

THE QUEST FOR ARAB-ISRAELI PEACE

ISRAEL'S DISENGAGEMENT FROM THE GAZA STRIP: PRECEDENTS, MOTIVATIONS, AND OUTCOMES

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Zionism Fulfilled.- Israel's preemptive physical disengagement from the Gaza Strip in August 2005 was the result of a national consensus; its goal was to protect the State of Israel and her citizens. In the absence of a viable Palestinian negotiating partner and no prospects of political compromise, Israel designed and implemented a unilateral withdrawal. Israel saw its neighbors under duress and decided evacuation was the best course of action. By divorcing herself from ruling 1.4 million Palestinians, and all the problems which accompanied it, Israel fulfilled two goals: to preserve, at least for the time being, the country's status as a majority Jewish state, and to decrease the costs and physical liabilities of protecting Jewish settlements not contiguous with the state. When Israel withdrew 9,000 settlers from 21 settlements, it demonstrated its prerogative to be proactive rather than to jeopardize its present posture by waiting for negotiating "partners".

Zionism has succeeded. Israel earned the right to determine her own future. Jewish territorial nationalism moved Jews from being an oppressed minority living in someone else's land, to exercising power and choice in their own land. Unilateral disengagement from Gaza was a prime example the Jewish state exercising its will without constraint. It chose the time, manner, and place for the protection of Jewish life and property. On the other hand, Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip exposed a significant shortcoming in attaining the complete goal of Zionism: that is, Israel's inability to attract sufficient Jewish immigrants to settle *all* of the land of Israel. As a core concept of Zionism, *aliyah* (immigration) was aimed at bringing Jews to the land of Israel. Jewish immigration to Zion, epitomized the in-

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gathering of the exiles from insecure areas of the world. *Aliyah* aimed at fulfilling messianic redemption, and in the process, to provide Jews with territorial security, and the right of self-determination. Today's world may have pockets of virulent anti-Semitism, but rather than being denied opportunity and being summarily attacked, world Jewry today is by and large a post-emancipation people. If there is "pull" today urging Jews to migrate it emerges from material advancement not stimulated by messianic redemption or even from Zionism which was secular in scope. The "pull" to Zion, to Israel, is simply not inviting enough for half of world Jewry to leave where they are living today and move to Israel. Jewish immigration, the human dynamic that fueled Zionism's emergence and then Israel's growth, for over a century has slowed to a trickle. Moreover, a critical nucleus of Jews already living in Israel chose not to move in the Gaza area. The opportunity to live in all the land of Israel, as promised by God to the Jewish people was voluntarily not fulfilled.

Zionist history is replete with making unilateral decisions and pragmatic compromises to advance the creation of a Jewish national home. Israel's disengagement from Gaza is another of those decisions where changing local, regional, and international realities required adaptation and modification of policy, where pre-emptive action was required. In this case, as in previous Zionist and Israeli cases, using land, the chance to control it or trade it was exchanged for protecting Jewish life, property, and Israel's national interest. In 1929, after Arabs killed 67 yeshiva students in the city of Hebron, the Jewish Agency (the governing authority of the Jewish community in Palestine) decided that settling in areas not contiguous with Jewish enclaves along the coastal plain and in the valley regions was a distinct liability. Henceforward, Hebron and other areas which eventually became the West Bank in the 1930s and 1940s were not of settlement interest to the Zionists. Three-quarters of a century later, Zionists have essentially reverted back to that decision concluding that settling in a majority Arab area, without a significant Jewish demographic nucleus, and the difficulty to protect Jewish life and property is more of a liability than an asset. With Jewish settlers remaining as a minority presence in many areas of the West Bank, and protected as they are by the Israeli army, the unanswered question remains: is the Gaza disengagement the first of several Israeli government decisions to remove small Jewish settlement enclaves, such as those that remain in Hebron today? In 1937, when the British

suggested Palestine be partitioned into separate Jewish and Arab states, Dr. Chaim Weizmann, president of the World Zionist Organization, disappointed at the small size of the proposed Jewish state said, “any form of partition involves a very real sacrifice to every Jew... If we are asked to make that sacrifice, it can be only if ...we can save the realization of our essential idea”¹.

