

Gaza Pullout: From Disengagement to Engagement

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Israel has finally pulled out from the Gaza strip and parts of the West Bank marking an end to 38 years of illegal occupation of the territory. Israel occupied this land, known as the Occupied Territories, (OT) after winning the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. However, this pullout, under what is known as the unilateral disengagement plan, originally conceived by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, has deeper implications and wider ramifications than simply returning the occupied land to the Palestinians.

The Disengagement Plan

Israel's cabinet approved the plan for disengagement from the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and West Bank on June 6, 2004. The Knesset (Israeli Parliament) endorsed the plan on October 25, 2004, and Israeli military forces finally began their evacuation on August 15, 2005.¹ This disengagement, carried out in phased steps, has been completed successfully, giving Mahmud Abbas, Head of the Palestinian Authority (PA), the much-awaited right to govern this piece of land, while simultaneously imposing demanding challenges on him. However, Israel's control has not effectively ended as it still controls Gaza's airspace, borders, and coastline, thereby minimising Palestinian control and authority.

The death of Yasser Arafat and the election of his successor, Mahmud Abbas, have somewhat infused an unexpected momentum in the torn relations between Israel and Palestine. Thus, this disengagement plan acts as an important, positive, and constructive step forward in the peace process, as well as in improving relations between the two age-old adversaries. This plan is also extremely controversial as it has caused rifts in Sharon's own Right wing ruling Likud Party, as well as reinforced Palestinian fears of Israel's unilateral actions in sidelining them. However, the most contentious

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segment of the plan was dismantling settlements and evacuating Jewish settlers from their homes. The plan envisioned evacuation of about 8,000 Jewish settlers from 21 heavily fortified enclaves in the Gaza strip as well as four isolated settlements in the Northern West Bank. Israel reasons out its withdrawal by reiterating its security dilemmas and challenges, which were proving extremely costly for the Israelis to cope with.

Gaza in the Future: A Phase of Cautious Optimism

The post-disengagement period marks the onset of an extremely crucial phase for the Palestinians, shifting the onus on them to prove their ability in administering the region effectively. This places Mahmud Abbas in an extremely precarious situation since he has not just the political, social, and economic development on his agenda, but also the task of restructuring disorderly security forces.

In addition, Abbas's task embodies further dilemmas and hurdles since the Gaza strip has never been autonomous, i.e. Gaza has never been Palestinian land. From 1948 to 1967, it was under Egyptian military rule and earlier from 1922 to 1948, it was a part of the League of Nations mandate. Preceding this period, for four hundred years it formed a part of the Ottoman Empire. Therefore, administering Gaza would pose arduous challenges for Abbas, and these include revamping the security set-up, reigning in and disarming militants, tackling Hamas, strengthening the political infrastructure, and pushing economic reforms and social development. The outcome of his efforts could either enhance or undermine Abbas's standing as a worthy political and national leader. Since it entered the political fray, Hamas also poses a serious challenge to Abbas and the PA. The Islamic movement has strengthened its base in Gaza, especially by setting up an extensive grassroots social system effectively undermining the PA's corrupt administration.

At the regional and international level, the pullout will have implications for Israel's role and the future of the peace process; role of Egypt Jordan, Lebanon and Syria (all of whom have an important say in Palestinian affairs); role of external actors; and finally, on US involvement.

Sharon's reasons for disengagement go beyond just security concerns. The original champion of settlements, Sharon has tempered his extremist policies to suit national and international interests. Domestic compulsions

include demographic concerns of an Arab majority over the Jews that could undermine the very essence of the Jewish state. Also, the high cost of human security and maintaining a military presence in Gaza added to these compulsions.

The disengagement comprises other elements that have intensified Palestinian fears. These include Israel retaining control over settlements in the West Bank, building new houses encircling Jerusalem, resettling ousted settlers from Gaza to settlements in West Bank, and continuing to build its security barrier/fence in order to realign the borders.



The West Bank settlements and settlers outnumber those in Gaza², confirming Palestinian fears about Sharon's strategy to engage in a wider struggle to define Israel's borders, with or without an agreement with the PA. However, critics of the disengagement plan argue that expanding the settlements in the West Bank could bring about a third *intifada* that could be more violent and brutal than the second one. As Dov Weisglass, a key adviser to Sharon, said "the significance of the plan is that it would freeze the political process and that once it was frozen, there could be no discussion about the establishment of a Palestinian state or negotiations about Palestinian refugees, borders or the status of Jerusalem."³ The ongoing construction of houses in Maale Adumim and Ariel, two of the largest settlements in West Bank, and making of the E1 corridor connecting Jerusalem to Maale Adumim is a definite move to cut off Palestinians in East Jerusalem from rest of the West Bank. Sharon has used the

disengagement plan as a double-edged sword, the edges of which are sharp enough to pre-empt the split of a future Palestinian state.

The disengagement process also brings the spotlight back on the Roadmap, which had frozen after Palestinian militants resumed violence.

A Palestinian State of the Art

International pressure, especially, from the Bush regime to reactivate the Roadmap⁴ and pullout from Gaza compelled Sharon to take this decisive step. The Roadmap essentially aims at establishing a Palestinian state by means of adhering to three phases outlined in the peace plan. The Palestinian state, a subject that not too long ago was a taboo for the Israelis, has now become an essential element in the dialogue for the peace process. Thus, the main obstacles to the peace process at present are the challenges, which lie ahead in the establishment for a Palestinian state.

