

# Israel's Disengagement Plan: Conception and Implementation

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The decision by the government of Israel to withdraw unilaterally from the Gaza Strip and its 17 Jewish settlements, and from four West Bank settlements in the autumn of 2005 represented a moment of historic importance in the ongoing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Both conceptually and practically, it was a major departure from Israeli policy since 1967. Disengagement has re-shaped Israeli politics, setting in motion processes which have ended the generation-long domination of the Israeli political scene by the Likud Party. Indeed, the emergence of a new Israeli strategy based on unilateralism has re-shaped the basic parameters of the Israeli discussion, which since 1967 had been divided between supporters and opponents of the idea of land for peace. This article will discuss the emergence of the idea of unilateral disengagement, its adoption as policy by the government of Ariel Sharon, the implementation of the Gaza disengagement and events since the implementation.

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## The Idea of Unilateral Disengagement

The Disengagement Plan from the Gaza Strip and from four settlements in the West Bank was approved by the Israeli Cabinet on 6th June, 2004, and by the Knesset on 25th October, 2004. The idea had emerged publicly, however, a year earlier. In October, 2003, then Industry and Trade Minister Ehud Olmert made a series of speeches in which he first floated the notion that if Israel became convinced that progress through negotiation with the Palestinian Authority

was impossible, then it might feel it incumbent upon itself to take unilateral action. Olmert in these speeches laid emphasis on the 'demographic issue': i.e. the fact that the rapidly growing Palestinian population in the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea might eventually, in the absence of diplomatic progress, make the continued maintaining of a democratic, majority-Jewish state unfeasible. Since this was the case, he argued, the status quo did not work in Israel's favor. An alternative way forward, Olmert suggested, would be for Israel to unilaterally withdraw from areas it felt were not essential, or which would in any case be ceded during future peace negotiations. This might lead to the de facto emergence of the Palestinian state with provisional borders envisaged by the Road Map, to which Israel remained committed.

This idea was further explained, and began the path to becoming Israeli policy, with the speech by Prime Minister (PM) Ariel Sharon, at the fourth Herzliya Conference on 18th December, 2003. PM Sharon expressed his advocacy of unilateral disengagement in the following terms: "We are interested in conducting direct negotiations, but do not intend to hold Israeli society hostage in the hands of the Palestinians. I have already said: We will not wait for them indefinitely. The Disengagement Plan does not prevent the implementation of the Roadmap. Rather, it is a step Israel will take in the absence of any other option, in order to improve its security. The Disengagement Plan will be realized only in the event that the Palestinians continue to drag their feet and postpone implementation of the Roadmap."

## Details of the Plan

The precise provisions of the Disengagement Plan, as accepted by the Israeli Cabinet in June, 2004, laid

out a blueprint for the complete withdrawal of Israeli forces and civilians from the area of the Gaza Strip, and the evacuation of civilian residents from four West Bank communities. According to the Revised Disengagement plan the settlements to be evacuated were divided into four groups:

- Group A – Morag, Netzarim, and Kfar Darom in the Gaza Strip.
- Group B – the villages of Ganim, Kadim, Sa-Nur, and Homesh in the northern West Bank
- Group C – the towns and villages of Gush Katif in the Gaza Strip
- Group D – the villages of the northern Gaza Strip (Elei Sinai, Dugit, and Nissanit).

It was made clear that territorial contiguity would be assured for the Palestinians in the areas to be evacuated, and that no permanent Israeli military presence would remain.

In the course of 2005, the Disengagement Plan was revised and finalized. It also became integrated into the broader picture of relations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

### **The Plan Becomes Policy, in the Face of Determined Opposition**

At a summit meeting held in Sharm al-Sheikh on 8th February, 2005, the Disengagement Plan was discussed and endorsed by representatives of the Palestinian Authority (PA), Egypt and Jordan. The summit also witnessed the brokering of a ceasefire between Israel and the PA which effectively brought to a close five years of overt hostilities between the two sides which had resulted in heavy loss of both Israeli and Palestinian life.

The Sharm summit was followed by the final endorsing by the Knesset of the Disengagement Plan on 16th February, 2005. The first months of 2005 witnessed a determined campaign of opposition to disengagement waged by Israeli residents of the Gaza Strip and West Bank, and their supporters. This campaign began with a strong sense of confidence among its adherents that the Disengagement could be prevented. Public support for the Disengagement Plan, however, remained consistently high in the months leading up to implementation. Polls revealed a rate of support of around 70% among the Israeli public for the plan.

The opposition campaign notwithstanding, on 16th February, 2005, the Knesset passed the final version of the Disengagement Plan Implementation Law. This law represented the penultimate hurdle that the plan was required to pass on the road to implementation. It laid down a series of practical measures for the relocation and compensation of Israeli residents of communities in the Gaza Strip and in the four West Bank communities slated for dismantlement. The law allocated the sum of NIS 3.8 billion (\$884 million) for the relocation and compensation of residents. It was passed with 59 in favour, 40 opposed, 5 abstaining. A proposed amendment to submit the plan to a referendum was rejected.

The Plan, as modified and amended by the Knesset, was then presented before the Israeli Cabinet on 20th February. The Cabinet approved it, completing the progress of the Disengagement Plan from an idea floated by senior politicians to the approved policy of the Government of Israel.

