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## **Disengagement: A Self-Imposed Strategic Disaster**

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### **Introduction: The Evolution of Unilateral Disengagement**

The concept of unilateral disengagement gained prominence during the January 2003 election campaign when Labor candidate Amir Mitzna proposed Israel unilaterally “separate” from the Palestinians if negotiations failed. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who had previously proclaimed the fate of Netzarim was the same as Tel Aviv, vehemently opposed Mitzna's plan, arguing that a withdrawal would simply reward Palestinian terror.

However, in November 2003, Sharon told the Israeli daily *Yediot Aharonot* he had “been thinking for some time about unilateral steps that [would] make things easier on Israel and secure its interests.” Media reports indicated the “unilateral steps” would include the evacuation of certain isolated settlements and the consolidation of others in the absence of successful negotiations with the Palestinian Authority.

After much speculation, Sharon officially unveiled his “disengagement plan” at the 2003 Herzliya Conference. The plan envisioned the redeployment of IDF forces along “new security lines,” and a “change in the deployment of settlements,” that would “reduce as much as possible the number of Israelis located in the heart of the Palestinian population.” Sharon also promised to “greatly accelerate the construction of the security fence,” allowing the IDF “to remove roadblocks and ease the daily lives of the Palestinian population not involved in terror.”<sup>1</sup>

### **U.S. Support for Disengagement**

The U.S. initially reacted to Sharon's announcement with trepidation, fearing that Israel was attempting to stray from the moribund “Road Map” agreed upon by the Quartet. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher emphasized that neither the Israelis or Palestinians could “find peace unilaterally,” as it had “to be negotiated.” White House spokesman Scott McClellan was even more blunt, declaring the U.S. “would oppose any Israeli effort to impose a settlement.”

Yet, a significant policy shift was not long in coming. On April 14, 2004, President Bush

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<sup>1</sup> “Prime Minister's speech at the Herzliya Conference,” *Ha'aretz*, December 20, 2003; Mark Heller, “Gaza Settlements : The Evolution of Ariel Sharon,” *International Herald Tribune*, February 24, 2006; Yisrael Harel, “Not the End of an Era,” *Bitterlemons*, January 9, 2006; Ellis Shuman, “Sharon Hints at 'Unilateral' Evacuation of Isolated Settlements,” *IsraelInsider*, November 23, 2003.

endorsed Sharon's plan, calling it "courageous," and a step that "could lead to a peaceful, democratic, viable Palestinian state." In an effort to counter Israeli domestic opposition to the plan, Bush stated that any future peace accord between Israel and the Palestinians must take into account changing realities, including Israeli population centers in the West Bank. Bush also declared the problem of Palestinian refugees could only be solved by their "return" to a Palestinian state, rather than Israel.<sup>2</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the Sharon administration interpreted the above-mentioned statement and accompanying letter as American support for the retention of settlement blocs. However, Dr. Aaron Lerner notes President Bush refrained from mentioning the term "settlement blocs," instead choosing the phrase "major Israeli population centers." According to Lerner, the U.S. considers "major Israeli population centers" in the West Bank and east Jerusalem to be little more than legitimate "bargaining chips."<sup>3</sup>

### **Withdrawal: A Strategic Threat**

Following U.S. endorsement of the disengagement, Ze'ev Binyamin (Benny) Begin, son of the late prime minister Menachem Begin, broke a self-imposed political silence to criticize the plan, warning its implementation would significantly increase terrorism. During a Channel Two television interview, Begin was asked: "There are so many former prime ministers and chiefs of staff and others who are certain that the disengagement plan is good. How can so many people be wrong?" Begin replied: "A decade ago there were so many former prime ministers and chiefs of staff and others who were certain about Oslo - and they were wrong."<sup>4</sup>

Bleak warnings were also issued by security officials. GSS (Shin Bet) chief Avi Dichter cautioned that Israel's planned unilateral disengagement would not have any affect on the Palestinians and predicted Israel might be forced to invade Gaza for a limited period after the withdrawal. Senior Hamas terrorist Mahmoud Al-Zahar confirmed his organization would continue to attack Israeli targets until it secured an Israeli withdrawal from all "occupied territories."

Despite the bleak predictions, Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz recommended that Israel withdraw almost entirely from the Gaza Strip, while maintaining control over the Philadelphi route on the Rafah-Egypt border in the southern Strip to curtail weapons smuggling.

### **The Strategic Importance of the Philadelphi Corridor**

The importance of maintaining control of the Philadelphi corridor was illustrated in a paper written by Maj.-Gen. (res.) Yaakov Amidror and David Keyes, in which they noted "the extent to which the Gaza Strip has unimpeded access to the outside world without Israeli security controls will determine whether a post-disengagement Gaza becomes a sanctuary for global terrorist groups like al-Qaeda."

