

Israel's Strategy of Unilateral Withdrawal

Shmuel Even

In the last three years Israel has been forced to wage two military campaigns in areas from which it withdrew unilaterally – southern Lebanon and the Gaza Strip – in order to cope with threats that grew steadily following the withdrawals. Precisely the two arenas from which Israel withdrew to internationally accepted borders in order to avoid conflict were those that became Israel's most violent fronts. In addition, Israel reversed its intention to realize the "convergence" plan in the West Bank formulated by former prime minister Ehud Olmert as a continuation of the disengagement from the Gaza Strip.

This article explores whether unilateral withdrawal is a proper strategy for achieving Israel's national objectives under circumstances where it is impossible to reach a suitable political settlement in the foreseeable future. It presents the rationales and the expectations defined by those who initiated these moves against the results apparent today. For example, one may question – if not doubt – whether Ariel Sharon would have carried out the disengagement plan had he foreseen today's security reality. The convergence plan was taken off the table before its implementation since the rationales did not withstand the test of time even in the eyes of its creators. In fact, the strategic rationale of unilateral withdrawal grew less and less compelling with each of these events: if the withdrawal from southern Lebanon had a great deal of logic on its side, the disengagement from the Gaza Strip had only limited logic, while the convergence plan had very little logic at all in terms of providing a response to Israel's strategic needs.

Dr. Shmuel Even, senior research associate at INSS

One of the lessons presented here is the need to undertake an advance examination of Israeli-initiated moves with a systemic long term view and to analyze the future expected conduct of all elements affecting the system. For example, in the disengagement Israel did not take into consideration that the withdrawal would generate fundamental changes in the complex Palestinian system so that the final outcome would significantly differ from what it anticipated. Israel also did not consider the full range of its limitations to impact on events in the territory it was evacuating. The backup mechanism for the withdrawal – a harsh military blow should the calm be broken after the withdrawal – turned out to require a concentration of high military firepower and maneuvers, and even then its success was by no means a given in light of the capabilities developed by the enemy.

The Withdrawal from Southern Lebanon

On May 24, 2000, Israel withdrew unilaterally from southern Lebanon to the international border, bringing to an end the IDF's occupation of the security zone that began with the 1982 Lebanon War. The considerations for the withdrawal included:

1. An inadequate military response to Hizbollah's fighting strategy and tactics, leading to relatively many IDF casualties, which in turn led to heavy pressure by the Israeli public. The security zone disintegrated and became a security and political burden.
2. Israel meant to retain the security zone until reaching a peace agreement with Syria and Lebanon,¹ but the failure to reach an agreement with them and the cost of maintaining a presence in Lebanon made Israel attempt to reshape the arena without an agreement. In the immediate term, Israel expected an end to the attacks on Israeli soldiers and the removal of Syria's bargaining chip, i.e., exerting pressure on Israel by means of Hizbollah.² In the longer term, Israel expected increased pressure on the Syrian forces to withdraw from Lebanon and a decrease in the legitimacy of maintaining Hizbollah's military power (dismantling the rationale of the opposition).
3. An expectation that Israel's international standing would improve. Likewise, by withdrawing to the internationally accepted border,

Israel expected international legitimacy for its reactions to hostile activities from Lebanon.

The unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon did in fact boost Israel's image in the international arena but severely harmed Israel's image in the region. It was accompanied by an extensive Hizbollah media campaign in which Nasrallah claimed Israel was weaker than a cobweb.³ In the Arab world, the withdrawal was seen as an unprecedented achievement for Hizbollah, which through intransigence and perseverance brought about – for the first time in history – an Israeli withdrawal without preconditions or an international dictate. The withdrawal apparently blurred Arab awareness that it is impossible to overpower Israel using military force, which in turn strengthened radical Islam's championing the destruction of Israel. Hizbollah's achievement was one of the factors that incited the Palestinians before the al-Aqsa Intifada.