The future Palestinian state does not, however, represent a state, which the Palestinians have strived and fought for in the past few decades. The Palestinians have existed as a *de facto* state since the land was partitioned under the British mandate and Israel was carved as a Jewish state. However, the borders of a final and legal Palestinian state recognised by the international community require contiguity, which is one of the main issues of contention. Though the borders of Gaza, after the pullout, may appear to resemble those of an interim Palestinian state, other extremely sensitive issues like the status of Jerusalem and refugees are equally important to the establishment of a final Palestinian state.

International Ramifications: Foes, Friends and Allies

Since peace remains quite elusive in the region and often involves very high stakes, the disengagement plan also comprises some subtle but very calculated and deliberate measures. The Gaza pullout has not affected just the Israelis and Palestinians but has had reverberations in the region as well as resulted in a reconfiguration of the international system.

A major shift in international Politics after the Gaza pullout was observed when the Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri met his Israeli counterpart Silvan Shalom in the first publicly acknowledged high-level meeting in Turkey on September 1. Pakistan's President General Pervez Musharraf defended this meeting, in the wake of strong protests from

domestic Islamic groups, stating Pakistan's aim to play an active role in the Israel-Palestine peace process, and plan to establish official diplomatic relations with Israel only after formation of a Palestinian state.

This meeting took many Islamic countries by surprise since Pakistan has always supported the Palestinian cause, condemning Israel's brutal measures and terming it as a "Zionist state." However, there have been clandestine relations between the two states soon after both achieved independence and continue even now. These talks are viewed as the first payoff after the Gaza pullout, as Pakistan also intends to establish itself as a moderate Islamic state and a power broker in the region.

Pakistan's decision invited a wide range of comments, primarily focusing on the rhetoric about the fear of growing Indo-Israeli defence ties and a close conspiracy between the two against Pakistan. However, Pakistan's motives for engaging Israel extend beyond this rhetoric and amplify Washington's role in the current events. "A strong Pakistan peacefully coexisting with India and Israel will, to borrow from Sir Halford Mackinder's famous geo-political theory, maintain relative peace in the Rimland while allowing Washington to pursue a policy of gaining rich economic resources from the heartland (incidentally made up of Muslim majority countries i.e., Central Asia)."⁵ Israel, on the other hand, justified this overture on the ground that Pakistan is the second largest Muslim country in the world and it is in Israel's larger interest to pursue friendly and diplomatic relations with all countries irrespective of their state religion. Given Israel's foreign policy objectives, this overture could serve as an insurance for its security (on the assumption that Islamabad can exert influence on the matter in Arab countries especially Saudi Arabia) as also the larger Israeli-American interests.

India too is intensifying its role and responsibility of an important player in West Asia. It promised \$15 million dollars in aid to Palestine, after Mahmud Abbas' visit on May 18 besides giving "new thrust" to its ties with the Arab and Islamic world. Secretary (East), in the Ministry of External Affairs, Rajiv Sikri, visited the region on August 27 and held talks with the Palestinian, Israeli, and Jordanian leaders. Talks with the Palestinians included issues relating to bilateral ties and regional matters, including Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and certain settlements in the West Bank and included possible ways of utilising aid promised by

India. The developing relations between Israel and Pakistan would need to be watched closely.

The May 2005 controversy over the China-Israel Phalcon weapons deal could lead to speculations about arms transfer from Israel to China and onwards to Pakistan. In addition, since Israel is India's second largest defence supplier, the fear of Pakistan entering into a defence deal as a part of this engagement, can also prove to be a problem for India. In addition, President Musharraf's plan to address the American Jewish Congress (AJC), an extremely strong pro-Israel Jewish group, in New York on September 17, 2005 adds to India's concerns about Pakistan using such groups for lobbying.

India can also arrive at an understanding with Israel that its relationship with Pakistan should not affect India in any adverse manner. Israel should heed this requirement keeping in mind its growing relationship with India and its role in recognising Israel at a time when a majority of the states had not established any ties with it.

Conclusion

The Gaza pullout has had several spillover effects and implications. The international community will keep a close watch on developments in Gaza and on Abbas' approach to tacking the militants as well as administrative challenges in the near future. On the other hand, Sharon will have to come to terms with leaders like Benjamin Netanyahu who pose a strong challenge to him in the next elections.

The Bush regime is striving hard to accomplish its goals in its agenda for the Middle East. A Palestinian state could well be a part of the answer to the many questions still being raised over the US role in the region.

This is also a testing time for India, since Israel, one of its closest defence partners, is moving closer to Pakistan. The Gaza pullout thus has implications for many not directly affected to the disengagement, and for the emerging contours of international relations.

References/End Notes

- ¹ For details of the Unilateral disengagement plan, see website of Israel's ministry of external affairs, www.mofa.gov

- ² There are 21 settlements and 8000 settlers in Gaza as compared to 120 settlements and 450,000 settlers in West Bank.
- ³ "Sharon's Gaza Plan", no. 2.
- ⁴ The Road Map is a performance based, scheduled, and detailed plan put forward by the Quartet (US, Russia, UN, and the European Union (EU)) on April 30th 2003 aims at breaking the Palestinian impasse, end the violence and subsequently arrive at a peace settlement between the two conflicting parties.
- ⁵ Sahaid Alam ,Pakistan-Israel Rapprochement: A Speculation turns real, Editorial page, *New Nation* Online Edition, September 6, 2005, at <http://nation.ittefaq.com>.

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