2 An official letter to the PMO stated "in light of new realities on the ground, including already existing major Israeli populations centers, it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949," "Bush Recognizes Israeli Settlement Blocs, Rejects 'Right of Return,'" *IsraelInsider*, April 14, 2004; Ellis Shuman, "U.S. Warns Sharon Against Taking 'Unilateral Steps,'" *IsraelInsider*, December 14, 2006; Ellis Shuman, "Sharon presents his plan of 'disengagement' from Palestinians," *IsraelInsider*, December 19, 2003.

3 Aaron Lerner, "Background: Bush 'Population Centers' vs. Israel 'Settlements,'" *IMRA*, March 26, 2005.

4 Ellis Shuman, "Benny Begin Breaks Silence to Attack Disengagement Plan," *IsraelInsider*, April 20, 2004.

Sharon initially appeared to understand the necessity of retaining the Philadelphi route. Indeed, the revised disengagement plan obtained by *Ha'aretz* in May 2004 (ratified on June 6 by the Israeli Knesset) stipulated the complete withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Gaza Strip, including all Israeli settlements "with the exception of a military presence in the area adjacent to the border between Gaza and Egypt."

### **Intimidating the Opposition**

Nevertheless, Sharon simultaneously began planning for a possible withdrawal by asking IDF officers to prepare for a theoretical exit from the area. During one meeting, Sharon reportedly lost his patience, and repeatedly cut off the officers, telling them, "everything you are saying I know already. I present the questions, you are experienced commanders and I want you to address the questions." According to *Ha'aretz*, Sharon also intimidated high-ranking army and GSS officials with the veiled threat that they could be blamed for the failure of the plan if they opposed it.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Myopia of Diplomacy: Losing Philadelphi**

Choosing to ignore the strategic reality, Israeli diplomatic advisers hypothesized that by withdrawing completely, the occupation of Gaza would be seen as having ended, along with the responsibility for the welfare of its population. As such, Israel eventually allowed Egypt to deploy additional forces and weapons along the Gaza-Egypt border (previously limited by the 1979 peace treaty) to halt the frenetic smuggling of terrorists and weapons.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, the advisers chose to ignore the fact that Egypt had done little to prevent weapons smuggling during the extended Palestinian terrorist war against Israel. In August 2004, *Israel Radio* military correspondent Carmela Menashe reported Egypt "knows exactly what weapons are being smuggled and can prevent the smuggling of RPG's to the Gaza Strip. It is also believed that if Egypt wanted...[Katyusha rockets] would be smuggled in via the tunnels. Egypt uses the weapons smuggling as a measure against Israel."

In August 2005, Yuval Shteinitz, Chairman of the Knesset Foreign Affairs & Defense Committee warned the agreement with Egypt to deploy its forces along the border with Gaza to halt smuggling was a strategic Trojan Horse that paved the way for a complete dismissal of the 1978 peace treaty with Cairo. The treaty limited Egyptian military deployment to a single division stationed up to 50 km. east of the Suez Canal. Civil police equipped with light weapons were permitted along the Egyptian side of the border with Israel - to a depth of 40 kilometers.

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5 It should be noted that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon told the Knesset's Defense and Foreign Affairs he would honor the defense establishment's red line that the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip be barred access to the outside world - either via land, sea or air. Ellis Shuman, " Hamas Vows to Continue Attacks Even After Israeli Withdrawal from Gaza," *IsraelInsider*, June 13, 2004; Arik Bender, "Palestinians Developing Long-Range Artillery," *Ma'ariv International*, February 24, 2004; Aluf Benn, "Mofaz Advises PM to Withdraw Almost Entirely From Gaza," *Ha'aretz*, March 17, 2004; Aaron Lerner, "Background: Sharon Committed To Controlling Gaza Border But Clueless How," *IMRA*, March 29, 2004; "Text: The Disengagement Plan of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon," *Ha'aretz*, April 15, 2004; Maj.-Gen. (res.) Yaakov Amidror and David Keyes, "Will a Gaza ' Hamas-Stan' Become a Future Al-Qaeda Sanctuary?" *JCPA Jerusalem Issue Brief*, Vol. 4, No. 7, November 8, 2004; Amir Oren, "Inside Track / If Egypt Were Jordan," *Ha'aretz*, June 4, 2004.