Following the withdrawal, the friction between Israel and Hizbollah declined significantly, but Hizbollah regularly sought new points of contention that would justify perpetuation of the armed struggle, including: the kidnapping of Israelis in order to release Lebanese prisoners in Israel, the demand for the return of Shab'a Farms, and the claim to Lebanese sovereignty over seven destroyed Shiite villages in the Galilee.⁴ As an inseparable part of the said unilateral strategy, Israel was supposed to retaliate forcefully against any provocation and blatant violation of the security status quo. However, Israel's reactions were comparatively mild and Hizbollah dictated the rules of the game – that is, until the kidnapping of Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser in July 2006, which resulted in the Second Lebanon War. Israel's reaction to the kidnapping was so extreme in terms of the damage suffered by Lebanon that Nasrallah admitted that his organization would not have kidnapped the soldiers had he anticipated Israel's reaction. This admission indicates that good deterrence on the part of Israel might have prevented a war. The blow Israel dealt Hizbollah did in fact change the rules of the game but did not alter the strategic threat posed from the northern front, and may have even accelerated the process of Hizbollah's rearmament.

Though the withdrawal from southern Lebanon had some significant disadvantages, it also had many more convincing rationales than those underlying the Gaza withdrawal.

Developments in Lebanon after the withdrawal did not occur as Israel had anticipated. Hizbollah's status was strengthened, as was Iran's influence on Lebanon. The withdrawal did in fact have a negative impact on Syrian legitimacy to remain in Lebanon and eventually sparked a process that – as Israel had hoped – forced the Syrian military to withdraw from Lebanon in April 2005, but this step backfired. As a result of the new order created in Lebanon, it is doubtful whether Syria today can bring the same incentives to the negotiations table with Israel as in the past. Although before Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon it was clear that a political move with regard to Syria would also include Lebanon, today there is no such guarantee in light of Hizbollah's power and Iran's involvement in Lebanon. While the strategic value of an agreement with Syria is significant in and of itself, without a solution in the Lebanese arena it is far less valuable since threats against Israel from this arena are no less severe than those coming from the Syrian army.

Yet despite the many drawbacks, the unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon still seems to have been a justified move in light of Israel's political and military situation. Nonetheless, it could probably have been executed differently, with less damage to Israel's image.

The Disengagement from the Gaza Strip

In September 2005, Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip and evacuated the settlements there.⁵ Similar to the withdrawal from southern Lebanon, the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip also stemmed from a desire to shape the political-security reality with a unilateral move after many years without a political solution. The idea of a unilateral withdrawal began to take shape in Israel earlier in the decade, after the Palestinians rejected the generous offers made by the Barak government for a permanent settlement and started the intifada. As a result, the Israeli side concluded that there was "no partner" on the Palestinian side. The idea of the unilateral withdrawal (which subsequently became known as the disengagement) was adopted by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

The disengagement plan was first presented by Sharon at the Herzliya Conference on December 18, 2003. Sharon said that he preferred to follow the Roadmap, but that he would not wait for the Palestinians to make the effort to solve the conflict and within

two months would initiate a unilateral move that would include an evacuation of settlements:

The Disengagement Plan will include the redeployment of IDF forces along new security lines and a change in the deployment of settlements, which will reduce as much as possible the number of Israelis located in the heart of the Palestinian population. We will draw provisional security lines and the IDF will be deployed along them. Security will be provided by IDF deployment, the security fence and other physical obstacles. The Disengagement Plan will reduce friction between us and the Palestinians....The relocation of settlements will be made, first and foremost, in order to draw the most efficient security line possible, thereby creating this disengagement between Israel and the Palestinians. This security line will not constitute the permanent border of the State of Israel, however, as long as implementation of the Roadmap is not resumed, the IDF will be deployed along that line....At the same time, in the framework of the Disengagement Plan, Israel will strengthen its control over those same areas in the Land of Israel which will constitute an inseparable part of the State of Israel in any future agreement.⁶

At the time, Ze'ev Schiff speculated that Prime Minister Sharon's initial thinking about the disengagement began with the idea of evacuating three Gaza Strip settlements – Netzarim, Kfar Darom, and Morag – but that the plan then evolved.⁷ Schiff added that, "We do not know what primary factor motivated Prime Minister Sharon to transform his strategic-security views and suggest the disengagement plan from the Gaza Strip and Northern Samaria.

