

# "Two Roads Diverged": Israel's Post-Disengagement Strategic Options

Shlomo Gazit

The disengagement plan, or more precisely, the plan to evacuate Israeli settlements from the Gaza Strip and northern Samaria, is a watershed for Israel's policy in the territories captured thirty-eight years ago in the Six Day War. In June 1967, Israel stood alone, facing what it perceived as an existential threat, in the form of a military coalition that united nearly the entire Arab world. The coalition assembled its forces, violated the understandings that Egypt had reached after the 1956 Sinai Campaign, and threatened war. Nearly four decades later, Israel has initiated a disengagement plan with the aim of staving off a completely different threat to its survival – the demographic threat.

## The Disengagement Choice

For many years a large majority in Israel has understood the difficult and painful choices facing the country. One choice is to quit the territories and divide the region into two states that will leave Israel with narrower borders, but whose limited size is essential for ensuring that Israel remains a democratic state with a solid Jewish majority. The other choice is continued Israeli deployment in the Gaza Strip and West Bank in order to retain control over all of the territory between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River, even if this results in the loss of a Jewish majority in the area within a short time and/or the end of Israel as a democratic state.

One person who understood the need for changing direction was Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who initiated the current political plan that unilaterally cedes Israel's control of the land and the Arab population in the Gaza Strip. This plan arose in the absence of a Palestinian partner with whom to negotiate a program for ending Israel's occupation and establishing a Palestinian state alongside Israel. Sharon's assumption is that this step, which involves the evacuation of all Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip (home to approximately 8,000 people), will free Israel from responsibility for 1.3 million Palestinians, an Arab population whose birthrate is one of the highest in the world.

## The Post-Disengagement Alternatives

How the disengagement scene will be played will only be known once it is completed. Nonetheless, whether the disengagement is implemented in full, as expected, and is unmarred by extremist violence, or whether it is accompanied by force and clashes that lead to casualties and even bloodshed, it will leave psychological scars as well as serious political, social, economic, and moral consequences for Israel.

The evacuation of the Gaza Strip and northern Samaria will not be echoed by similar withdrawals in the near future. It is generally assumed that immediately after the withdraw-

al, Israel's government will falter and Knesset elections will be held, very possibly before the scheduled date of November 2006. The balance of forces in the inevitable political struggle will undoubtedly be shaped by the deep rift and heated political and public debate that has taken place this past year over the disengagement. But the most important issue facing Israel and its political system in the coming national elections will be a new and painful choice. The electorate will have to choose between what is necessarily a short-range policy, which essentially continues the policy that has dominated thus far, and the adoption of a policy that resumes and furthers the prime minister's step of separating from the Palestinians. This latter choice is a more long-term, far-reaching policy.

The choice that Israel faces can also be formulated in another way. On the one hand, the trauma and harsh, painful scenes of the evacuation may convince Israel and the outside world that no one can expect and demand of Israel to implement another evacuation, this time in Judea and Samaria. It is even doubtful whether Israel will be able to live up to its promise to the American administration to dismantle the illegal outposts and halt construction activity in the settlements. There are more than a few signs that preserving the status quo and refraining from dramatic political initiatives may very well be the prime minister's policy in the near future and the platform he brings to the electorate.

Against this option is the opposite

alternative: the evacuation of the settlements in the Gaza Strip and northern Samaria may create a precedent for dismantling more settlements and evacuating Jewish settlers. Just as 8,000 settlers will be evacuated in the forthcoming disengagement plan, in the not too distant future and for the same reasons it will be necessary to evacuate tens of thousands of Jewish settlers from areas in Judea and Samaria as part of the strategy for separation, under the rubric of a unilateral pullback behind ethnic-demographic borders determined by Israel.

### The Well-Traveled Road

Underlying the short-range policy is the desire to avoid another rupture in Israel's weakened social fabric. The rationale is predicated on the despair of reaching a political agreement with the Palestinians, even though a window of opportunity seemed to open after Arafat's death. This policy will consciously avoid taking further steps toward withdrawal in Judea and Samaria. Its main goals will be the completion of the security fence, turning it into a separation fence and de facto border, and at the same time ongoing settlement expansion in most of the territory enclosed by the fence.

After Israel's agonizing social and political confrontations of the last year and after the trauma of the evacuation itself (even if it takes place without bloodshed), this policy will strive to restore "domestic tranquility" in the leading government party and provide it with a strong opportunity to win a new solid victory at the

polls. If indeed this policy is adopted, it will return Israel to the worldview and ideology that it appeared to have shed in the last two years – a policy directed toward a more vigorous settlement drive and strengthening Jewish Israel through the unilateral determination of permanent borders, on the assumption that they will eventually be accepted by the Palestinians and the international community.

Even if the security separation fence defines borders that include a minimum Palestinian population in Israel (leaving aside the question of approximately 200,000 Palestinians residing in the Arab neighborhoods of East Jerusalem), this will not be sufficient to guarantee the plan's success. The weak link in this policy is the hopeful if not naive assumption that the Arab world will reconcile itself to it and accept the dictated borders for the future Palestinian state although they neither match nor even approximate the June 4, 1967 borders, with the possibility of Palestinian territorial contiguity highly doubtful.