6 Gerald M. Steinberg, "Israel Must Control Gaza's Borders - All of Them," *Jerusalem Post*, July 2, 2006.

According to Shteinitz, the move would return "the Egyptian military to the land, air and sea of the eastern Sinai. It doesn't matter that it is a relatively small force. It is a vital strategic mistake." Shteinitz also explained that "the opening shot [of a war] is very important, [as] Israel doesn't have any strategic depth, so the question of your army sitting 150 kilometers from the border or 15 km. from the border is very significant."<sup>7</sup>

### **Relinquishing Control of the Rafah Crossing**

On November 15, 2005, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice brokered a security arrangement covering the Rafah crossing. Under pressure from Javier Solana, the European Union's high representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, and James Wolfensohn, the Quartet's special envoy in Gaza, Sharon agreed to grant the Palestinian Authority control over the Gaza-Egypt border. A European Union "monitoring mission" was established to prevent the smuggling of weapons and terrorists. Rice said the agreement "intended to give the Palestinian people freedom to move, to trade, to live ordinary lives."<sup>8</sup>

### **Preparing for War**

#### **A Missile Front Against Israel**

By September 2004, senior Israeli security officials had determined that a unilateral withdrawal from Gaza would transform the Strip into a missile front against Israel, or a "south Lebanon to Israel's south." Nevertheless, Sharon, determined to adhere to his evacuation timetable, announced he would retreat even under intensive enemy fire, and demanded security officials prepare for such scenarios.<sup>9</sup>

In October, *Ma'ariv* published a detailed IDF planning document that listed 13 possible security threats which could occur following the disengagement from Gaza, including:

- Rocket fire at western Negev kibbutzim
- Attacks against IDF patrols along the fence
- Kidnapping and holding soldiers inside Gaza
- The entry of terrorists into Israel via underground tunnels, ladders or gliders
- The acquisition of anti-aircraft missiles and long range rockets

In addition, the plan stated the need to prepare for the possibility that the Gaza Strip would become "a terrorist entity where anarchy prevails."<sup>10</sup>

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7 Jonathan Lis, "IDF: Weapons Tunnels To Gaza Strip Dug From Egyptian Army Bases," *Ha'aretz*, August 11, 2003, as translated from Hebrew by *IMRA*; Arie O'Sullivan "Steinitz: Egypt Wants to See Us Bleed," *Jerusalem Post*, September 2, 2004; "Israel: Egypt Knows Exactly What's Being Smuggled & Can Stop It," *IMRA*, August 24, 2004; "Anti-aircraft Missiles & Katyusha Rockets Held in Sinai for Palestinians - IDF Southern Gaza Brigade Commander Suarez," *Ha'aretz*, June 9, 2004; "IDF: Palestinians Trying to Smuggle Anti-Aircraft Missiles," *Jerusalem Post*, May 16, 2004; Ariel O'Sullivan, "Steinitz Slams Philadelphi Deal," *Jerusalem Post*, August 25, 2005.

8 Gerald M. Steinberg, "Israel Must Control Gaza's Borders - All of Them," *Jerusalem Post*, July 2, 2006.

9 "Advanced Weapons for Gaza Terrorists Turn Security Heads About Retreat," *IsraelInsider*, September 21, 2004.

10 "IDF: After Disengagement Gaza Strip May Become 'A Terrorist Entity Where Anarchy Prevails,'" *Ma'ariv*, translated by the *JCPA Daily Alert* and cited on *IMRA*.

In January 2005, IDF Homefront Command Colonel Uzi Buchbinder informed the Knesset Environmental Committee that the implementation of the Gaza disengagement plan would place 46 western Negev communities within the range of Qassam rockets launched from northern Gaza. Buchbinder also noted the army had been developing a plan that would include the installation of an early warning system and safety glass on school windows.

Colonel (res.) Mordechai Yogev of the National Security Forum noted the withdrawal of the Israel Defense Forces from the Gaza Strip and northern Samaria would "bring numerous large population centers and communities within the range of Qassam rockets and mortar shells, including Ashkelon in the south and the cities of Beit She'an, Afula, Pardes Hannah and Hadera in the north."

Former Military Intelligence Chief Shlomo Gazit warned an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza would transform the area into an armed camp that would become "an arsenal for independent development and production of arms." Gazit also emphasized the exit from Gaza would be perceived as "a victory for the Palestinian armed struggle."

### **Post Disengagement**

#### **Lieutenant General (res.) Moshe Ya'alon:**

"There is no doubt that the disengagement failed...It stems from the fact that underlying the disengagement was a baseless idea. It did not derive from a thorough strategic analysis but from political distress and from the personal distress of prime minister Ariel Sharon...The disengagement was a media spin. Those who initiated it and led it had no background in strategy, in security, in statesmanship or in history. They were image advisers...And what those people did was to place Israel into a virtual bubble divorced from reality by means of a huge media spin, which is now unraveling before our eyes."<sup>11</sup>

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11 "Shlomo Gazit On Retreat: Create Armed Camp Threatening Israel," *Ma'ariv International*, February 9, 2004, as cited on *IMRA*; "Gaza Withdrawal will Place Dozens of Cities & Municipalities At Risk," *IsraelNationalNews*, January 12, 2005; Gideon Alon, "IDF Official: Pullout to Expose 46 Negev Towns to Rocket Fire," *Ha'aretz*, January 12, 2005; Ari Shavit, "A Matter of Opinion," *Ha'aretz Magazine*, July 7, 2006.