There are undoubtedly several reasons for the switch, but it seems he concluded that despite Israel's successes in its war against terrorism it was unable to suppress it completely. He also understood that the occupation was greatly harming Israel's international standing and was damaging the underpinnings of the society and the economy."⁸

The unilateral withdrawals strengthened the radical axis in the Arab world that urged the destruction of Israel.

Another important consideration in favor of unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip was the acknowledgment that this area had little

chance of being included within the State of Israel in the permanent settlement, and therefore it would be best for Israel to spare the security and demographic burden of holding onto this strip of land. This consideration was supported by the following facts:

1. Demographic weakness: the Jewish population of the Gaza Strip was only 0.6 percent in relation to the Palestinian population. The location of the Israeli settlements between two large Arab population centers did not allow for a great deal of flexibility for possible future annexation to Israel.
2. The historic connection of the State of Israel to the Gaza Strip was less significant than the connection to the West Bank, and at the time there was a fairly widespread consensus in Israeli society on withdrawal from the Gaza area.
3. Israel has a relatively large capability of bringing military tools to bear on the Gaza Strip from the outside because of its small size and delineated area.
4. The Gaza Strip exacted a high casualty toll. From 1967 until the withdrawal, 230 Israelis were killed there.⁹

A successful marketing campaign accompanied the promotion of the plan and the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. The concept of “disengagement” took the place of the (defeatist) concept of unilateral withdrawal. It broadcast a message that Israel intended to take the initiative and disengage from the situation in the Gaza Strip, from the problems associated with it, and from the moral responsibility for events there. It served the shapers of public opinion and the leaders of the intra-Israeli arena well as they achieved a broad consensus in Israeli society for the disengagement.

The political echelon created high expectations from the disengagement. In a speech at the Israel Management Conference on September 29, 2005, Prime Minister Sharon said:

The title of your conference is “Decisions Can Change the Course of History.” As one who witnessed the decision making during several significant events in our short history, I would like to tell you that it is true. ... In the political field, I initiated the Disengagement Plan – a plan to secure Israel’s most essential interests. The implementation of the Disengagement Plan, in addition to our determined struggle against terror, yielded fruit in all fields. Israel’s

international standing improved immensely since the implementation of the plan. We brought about a significant reduction in the level of terror, and increased the personal security of the citizens of Israel. The international markets view the Disengagement Plan as a step which will lead to security and economic stability, which creates movement of capital to the Israeli economy and a sharp increase in foreign investment.¹⁰

The disengagement coordinator in the Prime Minister's Office, Brig. Gen. (ret.) Eival Giladi, clarified:

We decided to put an end to the fact that the Palestinian leadership was the one dictating our future to us....After ten years of dialogue along the lines of Oslo and over three years of struggle with many casualties, we decided on the disengagement...It would be accurate to say that had we continued without the unilateral withdrawal, the negotiations would have been hopeless, and even after many years we wouldn't have achieved any results.¹¹

When the disengagement was first made public, the Palestinians welcomed the withdrawal and saw it as a success of the intifada. At the same time, they treated the plan with suspicion and expressed concern about the end of the process of withdrawals and the possibility that the Gaza Strip would turn into one massive prison. A poll taken in March 2004 by the Palestinian Center for Political and Statistical Research among 1,320 Palestinians in 120 different locations in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank showed that 42 percent of respondents felt that the withdrawal would reduce the chances for peace, 23 percent felt that the plan would increase the chances for peace, and the rest answered that they did not know.¹²