Since June 1967 Israel has experienced territorial withdrawal in three arenas. The first was in the Egyptian arena, when Prime Minister Menachem Begin signed a peace agreement with Egypt only after he agreed to Israel's unconditional withdrawal to the international border. In the Jordanian arena, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin reached an agreement with Jordan that included minor changes and adjustments to the original border, but he achieved this only after he recognized the old mandatory border

and engaged in negotiations to reach a mutual agreement. On the northern border, it was Prime Minister Ehud Barak who decided on a unilateral pullback to the recognized international border with Lebanon, a line that was also approved by the United Nations.

Israel's unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip may succeed in bringing quiet and stability to that arena only if two key conditions are met: an unconditional pullout to the recognized June 4, 1967 lines, and a complete end to Israeli occupation in the region. On the other hand, assuming that Israel has no intention to make a similar move in Judea and Samaria, the only way to reach an agreement on the borders in this arena will be through negotiations, mutual understandings, and international backing.

The strategic goal of current Israeli policy appears to strive to use the security fence for unilaterally determining the future borders, since the fence will be transformed from a security barrier into a political-demographic one. Practical expression of this policy will be the attempt to return to massive, intensified construction in the existing settlements as well as expansion beyond them. The obvious goal is to create facts on the ground that guarantee that these settlements will indeed remain in Israel's hands for a long time as sovereign Israeli territory, while ignoring the likelihood that large portions of the area and the settlements will have to be ceded in the future.

Three conclusions may be drawn from this scenario:

- Sooner or later this policy will lead to the renewal of a violent struggle. Although the security fence (assuming it has been built along the entire length of the planned route) will make it difficult for suicide bombers to penetrate Israel, it will leave Israel exposed to attack by high trajectory weapons.

**A permanent arrangement will never be attained unless the two nations separate and there is a proposal for realistic borders that will permit the Palestinians to establish a viable state of their own.**

- This policy will return Israel to the unstable international status it had before the disengagement plan, with severe political, economic, and moral implications. In addition, the more ambitious the lines are that Israel tries to stabilize in Judea and Samaria, the less likely that they will be accepted when a permanent solution is hammered out. This will be a painful case of "biting off more than can be chewed." It will also be an attempt to capitalize on the current American president's statement that the facts created on the ground since 1967 will have to be taken into account.

- This policy will entail huge Israeli financial investments in new

settlement projects and their accompanying security features. The heavy price that Israel will soon be paying for the Gaza pullout is an indication of the future price it would have to render for the inevitable evacuation of already costly settlements in Judea and Samaria.

In other words, this option represents a short term policy indeed. Ultimately its shelf life is limited, and it will be replaced by an approach that is more durable in political, economic, and security terms on both domestic and international levels.

### **A Road for the Future**

The alternative policy is a continuation of the basic idea at the heart of the disengagement plan. This platform can be presented to Israeli voters in the coming elections, even if it creates a deepening schism in the Likud Party to the point of cleavage and reshuffling of the political system. The cornerstone of this policy is the realization that a permanent arrangement will never be attained unless the two nations separate, there is only minimal annexation of Arab-Palestinian territory, and there is a proposal for realistic borders and contiguous physical terrain that will permit the Palestinians to establish a viable state of their own.

In the absence of negotiations and a political agreement, there seems little reason now to initiate a new disengagement process in Judea and Samaria. Israel's policy and international position, however, will be examined according to its record on the

## Underlying the Disengagement Plan / Zaki Shalom

In December 2003, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon announced his plan for disengagement from the Palestinians. Since then, the question has arisen what prompted him, "the father of the settlement movement," to change his longstanding views and switch course so radically. The prime minister's public statements during the past year may shed light on the issue.

■ On June 7, 2005, in a speech at Bar Ilan University, Sharon declared that Israel has to recognize the **limitations of its power** and act accordingly. Israel lacks the power to fulfill the dream of settlement in all of Greater Israel, and must be satisfied with realizing only parts of the dream.

■ In his speech at the Herzliya Conference (December 16, 2004), Sharon stressed that Israel has to accept that **it does not have an option to create a Jewish majority in the Gaza Strip**. Therefore, even in a permanent arrangement, Israel has no interest in holding onto Jewish settlements there: "Disengagement recognizes the demographic reality on the ground specifically, bravely and honestly. Of course it is clear to everyone that we will not be in the Gaza Strip in the final agreement . . . and that, even now, we have no reason to be there."

