goods to and from Israel with minimum interference.

The last question deals with the level of coordination between the two sides. Currently, despite mutual declarations of willingness for coordination, they have yet to be translated into practical understandings. Unless that changes, the disengagement may proceed with a very minimal degree of coordination, especially if the security situation continues to deteriorate.

of the West Bank (whether it is carried out unilaterally or in agreement with the Palestinians).

The IDF, Evacuation, and the Consensus

One central dimension linked to the disengagement plan is the army's role as a principal agent in evacuating the settlers and the danger of those among the rank and file who refuse to undertake this task. The Israeli police, as part of their job to maintain public order, have been assigned to deal directly with the settlers, yet it is not clear if the police force alone will be sufficient. Saddling the IDF with the disengagement's manifestly non-military tasks, even if this means deploying it in the "second ring" of contact with settlers about to be evacuated, is also extremely problematic by professional standards. The IDF is assumed to possess skills that can be adapted to areas outside its professional experience. What, however, has prepared the army to deal with the evacuation of civilians – women, children, and the elderly – except its ability to deploy large forces within the framework of an efficient well-disciplined organization?

However, the more difficult problem in the IDF's involvement in the disengagement, especially if violence erupts involving casualties, has already triggered many questions about the degree of legitimacy in entrusting the IDF with police-civilian assignments, especially when public consensus over them is lacking. In this area too, disengagement is not

the only issue at stake. The current withdrawal has a moral and historical background over which a big question mark hovers regarding the national ethos that defines the IDF as a "people's army." The potential clash between IDF troops and Israeli citizens, the application of force against civilians, and the possible escalation to violence involving casualties are all liable to create schisms more unbridgeable than those the country has known previously in the unwritten covenant that binds the IDF, the state, and Israeli society.

This issue is of great concern to IDF senior officers not simply because of the immediate implications for the disengagement, but mainly because of its implications for future developments. Can the IDF continue to carry out non-military and semi-non-military missions as it has been doing since the state's inception? Will the government be able to marshal the army in other areas lacking national consensus and where a spirited public debate prevails? Can the troops be mustered for disengagement Stage II?

Refusal in the Military

The danger of insubordination, specifically the refusal to obey military orders during the implementation of the disengagement plan, increases the threat to the army's ethical and social foundations. The Tami Steimetz Center's December 2004 survey found that approximately 45 percent of the overall public (and 47 percent of the Jewish population) thought it certain

or probable that insubordination, whether on the political left or right, would compromise the IDF's operational ability. In the same survey, 26.4 percent of those polled (27 percent of the Jewish respondents) replied that they thought it certain or likely that soldiers from the political right were justified in refusing to take part in the dismantling of settlements, since an act of this sort would violate their belief. An even larger number of the general public (32.5 percent) answered that the army ought to exhibit understanding toward soldiers who disobey orders that clash with their conscience. A Dahaf Institute survey of January 2005 found that 32 percent of the respondents felt that insubordination was permissible within the framework of freedom of expression. The same survey also revealed that only 35 percent believed that those who advocate insubordination should immediately be put on trial, whereas 52 percent thought that an anti-insubordination information campaign should be launched first, and 11 percent felt that nothing should be done to those implicated.

This data shows that the general public harbors a large degree of lenience, tolerance, and acceptance of military insubordination – an attitude that naturally encourages potential "refusers" and makes it difficult for the IDF to put them on trial or to punish them harshly. The data also indicates that the problem runs deep and wide, since it goes to the heart of the traditional concept that sees the IDF soldiers' identification

with their assignments as an intrinsic and vital factor in the army's strength and preparedness. Although the view on insubordination does not seem to question combat assignments at the individual or unit level in the face of a clear external enemy, it does question the general public's attitude toward the army's role in non-military assignments. It is liable to seep into the operational level, thus obstructing the government's ability to employ the army as a systems instrument for the assignments it chooses.

The extent of insubordination is of critical importance regarding future developments. If the phenomenon is widespread, penetrates the IDF's officer corps, and spreads across regular (non-reserve) army units, the nature and character of the IDF could become a major issue on the national agenda. Even if insubordination is limited, it will not be able to erase the fact that the IDF was swept up into the epicenter of a political maelstrom. This will require serious public and political grappling and soul-searching on this issue. For many years it was claimed that the IDF stood outside, better yet, above the political and ideological debate. Will this be said for much longer?

After the second intifada the IDF found itself internally stronger in many ways and on the receiving end of the Israeli public's recognition and heartfelt gratitude. Its successes in the war against terrorism again proved its merit as an efficient tool

for safeguarding state and individual security, as well as its ability to adapt to changing areas and circumstances of conflict. The IDF has justifiably earned the public's increasing trust. But on the issue of public legitimacy, the army faces a more complicated situation. Despite official statements that the IDF merely carries out state policy, the soldiers and officers serving in the army, like a growing number of groups in general society, see a greater link between the IDF, the high command, military service, and political positions. These are also based on the common assumption that the army and its senior officers are increasingly involved in political decision-making. A February 2005 survey by the Tami Steimetz Center found that 25 percent of the public (and 20 percent of Israel's Jewish population) believed that the IDF had too much influence in shaping national policy; 16 percent felt its influence was too weak; and 45 percent claimed that it was sufficient. Under these circumstances, and with the sensitivity characteristic of the coming period, the relationship between army, state, and society will face new challenges.

Conclusion

The implementation of the disengagement plan in the Gaza Strip and northern Samaria will be a political and social watershed in Israel. If the disengagement occurs successfully or even with a few hitches, but without casualties, it will strengthen

Israel both at home and abroad. The government's basis of legitimacy and room for maneuvering will remain intact and even strengthened. The state system will have proven itself capable of carrying out normative democratic processes in decision-making on complex, highly controversial national issues; therefore successful disengagement will have a significant influence on future developments. The political system's strength and ability to wield democratic tools will enable it to determine, by means of regular processes, Israel's position on basic national security issues, including the manner of resolving the conflict with the Palestinians.

Thus the implementation or the failure to implement the disengagement plan, as well as the nature of its implementation, will have far-reaching implications for Israeli society, or more precisely, for social and political factors and processes in the Israeli arena. Unqualified success in carrying out the plan will awaken normative forces and vitalize the democratic system. Failure, however, would clearly denote, already in the short-term, a sharp deterioration and serious weakening of one of the main features of Israel's strategic strength: that Israel is a law-abiding state, based on a society rooted in democratic values, and able to overcome all types of internal challenges by democratic means, difficult though they may be.