Again, after Israel's Independence War ended, Israel's delegation to the 1949 Lausanne Conference proposed a compromise, “to incorporate Gaza and its Arab population” into Israel². The U.S. Government backed the idea but Egypt emphatically rejected it claiming it was a ploy for a territorial land grab by the new state of Israel³. After taking Sinai and Gaza in November 1956, Israel engaged in territorial concessions withdrawing from these territories in March 1957, trading land for time – a UN promise that Sinai would not be remilitarized.

In June 1967, surrounded by vehemently hostile Arab states, Israel preemptively struck her neighbors and as a result took the Golan Heights, the West Bank, east Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. Shortly thereafter, Israel wanted to exchange the West Bank for a negotiated peace with Jordan. However, the Arab states absolutely rejected the idea, maintaining a policy of “no peace, no recognition, no negotiation”. That left Israel the ability to use, toy with, and absorb portions of the new territories. In the following forty years, Israel unilaterally unified Jerusalem, and initiated vast settlement growth in all the territories taken in the June 1967 War. When Egyptian President Anwar Sadat pressed Israel through the Americans to exchange land for peace, Israel decided it was strategically wise to give up land for a peace accord with Egypt. In July 1976, Israeli forces in a unilateral and pre-emptive action, rescued Jews taken hostage and held in Uganda. In April 1982 Israel, under Likud Prime Minister Menachem Begin, withdrew from two Sinai settlements in order to fulfill Israel's obligation to Egypt laid out in the March 1979 peace treaty. Though Begin pledged in 1982, that existing Jewish settlements would never again be dismantled, Ariel Sharon, an Israeli prime minister of the same ideological leaning did exactly that twenty-

¹Barnet Litvinoff, Barnet (ed.), *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann*, Volume II, Series B, December 1931-April 1952 (Transaction Books Rutgers University: 1984), 293.

²Neil Caplan, *The Lausanne Conference, 1949 A Case Study in Middle East Peacemaking*, Occasional papers 113, Tel Aviv University: The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 1993, 61-61.

³*Ibid.*, 64.

three years later. Acting preemptively in her own best interest, Israel attacked and destroyed the Iraqi nuclear reactor in a bid to buy time against a dreaded enemy. Since 1993, when Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin initiated the process of politically sharing the land west of the Jordan River with the Palestinians, the Israeli government negotiated (in the 1998 Wye Agreement), and implemented territorial withdrawals in exchange for security. In May 2001, Israel unilaterally withdrew from southern Lebanon in order to preserve the lives of Israeli civilians and soldiers. And since the outbreak of the Palestinian uprising in September 2000, Israel has unilaterally engaged in targeted assassinations against Palestinians who killed, planned or threatened to kill Israeli civilians, a policy that Israel has not halted since the Gaza withdrawal.

Palestinian Reality.- If Israel were to absorb the Palestinians living west of the Jordan River, the growth of the Arab population would quickly threaten the Jewish majority in Israel. Israelis overwhelmingly do not favor a bi-national state, that is, a state where Jews would forfeit the majority and hence, control over their own destiny. Today, as it was in 1948, there is a 4:1 Jewish to non-Jewish population ratio. Primarily due to significant Jewish immigration from the diaspora, Israel has sustained this ratio over the last half century. However, now that immigration has trailed off and Israel's natural population increase does not reproduce itself, and with an Arab population that continues to increase significantly, Israel's ratio of Jewish to non-Jewish population by 2025 is estimated to be 3:1, not 4:1. Specifically, the rate of Jewish population growth at the end of 2025 is expected to remain at 1.1%, whereas the Israel Arab population's growth rate is predicted to be 2.7%⁴. Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip bought her time, however, it did not solve her long term demographic problem. Cold pragmatism trumped divine promise; Jews decided that they could not live in all the promised land.

In its post Arafat-Yasin-Rantisi era, Israel sees the Palestinian community churning and splintering as perhaps at no other time in recent Palestinian history. There is no reason to believe that merely the conduct of the scheduled January 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections will bring about a stable political environment. Elections can

⁴ Jpost.com staff, «Jewish Percentage of Population declining» Israel Forum.com <http://www.israelforum.com/board/printthread.php?t=7879>, April 5, 2005.