On 28th March, the Knesset rejected a bill to delay the implementation of the disengagement plan by a vote of 72 to 39. The bill was introduced by a group of Likud MKs who wanted to force a referendum on the issue.

On 17th March, Israel Defensive Forces (IDF) Southern Command issued a military order prohibiting Israeli citizens who did not reside in the Gaza Strip settlements from relocating to the area.

The domestic campaign against disengagement did not cease at this point. But for the remainder of 2005, it would take the form of a series of public events and demonstrations which sought – through massive public pressure – to delay or frustrate the carrying out of the dismantling of settlements, and the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

On 7th August, just a week before the commencement of Disengagement, Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu resigned his Cabinet post, prior to the final Cabinet ratification of the first phase of Disengagement. This vote was carried in the Cabinet by 17 votes to 5. Netanyahu explained his reasons for resigning as deriving from his fears of a surge of terrorism following the Disengagement. He considered that this would take place both because Israel would no longer be able to control events in Gaza, and because the withdrawal would be perceived by Palestinian rejectionists as a vindication of their violent tactics. “The withdrawal,” Netanyahu said in a statement following his resign-

nation, “endangers Israel’s security, divides its people and sets the standard of the withdrawal to the 1967 border.”

### **The implementation of the plan**

The implementation of Disengagement began on 15th August, 2005. The Gaza Strip and the area surrounding the four West Bank settlements were closed to visitors, and the process of evacuating all those individuals who had not already left, and demolishing the infrastructure of the communities began. In the event, the disengagement proceeded far more smoothly and speedily than had been predicted. There were nevertheless anguished scenes in all the communities slated for destruction, as the settlers and their allies protested their removal. Some protestors threw substances at Israeli security forces personnel. The substances included, paint, turpentine and in one case acid. But there were few serious acts of violence, and no fatalities as a result of the disengagement. (With the exception of one female opponent to the disengagement who set herself on fire and later died of her injuries.)

Israel’s conduct of regular security operations continued during the course of the implementation of disengagement. An IDF force killed five members of the Islamic Jihad organization on the week of the Disengagement.

The removal of settlers and protestors from Gaza was completed by 24th August, 2005.

On 31st August, the Knesset reversed previously stated Israeli intentions, and voted to withdraw from the Gaza-Egypt border. Egyptian security personnel would now be deployed along the demilitarized Egyptian side of the border. Israel had previously maintained its intention of retaining control of the border in the hands of the Israeli security forces.

On Sunday, 11th September, the Israeli Cabinet voted to leave the synagogues in the Gaza Strip settlements intact. This enabled the withdrawal to proceed slightly ahead of schedule. The last IDF troops left the Gaza Strip on 11th September. On 12th September, the settlements were handed over to the Palestinians. The evacuation of the four northern West Bank settlements, meanwhile, was completed by 22nd September.

In a statement issued on the first day of the Disen-

gagement, Ariel Sharon once more clarified the reasons for Israel’s unilateral turn. He expressed himself in the following terms: “We tried to reach agreements with the Palestinians which would move the two peoples towards the path of peace. They were crushed against a wall of hatred and fanaticism. The unilateral disengagement plan...is the Israeli answer to this reality. The plan is good for Israel in any future scenario. We are reducing the day to day friction and its victims on both sides. The IDF will redeploy on defensive lines behind the Security Fence. Those who continue to fight us will meet the full force of the IDF and the security forces.”

### **Developments since the Disengagement**

In the days that followed the implementation of Disengagement, an immediate truce of strength developed between Hamas and the Israeli security forces. After an explosion at a Hamas ‘victory parade’ in the Jebalya refugee camp on 19th September, the movement began a Qassam bombardment of Israeli western Negev communities. A heavy Israeli response in the subsequent days ended the exchange. But a constant, steady rain of Qassams, now reaching the outskirts of the city of Ashkelon, has been a factor since the withdrawal from Gaza.

Agreement on the vexed issue of the southern crossing from Gaza to Sinai was not reached until 15th November, 2005. The Rafah Crossing, and the security arrangements there, remain an issue of concern for Israel. For Palestinians, meanwhile, the issue of the Karni border crossing – the main commercial crossing between Gaza and Israel – has been a point of frustration. The crossing has periodically been closed because of Israeli intelligence warnings of possible Palestinian attack. The effect this has on the Palestinian ability to conduct commercial activity is significant, and has caused damage to the Palestinian economy in the Gaza Strip. The Hamas victory in the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections of 25th January, 2006 has been cited by some as influenced to some degree by the perception that the movement’s violence had produced the Disengagement. Such a contention, however, remains open to question. Other issues – most importantly anger at the perceived corruption of the Fatah-led PA, and the general phenomenon of popularity of Islamist candidates wherever genuinely free elections have been held in the Arab world

– must also be taken into account in this regard. (E.Yaari: 2005).

## Conclusion

The implementation of the Disengagement from Gaza and part of the northern West Bank was viewed by those who formulated it, and by Israel's security establishment, as a success. The perceived success of the move has brought the likelihood of further extensive unilateral moves by Israel on the West Bank onto the agenda. Crucial issues which remain as yet unclear include the precise contours and extent of further unilateral withdrawals, security arrangements in the areas to be evacuated, and the broader diplomatic significance and implications of such moves.

## References

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