The disengagement plan infused the Palestinian drive with new energy. Similar to Hizbollah's claims after the withdrawal from Lebanon (the issues of Shab'a Farms in the Golan and the ruins of the Shiite villages in the Galilee), the Palestinians too found new bones of contention with Israel concerning the Gaza Strip. Before the implementation of the disengagement, Mahmoud Abbas asserted that even after the completion of the withdrawal, Israel would continue to occupy land belonging to Palestinians to the north and east of the Gaza Strip. He was referring to areas included in the Gaza Strip as part of

the ceasefire line set in 1949 in the Rhodes agreements between Israel and Egypt but that had passed into Israeli hands a year later as part of a land-swap agreement.¹³

The disengagement and the events that followed did not meet Israel's prior expectations. Hamas' victory in the parliamentary elections and its takeover of the Gaza Strip created a new reality that complicated the reality of the Palestinian system. In the wake of the disengagement, the Gaza Strip is controlled by a hostile entity supported by Iran. Now, after the disengagement, Palestinians are under different rule in four separate geographical locations: citizens of Israel, residents of the "independent" Gaza Strip under Hamas rule, Palestinians under Israeli and Palestinian Authority control in the West Bank, and Palestinians in the diaspora claiming the right of return to Israel.

As a substitute for the friction within the Gaza Strip, the Palestinians accelerated the confrontation with Israel using high trajectory fire. This capability was strengthened thanks to a steep rise in arms smuggling into the Gaza Strip, primarily as a result of the withdrawal from the Philadelphi axis. The new reality was a major snag in the political negotiations that posited territorial unity between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

Though the withdrawal from southern Lebanon had some significant disadvantages, it also had many more convincing rationales than those underlying the Gaza withdrawal. A comparison between the two may shed light on the weaknesses of the disengagement:

1. In the withdrawal from southern Lebanon, Israel returned to the international border, and with that the conflict between the two countries was meant to come to a close, at least in the eyes of the international community, while in the disengagement from Gaza Israel withdrew to the border in only one of the disputed sectors.
2. The withdrawal from southern Lebanon greatly decreased Hizbollah's legitimacy in attacking Israel, while the disengagement did not affect Palestinian legitimacy in its struggle against Israel.
3. In the withdrawal from southern Lebanon, Israel left the territory it had occupied in the hands of a sovereign nation that upholds ceasefire agreements with Israel (despite the obvious weaknesses of Lebanon's central government), while in the disengagement, Israel left the territory to the whims of the powers there, though without

- any possibility of existing as an independent entity detached from Israel (especially in light of Gaza's economic dependence on Israel) and without a security arrangement.
4. In the withdrawal from southern Lebanon, Israel did not concede any bargaining chips it might have needed in future negotiations, while the disengagement included an erosion of Israel's position and problematic precedents for future negotiations with the Palestinians. Israel withdrew from Gaza fully, without preconditions and without recompense for a strip of land it had previously put up for negotiations with the Palestinians. Israel also evacuated and destroyed Jewish settlements (hitherto unprecedented in the Palestinian arena) and withdrew without any of the demilitarization agreements it would have obtained had there been an agreement with the Palestinians.
 5. The withdrawal from Lebanon matched the interests of the pragmatic Arab nations, while the disengagement was seen as a hostile move: skirting the political process, casting the Gaza Strip and its problems at Egypt's doorstep, and setting the precedent for a similar move in the West Bank with difficult consequences for Jordan.
 6. The withdrawal from Lebanon was carried out under heavy internal Israeli pressure in light of the failure of the military struggle against Hizbollah in the security zone, while the disengagement was initiated at the political level precisely after impressive Israeli successes in breaking the Palestinian terrorist assault in Operation Defensive Shield in the West Bank and the preventive operations that followed. The psychological achievements of these successes were all but wiped out by the disengagement.