bring legitimacy but they can not change decades of politics where allegiance is based upon protecting family and clan for economic and political good, '*wasta*', and not based upon ties to principles, performance, and institutions. Contentiousness bordering on immobility exists between the current president of the Palestinian Authority (hereafter PA) and his Prime Minister. Within the ruling Fateh political party, there remains an on-going struggle between young and older generation of Palestinian nationalists. Though a strong parliament and independent judiciary are sought by the Palestinian people, elections will not alone bring them about. Whether the PA or Hamas will prevail in the upcoming election and whether, or to which degree, each will accept or resist integration to the other, remains to be seen. The most plausible outcome is that each will carry on as it does now, separate entities vying to share the economic aid that is ear-marked for the Palestinian people. Provision of funds will only temporarily make life better for the Gaza population; it will not generate a consensus upon which to base a common Palestinian political future. Many Palestinians are ideologically unprepared to end their conflict with Israel. Only the emergence of a strong leader, who has strong political institutions with whom to share power, can make and what appears necessary and pragmatic critical choices. There remain unbridgeable gaps between even the most moderate Israelis and Palestinians on issues such as sharing Jerusalem, the future of the remaining settlements in the West Bank/east Jerusalem, and continued Palestinian insistence on the 'right of return' to Israel proper. Israel's disengagement from Gaza, goes hand in hand with her refusal to accept Palestinian return and her unilateral construction of the barrier/fence, for they all point to the same objective of preserving Israel's Jewish identity.

For Israel, Gaza was an albatross. With a high population of 1.4 million, the GDP at only \$722 per person or less, (and 30% of it provided by external financing), more than forty percent unemployment, and two-thirds of the population below the poverty line, or earning less than \$2/day, Israeli's did not want Gaza to become a financial burden. By removing herself as occupier, Israel put the onus on the PA, international donors, and the Arab world to provide for the economic future of Gaza's Palestinians. By removing herself from Gaza, Israel is not guaranteeing that it will employ again tens of thousands of Palestinians in need of jobs.

Palestinians themselves fear a civil war. Immediately after the January 2005 Palestinian presidential elections, a Palestinian journalist wrote, "the Palestinian house [is] falling apart...it is not true to say that the people are inching towards civil war for this war is already upon us. A yawning chasm exists between those who believe in a peaceful settlement [and] those who advocate resistance using all available means"⁵. There is cause for fret, given the lawlessness, kidnappings, and gangsterism that has dominated portions of the West Bank and Gaza for more than several years. The social chaos, and the political weakness, and therefore ineffectiveness of PA President Mahmoud Abbas in stabilizing the situation, contributed to the Israeli decision to withdraw. In the post withdrawal period, portions of the Gaza Strip have seen similar fits of disorder. Characterized by some Palestinian writers as 'anarchy', there has been continued firing on Israeli settlements outside of Gaza, ransacking of greenhouses otherwise destined for Palestinian use, and the smuggling in of weapons from Egypt. On September 12, 2005, Gaza synagogues in Morag, Netzarim, Neve Deklim and Kfar Darom were torched. Noting the chaotic social scene, Hani al-Masri, a Palestinian columnist wrote recently, "The PA cannot hope to be taken seriously unless it proceeds forthwith in combating the anarchy and breakdown in security that is afflicting the Palestinian territories. Thieves and murderers must be caught and punished...groups and powerful individuals... are linked to the perpetuation of chaos; they flourish... which allows them to engage in corruption... and to amass illegal fortunes. In conditions of lawlessness, gunmen rule supreme. So long as there is a power vacuum, they will try to fill it"⁶.

Conclusions.- In withdrawing from Gaza, Israel effectively said to the Palestinians, 'Here you take it. You rule yourselves; we shall leave you to do that as long as you do not harm Israelis'. Whether Israel withdraws from additional portions of the West Bank depends on whether or not the Palestinians can transform the now chaos-stricken and economically impoverished Gaza Strip into a stable, productive and cooperative territory. It is clear that Israel does not need to reach a negotiated agreement with the Palestinians in order to impose a political outcome. Nothing that Israel did in withdrawing from the

⁵ Palestinian writer, Feisal Abu-Khadra in an open letter to the new Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, *al-Ahram*, January 24, 2005.

⁶ Hani al-Masri, *al-Ayyam*, September 19, 2005.

Gaza Strip will prevent it from turning the withdrawal into a future diplomatic understanding either through the good offices of the United States or within the framework of the «Road Map». Palestinian political behavior in Gaza in the weeks and months ahead will determine more than any other variable whether Israel withdraws further from settlements in the West Bank, and whether a broader diplomatic negotiation will unfold. In December 2003, Prime Minister Sharon announced his unilateral policy to leave Gaza and in eighteen months the Israeli army accomplished the task humanely yet firmly. Unlike pundits who suggested that Israel was on the brink of civil war, in her public confrontation with the settlers, Israeli Prime Minister Sharon correctly gauged that withdrawal would take place quickly and without physical violence dotting the Israeli landscape. Withdrawal from Gaza however, did not terminate the deep-seated animosity that remains between the minority settler movement and the majority of Israelis who refuse to countenance government, financial, and armed support for sustaining the settlements.