■ Sharon has repeatedly stated that in the current reality, the international system would not tolerate a vacuum in the Middle East. Israel must understand that if it does not come forth with its own **political initiative** in resolving the conflict, the international community will impose a much less acceptable one on it. The disengagement plan, he asserted, has deflected this move, and has allowed Israel to lead, rather than be led. (Caesarea Conference, June 30, 2005)

■ Sharon has argued that the reduction of friction between the Palestinians and Israel will lead to a decline of hostile activity. Nevertheless, if terror continues, Israel will be able to combat it more effectively because after disengagement, Israel will have the **legitimate option to make better use of broad-spectrum force** against terror. (Sharon's speech at the Confer-

ence of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, Jerusalem, February 20, 2005)

■ Sharon has pointed out that another gain resulting from the disengagement plan was a set of **far-reaching, unprecedented strategic understandings** between Israel and the United States, reached with the president and endorsed by Congress. Accordingly, the US will not demand an Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 borders. In addition, during negotiations over the permanent arrangement, the United States would be expected to support Israel's retention of the settlement blocs in Judea and Samaria as Israeli territory and the preclusion of the Palestinians' "right of return." Furthermore, with each step in the roadmap, the Palestinians will have to prove that they have made an actual move in rooting out and eradicating terror, have made progress in genuine reforms, and have ended the indoctrination of hatred toward Israel. (Sharon's speech to Jewish leaders in New York, May 22, 2005)

■ Sharon has contended that disengagement **will contribute to enhancing national unity**. The settlement project in the territories, he declared with exceptional candor in one of his speeches, was mostly undertaken without the general agreement of Israeli society. "We established the settlement enterprise with faith and zeal, but also with the resentment of many citizens who disagreed with us. They too are part of the Jewish people, they too send their children to the army, and even if our views are not theirs, no political camp in Israel has a monopoly on absolute justice. Unity is a painful, mutual surrender in order to remain together." (Bar Ilan University, July 7, 2005)

A comprehensive look at how the prime minister has argued in favor of the disengagement plan reveals some of the motives underlying the initiative. Presenting the disengagement plan in its broader context allows a measured evaluation of its intentions, its potential, and its possible ramifications.

ground – either a continuation and perhaps even acceleration of land acquisition and the physical expansion of the existing settlements, or the reduction of the settlements' current perimeters while conveying an un-

equivocal message that Israel is open to political suggestions.

The adoption of the latter strategy as a long-term policy is not a simple matter in Israel's present political system or in the current Palestinian

political reality. It is highly unlikely that pragmatic and capable leadership can be found on either side that could facilitate an agreement today. The weak political positions of Ariel Sharon and Abu Mazen certainly pre-

clude any chances of arriving at this goal in the near future. In light of this obstacle, Israel's leadership will have to choose between steps that encourage a positive process in the foreseeable future or steps that will stiffen the Palestinians' position and push them to resuming the violent confrontation.

In other words, what kind of messages will Israel relay? The national election campaign that is expected in the coming year will demand of the contending parties, with the government party in the lead, to place the Palestinian issue at the forefront of their political platforms. They will have to declare their intentions of either settlement expansion or the opposite: steps for further withdrawals.

These declarations will contain a twofold message – one for the Israeli electorate and the other, of no less importance, for the Palestinians and the world. The reality in the coming years will be decided by the Israeli voters at the polls according to the strategy they choose. At this stage it seems that the decision will be determined to a great degree by Prime Minister Sharon who – assuming that he wants to be reelected – will have to decide between the two aforementioned alternatives. Whatever Sharon's decision, the movement that he

heads will have a good chance of remaining at the helm.

### Behind an Agreement

Finally, it is important to emphasize that in the coming years Israel will have to decide on negotiations and the substance of the political agreement it will eventually sign with the Palestinians. At the same time, even if the long-range plans are not directly connected with the imminent disengagement and its results, the agreement will remain a limited, political one, and Israel should not disillusion itself into thinking that a true reconciliation with the Palestinians or the surrounding Arab world can be attained in the foreseeable future.

The public must be aware of the limitations of the political goal. Menachem Begin did not hesitate to affix his signature to the agreement with Egypt that we define today as a "cold peace." Yitzhak Rabin signed the peace agreement with the Kingdom of Jordan fully aware that the Palestinian majority in that country would reject a true reconciliation with Israel. Similarly, we too must realize that even after an agreement is reached with the Palestinians, the only factor guaranteeing Israel's survival in the coming years is its military strength. In this strength lies the ability to deter

the other side from initiating military moves, and, if need be, to win decisively while inflicting heavy losses and damage on the aggressor.

If Israel decides not to sign an agreement with the Palestinians (and Arab states) until absolute security has been achieved based on the other side's commitment to peace and reconciliation, then Israel will have chosen the path of violent confrontation. On the other hand, the realistic path for reaching genuine peace and reconciliation lies in a long and gradual process. After the political agreement is signed, after the strength of the agreement removes all the centers of friction, and after an independent Palestinian state is established, the Palestinian leadership will have to bear the responsibility for administering the state. This will require a change in its national priorities that will be possible only when the reasons for violent armed conflict are removed.

Last but not least, Israel's problems in its narrow regional sphere cannot be divorced from the formidable global problems in the Arab-Muslim world where existential political, economic, cultural, and even religious questions abound. The unrest and struggle in Arab world also impact on events in the local arena.

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