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## **The Disengagement, Twelve Years On: Implications, Lessons, and an Eye toward the Future**

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The perspective of twelve years since Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip and the northern West Bank enhances the lessons that can be derived from this significant political and security-related event. In retrospect, it is clear that against the background of the second intifada, the numerous casualties of the ongoing terrorism, and the deep disagreements within Israeli society regarding a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the government of Ariel Sharon made a correct strategic decision. The decision's implementation, however, suffered from serious shortcomings in planning and execution in the realms of security, diplomacy, internal discourse, and the democratic process within Israel, as well as the treatment of those evacuated.

Discord and rifts rooted in the disengagement with regard to identity, the sense of belonging, and the narrative itself continue to fester. The different lexicons relating to the event – with terms such as “expulsion,” “decree,” and “trauma” on the one hand, and “disengagement,” “separation,” and “ceasing to control another people” on the other hand – attest to the divide within Israeli society. Furthermore, the disengagement has continued to affect Israeli political discourse over the years. It was a major factor in the bang that rocked Israeli politics a few months later, when in November 2005 Prime Minister Sharon and other Knesset members left the ruling Likud party to establish Kadima. And after three rounds of violent confrontation against Hamas in the Gaza Strip over the years, large portions of the Israeli public view the disengagement as a strategic error.

### **Achievements**

Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip and the northern West Bank achieved four positive goals. First, Israel ceased its control over a Palestinian population that at the time numbered approximately 1.7 million people. In doing so, it greatly mitigated the scope of the occupation (though some disagree with this assertion) and achieved a large degree of

legitimacy – in the short and medium terms – for the use of force against terrorist activity originating in the Gaza Strip. Second, Israel parted ways with a significant portion of the demographic threat to the Zionist vision. It conveyed a clear message that it had no intention of endangering its Jewish and democratic character by retaining control of all Palestinian territory, even that which is partially populated by Israelis, and that it would act as it saw fit without giving others the opportunity to contest its identity. It was a message aimed inward, toward Israeli society, but also outward, toward the Palestinians, the Arab world, and the international community. The third achievement of the disengagement was the establishment of a clear border, with Israel on one side and others – whether enemies or friends – on the other. If Israel is forced to take action against an enemy, it will enjoy greater international legitimacy, and the confrontation will assume the character of an inter-state conflict, which is better suited to Israel's military capabilities. Fourth, it unburdened the IDF of its policing role in the Gaza Strip and freed it up to engage in its original purpose: to defend the State of Israel.

### **Failings and Errors**

At the same time, serious errors were made while implementing the disengagement plan. In the realm of security, withdrawing from the Philadelphi axis and leaving it open for the smuggling of weapons enabled Hamas to arm itself and pursue its military buildup without disruption. In addition, Israel did not clarify what the rules of engagement would be following the pull-out. That is, it was not initially clear what the repercussions would be for firing on Israel from within the Gaza Strip, and even when these rules were finally clarified, Israel did not act in accordance with them.

In the diplomatic/political realm, there should have been attempts to transfer the evacuated territory by agreement to Mahmoud Abbas, the legitimate moderate representative of the Palestinians, in order to provide him with a political achievement for the entire world to see. Instead, Israel withdrew from the territory unilaterally, leaving Hamas to take credit for the Palestinian accomplishment. In addition, Israel began coordinating the disengagement plan with the United States at an extremely late stage of the process, and once the Americans understood that Israel was going to withdraw from the territory in any event, they refused to provide it with any substantive political return or to support the plan with requisite resources.

Regarding Israel's borders and the settlements, the disengagement established a precedent of complete unilateral withdrawal, ostensibly with nothing in return, from 100 percent of a territorial area back to the 1967 borders. Instead, it would have been wiser to leave a settlement bloc in place in the northern Gaza Strip, even if only as a bargaining chip for future negotiations for an agreement. Leaving a settlement bloc in the northern Gaza Strip and refraining from evacuating the entire Jewish population could have provided a basis

for similar processes in a future West Bank measure. It could also have provided Israel with security advantages, and reduced the pain and cost of the evacuation.

Internally, there were serious mistakes. The evacuees were not provided with an empathetic, supportive framework, and an opportunity for comprehensive national planning for settlement elsewhere, such as in the Negev and the Galilee, was missed in the process. An opportunity was also missed for solidarity discourse within Israeli society despite the severe public divisions regarding the plan. The evacuees were treated as individuals as opposed to communities. According to a report by the state commission of inquiry that was established under the leadership of former Supreme Court Justice Eliyahu Matza to examine the disengagement from the Gaza Strip and the northern West Bank, the state failed in its treatment of the evacuees and commitment to make the treatment of evacuees an urgent national undertaking. “A gap emerged between the lofty rhetoric of all the prime ministers and the practical functioning of the state,” the commission found. With regard to a similar measure in the future, the commission determined that the state would need to make advance preparations and establish a proper planning and land infrastructure on a national scale to help rehabilitate people from evacuated areas. Inter alia, it would need to approve a special national outline plan for up to 100,000 potential evacuees. The commission concluded that responsibility for this undertaking lies with the government, and primarily the prime minister. It also determined that it would be necessary to engage in overall preparations – including specific legislation, the allocation of resources, and the establishment of an integrated, multi-realm body that would be charged with responsibility for the issue.