The Convergence Plan

The quick and smooth implementation of the disengagement plan aroused expectations in Israel and among foreign elements that Israel would continue with similar moves. During a full day seminar of the Reut Research Institute at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya on September 27, 2005, the prime minister's strategic advisor, Eyal Arad, responded to the question that was the focus of the conference: Was the disengagement a one-time move or did it represent a strategy?

Arad said: "If over time we see that the stalemate continues despite the fact that the political reality is convenient for Israel, it is possible that we would consider turning the disengagement into an Israeli strategy. Israel will determine its borders independently." Following up on this, Prime Minister Sharon's office clarified that "the position of the prime minister has been and remains that after the completion of the disengagement, Israel will work towards promoting the political process solely on the basis of the Roadmap. Any additional territorial change will be discussed and decided upon only in the context of negotiations over a permanent settlement. If and until we reach that point, there are and will be no additional unilateral territorial moves." It was explained that there was no diplomatic or political rationale for embarking on a new initiative that would include withdrawal from territories at the time, and that the disengagement was meant to secure the existing situation in the West Bank until the Palestinians changed.¹⁵

The consensus on the Israeli street in favor of disengagement from the Gaza Strip was nonexistent regarding the West Bank. A survey by the Peace Index taken on September 1, 2005 at the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research at Tel Aviv University¹⁶ showed that 71.5 percent of the Jewish population in Israel felt that the disengagement from the Gaza Strip was the first step in an extensive plan for evacuating settlements in the West Bank as part of a permanent settlement with the PA; 15.8 percent did not believe there would be further evacuations, while 12.7 percent did not know. In response to a question about their position regarding extensive evacuations of settlements in the West

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Bank, 34.3 percent answered that they would support an evacuation only in the context of a peace agreement, 13.5 percent answered they would support it even in the context of a unilateral withdrawal, and 41.8 percent answered they would not support extensive evacuations from the West Bank under any circumstance; the rest said they did not know.¹⁷

After Prime Minister Sharon was incapacitated and no longer in office, Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert presented the convergence plan, an idea of his own design. According to the plan, Israel was supposed to withdraw unilaterally from some sixty settlements. Upon

completion of the plan, Israel was supposed to realign its borders based on the 1967 lines, retaining control of only 7 percent of the West Bank.¹⁸ The convergence plan lay at the heart of the political platform of the Kadima party, which won the 2006 elections. During the first part of the Second Lebanon War in 2006, Olmert declared that the war would give momentum to the convergence plan, but later he announced the plan's suspension. The notion of a unilateral separation from the Palestinians without an agreement was so strong among the population that it created a new field in Israeli politics. Although nothing was left of the original idea of unilateral separation by the 2009 elections, the notion nonetheless changed Israel's political map.

The main rationales of the convergence plan were largely similar to the previous withdrawals: an attempt to shape unilaterally a new security-political reality after the failure to achieve political agreements; an attempt to determine unilaterally the permanent borders of the State of Israel; an attempt to reduce the friction between Israel and the Palestinians, and thus reduce the loss of life and the costs of security; and an improvement in Israel's international standing.

A comparison between the disengagement and convergence plans shows that even the limited rationales of the former did not exist in the case of the latter. First, the strategic importance of the West Bank is much greater than that of the Gaza Strip because of its location in the center of Israel, the size of the area, and its key areas (such as the ascent from the coastal region towards the central mountain ranges and the Jordan Valley). The military threat liable to develop from the West Bank and the subsequent difficulty in operating the IDF (after a withdrawal) are much greater in comparison with the situation in the Gaza Strip because of the size of the West Bank, the area's proximity to the center, and the topography. Second, Jewish settlement in the West Bank is much larger than that in the Gaza Strip, and history forges a strong connection between areas in the West Bank (among others, for example, Bethlehem and Hebron) and Israel. Evacuating these areas might invite much more severe internal confrontation than what took place regarding the Gaza Strip. Third, the area of the West Bank is vastly more important to Israel as a bargaining chip in negotiations over a permanent settlement – importance that increased following the withdrawal from Gaza. Finally, the convergence plan did not denote

withdrawal to an internationally acknowledged border and not even the complete withdrawal of Israel's security forces, but primarily an evacuation of settlements, similar to the evacuation of the four northern Samaria settlements in the disengagement plan (the status of this area differs from the status of the Gaza Strip, which Israel completely evacuated). Therefore, the convergence plan would not have resolved the conflict with the Palestinians and would not have supplied Israel with great political gains on the international arena in comparison with the heavy internal cost this move would have entailed.