How Israeli leaders manage the territories taken in the June 1967 war still influences the composition of Israeli domestic politics. Sharon's Finance Minister, Bibi Netanyahu resigned in protest over the Gaza withdrawal, claiming that Israel's evacuation would turn the area into a terrorist enclave diminishing not benefitting Israel's national security. Netanyahu's objective to bring Israeli elections forward in an effort to topple Sharon from the Likud Party leadership did not succeed. Sharon remains the national consensus leader, though he remains vulnerable both to age and to a political system that routinely chews up her prime ministers through public debate and contentiousness.

Israel demonstrated that it seeks to shape her destiny by defining what it does want or need. What it can not control for are the actions of outside parties be they in Europe, the US, or in their own backyard. How will the EU act now toward Hamas? Will the EU, that vehemently condemned terrorism, fascism, and incitement by political parties in their own countries in the past (Batasuna in Spain in 2002; Unite Radicale in France in 2002, and the Flemish Bloc Party in Belgium in 2004, among many others), criticize and boycott the participation of Hamas in the coming elections, an organization that openly advocates the use of force and the destruction of Israel⁷? Will

⁷ See David Makovsky and Elizabeth Young, "Toward a Quartet Position on Hamas: European Rules on Banning Political Parties, Peace Watch #515, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy,

the EU preemptively and unilaterally show courage and boldness and bolster the Palestinian Authority at the direct expense of Hamas? Or, will the EU tolerate Hamas because it is a social organization which helps suffering people?

Moreover, disengagement from Gaza took place in the context of Israel's Middle East neighbours under political, social, and economic duress. Israel saw Arab countries lacking will and courage. It saw them providing only passing interest to problems beyond one's borders. It saw no Arab unity, Arab political impotence, perhaps no longer 'an Arab world' merely separate Arab states interested in solely themselves and contending with unending domestic problems. At the end of September 2005, the veteran Arab political observer, Joseph Samaha from Beirut noted what Israel saw, "... not a single Arab state today that deals with Israel [with] a clear 'national strategy...'" [Another] side of this impotence, is to fill the air with illusions and absurdities, to proceed to unacceptable levels of self-delusion and self-deception...we have lackey rulers who consider their weakness to be their main point of strength, and an imperial center that needs more than one hurricane to get acquainted with modesty"⁸. Despite Arab oil producers awash in petro-dollars, the habitual reticence to help the Palestinians does not go beyond funding a sometimes corrupt Palestinian bureaucracy. Where is the Arab "Marshall" Plan for the Palestinians? The money is there, but not the will to spend it on the brother in need. Israel was witness. Arab countries have shown no courage or appetite to quell the violence in Iraq, they are simply sitting on the side-lines as carnage rages day after day. The Arab League exists on paper alone. In a moment of enormous candor, the Arab League Secretary General Amr Musa is reportedly to have noted that after five years in the position, he "learned from the inside how the Arabs think, including their tendency to self-destruct"⁹. Swirling about Israel are the political uncertainties in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. There is the upsurge of terrorist acts in Arab Gulf states, with anti-regime groups like Al-Qaeda, focused on destabilizing Arab autocrats and family dominated states. Churning goes on in Egypt and elsewhere as civil society advocates confront the *status quo* and determine their role, that of political Islam, and the role

September 2005, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2369>.

⁸ Joseph Samaha, *al-Safir*, September 29, 2005.

⁹ Remarks attributed to Amr Musa, Secretary General of the Arab League, *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, Monday, October 3, 2005.

of steadfast autocrat in daily political affairs. Israel looked about in its neighborhood and responded as rationally as she could to foreboding realities, not the least of which is her deep concern for the developing Iranian nuclear option. Israel built a high wall, withdrew from a costly occupation, bolstered her economy, renewed relations with countries that once shunned her, almost over night dramatically improved her presence and acceptance at the United Nations, and all the while sustaining the strongest relations possible with the US. In advance of the demographic hurricane, and given the other inclement weather about it, Israel chose wisely, it evacuated.