In the realm of the democratic process in Israel, large segments of the moderate Israeli population from the political center and the left, as well as the major media outlets, chose to ignore the political manipulations of Prime Minister Sharon and the manner in which he bent the basic rules of parliamentary democracy that often accompany such critical decisions in the life of a nation. These include the decision to disregard the binding referendum among Likud party members, and the plan’s presentation to the government for approval before it was presented to the Knesset.

### **The Security Situation**

Prior to the disengagement, senior IDF officers remained divided regarding the question of what was more effective from a security perspective: retaining the Gaza Strip or providing defense and deterrence from behind a clearly defined border and assigning responsibility for security breaches to a political party on the other side of that border. Presence on the ground in Gaza provided a better intelligence and operational foothold but also presented disadvantages in the densely populated Gaza Strip, most of which was not under Israeli control, such as long, deep, exposed lines of friction and vulnerability to terrorist attacks

carried out under conditions that were ideal from the perspective of Hamas and other Palestinian factions operating in the area. Providing defense from outside the Gaza Strip, on the other hand, did not sufficiently address Hamas's massive military buildup. The rounds of armed confrontation in the Gaza Strip (in 2009, 2012, and 2014) were not conducted in a manner that maximized IDF's capacity to achieve better results in targeting and maneuvering. Also problematic was high trajectory weapons of varying intensities fired from Gaza at population centers in Israel. An analysis of the three rounds of fighting in the Gaza Strip between Israel and Hamas is beyond the scope of this article. Clearly, however, the political debate continues with regard to the quality of the security response to threats emanating from Gaza before and after the disengagement.

### **Lessons for the Future**

The Zionist vision for the State of Israel – a democratic state of the Jewish people as envisioned in the Declaration of Independence that is secure, moral, and enjoys international legitimacy – is inconsistent with Israel's ongoing slide toward a single binational state. The complete lack of trust between Israel and the Palestinians and the inability of the two sides to agree on the parameters of a peace agreement, or even the terms for the resumption of the political process, requires that Israel engage in an integrated process that does not require a high level of trust with the Palestinians and that includes the active involvement of the international community. One necessary condition of progress in the process of political and territorial separation from the Palestinians is that security not be impaired. Moreover, the citizens of Israel must be convinced that state officials have learned and implemented the lessons of the 2005 disengagement in order to prevent a decline in security, and that progress is made toward a better political and security reality.

It appears that unilateral disengagement as a stand-alone event will not repeat itself. However, a political and security independent process with similar attributes could enable Israel to continue striving for a reality of two states for two peoples, based on a gradual, secure, and responsible end to Israel's control over the Palestinian people. This would be a positive development for the country in terms of national security and internal resilience. At the same time, Israel will need to maintain the conditions for a future solution of two states, or two separate political entities, while also bolstering the Palestinian Authority as a stable, responsible, and functioning entity. Israel will need to shift from maintaining the status quo and retaining footholds everywhere on the ground to shaping the situation and determining the border around the major settlement blocs, even if this is would be a provisional rather than a permanent border.

The Gaza Strip and the West Bank differ from one another in terms of the scope of Israeli settlement, the Jewish historical and religious attachment to the respective areas, and the potential security threats they pose to essential Israeli infrastructure in the center of the

country. Any political and territorial separation from most of the West Bank must be considered in light of the experience that left Israeli society with serious security-related, political, and social scars. Precisely for this reason, and despite the differences between the territories, Israel will need to take into account the lessons that were learned from the disengagement from the Gaza Strip and to implement them as part of future processes in the West Bank. Gradual progress toward a reality of two states, even in the absence of a full-fledged agreement, must be a major component of Israeli policy. Efforts should be made to reach agreement with the Palestinians regarding interim measures throughout transitional stages. However, if it becomes clear that an agreement cannot be reached, measures should be implemented independently (regardless of Palestinian consent) aimed at improving Israel's situation without impairing its security. These measures will need to be carried out in close coordination with the United States and in accordance with US-Israel understandings.

More effective progress toward Israel's strategic aims will require a number of measures, including advance agreement with the US administration regarding gradual progress toward a reality of two states and the contours of a final status agreement that is acceptable to Israel; regional dialogue; bilateral negotiations with the Palestinians; and independent measures that further the aim of a future two-state solution, or that at least bring Israel closer to a reality of two states. This will enable Israel to build a desirable situation, even in the absence of a Palestinian partner for dialogue for a long term agreement, while maintaining flexibility and initiative for other strategic trajectories to the extent necessary.

One of the most important national lessons of Israel's 2005 disengagement is that the government must conduct an internal dialogue regarding the measures it intends to implement with the citizens of Israel in general, and with the population that would ultimately be designated for evacuation in particular. The dialogue will not repair the deep division that exists in Israeli society regarding such decisions. However, it can help cultivate tools and suitable mechanisms for democratically contending with national decisions of this nature.