Assessment

There was a considerable gap between the expectations that the political echelon and the Israeli population had pinned on the strategy of unilateral withdrawal and the results in practice, as outlined in table 1.

Table 1. Unilateral Withdrawal: Expectation vs. Reality

	Expectation	Outcome
1.	Israel's international standing would improve as a result of the withdrawals from southern Lebanon and the Gaza Strip.	The withdrawals contributed to Israel's international standing. Israel enjoyed broad international legitimacy even at the beginning of the military campaigns in Lebanon and Gaza, but later there was an erosion of this legitimacy on the basis of the claim of "lack of proportionality."
2.	The withdrawals would create a new political reality that would promote the peace process.	The withdrawals did create a new reality, one that strengthened the opponents of peace in the region.
3.	The withdrawals would erase the friction between Israel and its enemies in the area.	As a substitute for a drop in friction in the area, there was a rise in the enemies' capability and high trajectory fire. In addition, Israel was forced to return to the region and operate with a show of great force.

4.	The withdrawal would deny legitimacy to act against Israel from the evacuated areas.	The withdrawal from southern Lebanon did in fact reduce legitimacy to act against Israel, but Hizbollah found new means of engagement. The withdrawal from the Gaza Strip did not reduce Palestinian legitimacy to operate against Israel.
5.	The withdrawals would reduce the need and the legitimacy for maintaining military forces in the areas evacuated, since there would no longer be any Israeli targets and Hizbollah and Hamas would be occupied by political and governmental demands.	After the withdrawals, Hizbollah and Hamas' military forces grew stronger, in particular their high trajectory ballistic missiles, both in terms of quantity and in their range of attack. Despite Hizbollah's political challenges and Hamas' governmental difficulties, both groups chose to invest in military fortification.
6.	The IDF's capabilities, Israel's warnings, and Israeli legitimacy to operate from the international border would deter the enemy from acting against Israel on these fronts.	The enemies on the two fronts were not deterred.
7.	Israel would respond rapidly with great military force should it fail to deter (should strategic threats in the areas withdrawn from be created or should power moves be made against it).	Israel did not make good on its threat until the Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead.
8.	Even were threats to emerge from areas Israel evacuated, the IDF has the standoff fire capabilities to handle security problems without the need for ground maneuvers.	The IDF's standoff fire capabilities did not achieve sufficient successes. The ground maneuver emerged as essential, but using it involved some difficult dilemmas.
9.	The residents of the Gaza Strip settlements would be assimilated into new settlements to be established in southern Israel and into older settlements.	The process of rehabilitating the Gaza Strip evacuees has been fraught with difficulties and, as indicated by the state comptroller's report, many remain without a suitable arrangement to this day.
10.	The withdrawals would reduce casualties among the civilians on the enemy side.	In both campaign, Israel was forced to harm many civilians as a result of the enemy's manner of engagement.

In the end, the strategy of unilateral withdrawal caused Israel significant damage in several areas. In both sectors from which Israel withdrew, the security-strategic threats grew stronger. The Gaza Strip, which before the disengagement had been a secondary confrontation arena with the Palestinians, turned into the major front and a considerable strategic problem affecting Israel's relations with its surroundings, as demonstrated during Operation Cast Lead. Furthermore, the withdrawals hurt Israel's image as an entity that cannot be vanquished by the use of military force. The unilateral withdrawals strengthened the radical axis in the Arab world that urged the destruction of Israel. It would seem that the disengagement hurt Israel's image more than the withdrawal from southern Lebanon, as Israel created a precedent for destroying settlements it had established without getting anything in return from the Arab side, at a time when the Oslo accords did not even demand the evacuation of the settlements.

