

# Rules of Disengagement

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*Herzliya, Israel*

TWO YEARS AGO, in a major speech at the annual Herzliya conference on national security, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon affirmed his embrace of the road map, the plan for peace in the Middle East laid out by President Bush in June 2002 that calls for a two state solution. Last year, in the same venue, a few miles north of Tel Aviv on Israel's Mediterranean coast, Sharon stunned the nation by declaring his intention to proceed with unilateral disengagement. Last night, Sharon once again used the forum presented by the packed closing banquet of the four-day extravaganza of panel discussions and policy addresses to announce a significant development in Israeli policy toward the conflict with the Palestinians.

But this time it was what he did *not* say that was most significant: Last year's plan for "unilateral disengagement" had become this year's "Disengagement Plan." The term "unilateral" had been dropped silently and without fanfare. But instructively: The reality is that the success of the Disengagement Plan will depend in no small measure on Israel's ability to forge cooperative relations with its partners, and in some cases to forge partners with whom to cooperate.

The security situation in Israel has changed a great deal over the last two years. The second intifada has been defeated. Terror has subsided. Saddam Hussein is in prison and Libya has renounced weapons of mass destruction. The Bush administration and the Sharon government have developed a close working relationship. Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak has reengaged with Israel. Syria is sending messages that it is prepared for talks with Israel.

BUT NONE OF THAT quite gets to the heart of the matter, according to Uzi Dayan, former head of Israel's National Security Council under Sharon. The most important developments for peace between Israel and the Palestinians, Dayan explained to me in the new suburban Tel Aviv headquarters of his fledgling center-left political movement, have been Sharon's unflinching determination to proceed with disengagement from Gaza and the West Bank, and Yasser Arafat's willingness, at long last, to disengage from the world.

Sharon certainly agreed about Arafat, and amplified the point in his Herzliya address: "The most genuine and greatest opportunity for building a new and different relationship with the Palestinians was created following the death of Yasser Arafat, who constituted the primary obstacle to peace." The demise of the corrupt dictator--who stole hundreds of millions (perhaps billions) of dollars intended for the Palestinian people, abolished elections, enforced a violent cult of personality, supervised an educational system that preached hatred, and in the fall of 2000 renewed a war of terror against Israel--presented the "opportunity for an historic breakthrough in the relations between us and the Palestinians."

It was up to Israel to seize the initiative. "This is the hour, this is the time," proclaimed Sharon. "This is the national test." Indeed, one part of the Disengagement Plan remains all about Israel and strictly unilateral. As Itamar Yaar, the number two man on Israel's National Security Council, pointed out to me after Sharon's address, the decision itself to disengage, the exact territory from which to disengage initially, and the overall timing of the disengagement remain entirely in Israel's hands. And Yaar has no doubt that, by the end of 2005, Israel, as called for by Sharon's plan, will have completed disengagement from Gaza and from about 20 percent of the northern part of the West Bank.

But contrary to perceptions not only widespread abroad but common in Israel as well, Yaar said, Sharon understands that it is in Israel's strategic interest for disengagement to benefit the Palestinian people. To this end, Yaar and the National Security Council have been working on plans for nearly a year, involving all the ministries of the Israeli government, to guide the complex task of vacating land, uprooting and relocating citizens, and transferring power to a people that have never fully governed themselves.

FOR ISRAEL, disengagement also will involve delicate coordination with a host of partners--including first and foremost the Palestinians, but also Israel's Arab neighbors, the wider Arab world, the international community, and not least the United States. According to Shmuel Bar, a senior fellow at the Institute of Policy and Strategy at the Herzliya Interdisciplinary Center and one of the Herzliya Conference organizers, all will be put to the test.

First, the Palestinian people must decide whether they are ready to make good on their professed desire to live in their own state and take control of their political destiny. To do this, they will have to ensure that their scheduled January elections are relatively free and fair. And then they will have to make the collective decision to reject the multiplicity of authorities contending for their allegiance, and instead legitimate democracy and the rule of

law by embracing the single authority that emerges from the elections. Otherwise the Palestinians face the prospect of descending, on their way to statehood, to the status of a failed state.

Second, Israel's Arab neighbors will have to learn to stop responding to the Palestinians as people locked in an existential conflict over their right to live in their own state and instead as an actual state engaged, like many other states, in territorial dispute with one of its neighboring states. This means establishing formal relations with the new Palestinian state and offering financial assistance. At the same time, Israel's Arab neighbors will have to treat Israel not as a special source of injustice to the Arab peoples, but as a state like other states, one with disagreements with its neighbors that are susceptible to resolution through negotiation.

SIMILARLY, it will be necessary for the entire Arab world--reaching east in Africa to Morocco and west to the Gulf monarchies--to assist in the birth of the Palestinian state. In addition to financial support, one big step would be to normalize relations with Israel, extend full recognition, exchange ambassadors, open up travel, and promote trade. This would defuse tension in the region, build confidence among Israelis, and provide further evidence to the Palestinians that their hopes for the future lie not in violent revolution but in peaceful cooperation.

Fourth, the international community must continue to invest in the Palestinian people both by offering financial assistance and by providing consultation on the enormous range of issues involved in creating the institutions of a modern nation state. But, unlike the Arafat era, this time the international community must invest responsibly and must hold the Palestinian leadership accountable.

Finally, the United States must continue to play its indispensable role. As Sharon stressed in his Herzliya speech, the Bush administration has already contributed mightily by making clear its agreement with Israel that, in reaching a two state solution, Israel cannot be expected to return precisely to the 1967 borders; Israel must be allowed to keep large settlement blocks, particularly around Jerusalem; and that there will be no right of Palestinian refugees to return to Israel. In addition to continuing its close consultation and cooperation with Israel, the United States should now try to explain better, most importantly to the Palestinian people, but also to the international community, that to be pro-Israel is not to be anti-Palestinian--not only because establishing a viable Palestinian state is in Israel's strategic interest, but also because it is just.

NOTWITHSTANDING all these uncertainties, many are still inclined to doubt Sharon. Is he genuinely committed to peace? Doesn't he just wish to wash his hands of responsibility for the Palestinians? So long as Israel can keep out the terrorists, does Sharon really care if the Palestinians descend into bloodshed and civil war?

These questions bring a small knowing smile to Itamar Yaar. Then his eyes narrow. The Sharon Disengagement Plan, he reiterates, has been designed to benefit the Palestinian people. If Israel and its partners squander the opportunity of 2005, a generation may pass before Israelis will again be willing to make painful concessions. Then Yaar shrugs his shoulders. And then the small smile returns, and he tells me that if Israel seizes the moment and, with its partners, succeeds in its ambitious hopes for a truly multilateral disengagement, it will set in motion a process whose logic will prove irresistible to both the Israeli public and the Palestinian people.

To realists on the right and cynics on the left, that may seem like an unlikely scenario. Then again, if you had predicted on Bush's election in November 2000 or Sharon's in January 2001 that three years later they would be embracing what has come to be called the Bush Doctrine and collaborating to promote a progressive agenda in the Middle East, you would have been mocked as a fool and dismissed out of hand. But you would have been right.

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