The strategy of unilateral withdrawal and its implementation strengthened the image of the Shiite and Palestinian struggle and its values: patience, self-sacrifice, endurance, resistance, and devotion to the land. The unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip demonstrated to the radical Islamic camp that it could achieve extraordinary successes even without negotiations, which was quite disturbing to the pragmatic camp in the Arab world. The unilateral withdrawals did not create better political conditions or improve political options, but rather harmed Israel's ability to promote political settlements. The disengagement contributed to the internationalization of the conflict, i.e., it strengthened the involvement of foreign nations and international organizations in the conflict. It may be possible to find advantages in this (especially in the humanitarian field), but there are also distinct disadvantages to their involvement, such as the growing need to consider their positions and sensitivities to events in the territories. The unilateral withdrawal left Israel's security interests in the hands of others, such as supervision of arms smuggling and security arrangements in the Gaza Strip, matters that Israel would have insisted on in any negotiation. In the internal Israeli arena, the unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip took a tremendous social toll, as well as incurring a very high economic price.

The strategy of unilateral withdrawal likely did not meet expectations because of some erroneous basic assumptions, estimates, and concepts that lay at the heart of the approach:

1. Israel did not understand that the step would cause a deep systemic change in the political and security reality of the region evacuated and in the entire strategic surroundings, e.g., the rise of Hamas in the Gaza Strip and the strengthening of the Iranian camp and Hizbollah in Lebanon, and ultimately the strengthening of the radical axis.
2. The assumption that withdrawal would pull the rug out from under the feet of the aggressor was mistaken. In practice, the enemy found new points of friction after the withdrawals.
3. The use of concepts such as “disengagement” and “convergence” (as substitutes for unilateral withdrawal) in the Israeli public discourse created a mirage, as if Israel could take its fate into its own hands unilaterally and ignore what was happening on the other side.
4. The assumption that it was proper to withdraw unilaterally from land Israel did not expect would be included in its areas in a permanent settlement ran counter to the rules of negotiation, whereby Israel should have held on even to assets needed by the other side. The convergence, for example, would not have left enough assets in the hands of Israel to conduct negotiations for a permanent settlement.
5. The assumption that the disengagement was able to offset the Palestinian demographic threat and help preserve Israel as a democratic Jewish state was unfounded. The demographic threat was presented to the Israeli population as one of the central and urgent justifications for the disengagement.
6. Israeli deterrence was not effective. After the withdrawals there was no real backing to the declarations regarding harsh and immediate Israeli responses to hostile enemy acts and the development of threats against it from the areas it evacuated. The enemy continued to strengthen its forces and engage in provocations, so that in the end Israel had no choice but to fulfill its deterrent threat with the Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead while paying a significant price.

Conclusion

It would seem that from one withdrawal to the next the Israeli rationale for the strategy of unilateral withdrawal grew slimmer and slimmer: if it was possible to discern significant logic in the withdrawal from southern Lebanon, the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip had limited rationale, while the convergence plan had very little. Acknowledgment of the less than stellar results is embedded in President Shimon Peres' statement: "Had the disengagement [from the Gaza Strip] been a success, we would have repeated it in the West Bank."¹⁹

As an inseparable part of unilateral withdrawal, Israel was supposed to have reacted immediately and with great force to any provocation and gross violation of the security status quo, but that did not happen. Its reactions were relatively mild – until the war in Lebanon in July 2006 and Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip in December 2008. In both cases, the blow dealt by Israel had a significant impact on the enemy but did not change the trend of the enemy's growing strength or the strategic threat posed from these fronts.

As for the foreseeable future, there is no rationale for the strategy of unilateral withdrawal. At most, Israel may examine the use of this tool on the basis of tactical considerations. Apparently the right way to evacuate territories is only on the basis of a stable agreement that is in line with Israel's long term objectives.

Notes

- 1 Israel's presence in Lebanon was a strategy (the security zone) and therefore differed from the temporary presence of the IDF on enemy territory in other operations.
- 2 When it controlled Lebanon, Syria allowed Hizbollah activity against Israel on the assumption that it provided a means of exerting pressure on Israel to arrive at a political agreement with it and with Lebanon (which was inextricably linked to Syria) on terms convenient to Damascus.
- 3 In an interview published on April 15, 2000 in the Egyptian *al-Ahram* just before the withdrawal, Hizbollah leader Nasrallah said that "Israel has no foundation that would allow it the possibility to exist more than a decade." In the victory speech made on May 24, 2000, in Bint Jbail, after Israel's withdrawal, he said: "Israel may have nuclear weapons and heavy weaponry, but, as God lives, it is weaker than a cobweb.... There was a time when we feared the Israeli threat, its airplanes, tanks, and missile boats that encroached on our sovereignty of the skies, the land, and the air, but that time has passed and is no more." Nasrallah called on Palestinians

- to follow his fighters' example: "In order to liberate your land, you don't need tanks or airplanes. Learn from the holy martyrs; you can impose your demands on the Zionist aggressor" (Sheffi Gabbai, *Maariv*, May 26, 2000).
- 4 These villages are on the Israeli side of the international border. According to a 1920 agreement between France and Britain, they were Lebanese, but according to the 1923 border marking, recognized by the UN, they are in Israeli territory.
 - 5 The settlements evacuated were Neve Dekalim, Netzer Hazani, Pe'at Sadeh, Katif, Rafiah Yam, Shirat Hayam, Shalev, Tel Katifa, Bedolah, Bnei Atzmon, Gadid, Gan Or, Ganei Tal, Kfar Yam, Kerem Atzmona, Morag, Netzarim, Elei Sinai, Dugit, Kfar Darom, and Nissanit. Four settlements in northern Samaria were also evacuated: Ganim, Kadim, Homesh, and Sa-Nur.
 - 6 <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Speeches+by+Israeli+leaders/2003/Address+by+PM+Ariel+Sharon+at+the+Fourth+Herzliya.htm>.
 - 7 *Haaretz*, August 19, 2005.
 - 8 *Haaretz*, September 4, 2005.
 - 9 *Haaretz*, August 23, 2005.
 - 10 <http://www.sela.pmo.gov.il/PMOEng/Archive/Speeches/2005/09/speechB290905.htm>.
 - 11 At the State of the Nation Conference on September 28, 2005, at Tel Aviv University in memory of Maj. Gen. (ret.) Aharon Yariv, *Maariv*, September 28, 2005.
 - 12 Itamar Inbari, *Maariv*, March 29, 2004.
 - 13 As part of the land swap, Israel received the area in the northern Gaza Strip where today the Erez crossing and the cooperative agricultural settlement of Netiv Ha'asara are located, while in exchange it gave up a larger part in the eastern Gaza Strip. The amended border was in force until 1967, and was accepted by the Palestinians in the Oslo accords, Aluf Benn, *Haaretz*, September 6, 2005.
 - 15 *Haaretz*, September 29, 2005.
 - 16 Efraim Yaar and Tamar Hermann, *Haaretz*, September 7, 2005.
 - 17 A comparison with a similar question posed six months earlier (in April 2005) showed that the number of supporters for unilateral disengagement dropped by half (from 26.2 percent to 13.5 percent), while there was a rise among supporters of an evacuation only in the context of an agreement (from 27.5 percent to 34.3 percent) and among opponents of evacuation under any circumstance (from 37.1 percent to 41.8 percent).
 - 18 *Maariv*, April 11, 2006.
 - 19 Walla, October 28, 2008.

