

Gaza Withdrawal Plan

Introduction:

The Israeli plan of a unilateral withdrawal from some Gaza settlements presents opportunities as well as risks. A constructive engagement with the plan can help minimize the risks and maximize the benefits, namely strengthening the PA and the moderate trends in Palestine and reviving the Roadmap. However, constructive engagement requires some conditions if it is to be successful.

Risks

A purely unilateral withdrawal will result in:

- Weakening the PA
 - Discrediting the PA's policy of ending the conflict through negotiations. The message is why negotiate and compromise when you can get what you want for free using violence.
 - Violent elements emerge as victors. These elements will point out that their policies of violence have succeeded. This is especially true of Hamas in view of its popular support base and advanced organizational abilities.
 - It is unlikely that Hamas will use this to assume direct control, given the responsibilities entailed in that. However, it might use its increased influence to demand more powers in the social sphere.
 - This would be a setback for democratization efforts in the whole region.
 - The emergence of local "war lords" as viable interlocutors on the local levels. This is to the detriment of the central, national-level Palestinian Authority.
- Weakening the Roadmap:
 - The logic of the Roadmap is a set of cumulative, mutually supportive measures leading to the ultimate objective of a negotiated Palestinian state by 2005.
 - The Roadmap logic of bilateralism and return to negotiations will be undermined by unilateralism.
 - A perceived victory for violence in Gaza might encourage increased violence in the West Bank.

- The "two-state solution" vision of President Bush and of Phase III of the Road Map will be undermined by:
 - A perception of "Gaza first, Gaza last".
 - A perception – or a reality – of international acceptance of Israeli measures leading "state within the Wall".
 - The precedent of unilaterally establishing borders.
- Purely unilateral withdrawal – especially one supported or accepted by the Quartet – along with lack of credible movement on the Roadmap will signal the abandonment of the Roadmap.

Opportunities

If properly conducted and coordinated, and if placed in the wider political context of the implementation of the Roadmap, the Gaza withdrawal can open up certain opportunities.

- It creates movement on the ground that can create the requisite positive atmosphere for resuming the implementation of the Roadmap.
- It can give the PA the incentive and political context for reasserting its power on the ground, and by doing so implementing its Roadmap obligations, particularly in security.
- It can help rehabilitate the two-state vision of President Bush and Phase III of the Roadmap, if presented as a step in this direction.
- It creates a precedent of settlement evacuation that will facilitate future evacuations in the context of an agreement.
- It will improve the quality of life of the Palestinian population of Gaza.
- It will increase the resources available to PA, especially in terms of water and infrastructure.
- It provides an opportunity for the PA to prove its ability to function as a positive government in areas evacuated by Israel.

This will help rehabilitate the credibility problems facing the PA both internationally and domestically.

Conditions for Success

The following are not conditions for the implementation of the unilateral withdrawal – this can be done by Israel on a purely unilateral basis. These are conditions for optimizing the benefits created by such a withdrawal and minimizing the risks. There are two sets of conditions: conditions that will need to be included in the plan itself, and conditions that will need to be met by the PA.

Conditions to be included in the plan

As the plan is still under development, there is a chance now to formulate it in such a way as to maximize the potential benefits. This will require decisions and actions from the Israeli government and active intervention from the Quartet, especially the US.

- The withdrawal must be comprehensive. If the withdrawal is to be perceived as a relevant event, it must 1) include all settlements in Gaza, 2) not be replaced by a military presence 3) include Palestinian control over the Rafah border crossing with Egypt, with the possibility of a third party having a role.
- The withdrawal is not seen as a tradeoff between Gaza and strengthening the occupation in the West Bank. This requires a number of steps:
 - The Gaza withdrawal is part of a larger plan – subject to negotiation – for ending the occupation of the West Bank.
 - Gaza settlers must not be resettled in the West Bank settlements. The international community must ensure that no funding is given to Israel for these purposes.
 - Link between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip must be maintained to keep them as a single geographic and economic unit.
 - The construction of the Wall inside the West Bank must be stopped, and its course changed to the Green Line. The international position on this must not change.
 - Until a change of the course of the Wall occurs, steps to strengthen Israeli control in areas currently beyond the

course of the Wall (as contemplated in the Herzliya speech) must not be undertaken.

- Evacuation of some settlements in the West Bank must be part of the plan or at least be seen to follow.
 - Any additional evacuation of settlements in the West Bank should not be seen as part of establishing a state within the Wall.

- The withdrawal is presented in the context of the Roadmap. Assurances and reiterations are needed to guarantee that the unilateral action is not intended to relieve Israel from its Road Map obligations or forestall permanent status negotiations. The withdrawal can be placed in the context of the Road Map in a number of ways:
 - It can be presented politically as a step intended to jumpstart the Road Map. This means that the withdrawal is explicitly characterized as a step that is outside the Roadmap and parallel to it, but with a clear linkage. In this scenario, the mechanics of the implementation of Phase I will not be affected.
 - It can be presented in the context of Phase II. This way, preparations for the Gaza withdrawal will become an integral part of the Road Map. For this to be credible, a significant withdrawal from the West Bank is also required so as to make sure that Phase II is not Gaza only.
 - It can be presented as a "down payment" to Phase III, intended to show the benefits of a permanent status agreement. However, for this to be credible it must be accompanied by clear iterations of Israel's commitment to Phase III. Further assurances can be provided if Phase III is fleshed out.

- The withdrawal is not seen as a replacement of the settlement freeze. A settlement freeze is the most significant Israeli obligation in Phase I and must be implemented. The plans currently floated by Israel and the US regarding a partial freeze are insufficient as they allow for construction within the settlements' master plans and allow for the construction of bypass roads and infrastructure.

- The PA is enabled to fill the security vacuum left after the withdrawal. Considering that a replacement of settlers by the IDF will defeat the purpose of the withdrawal, and assuming that no third party will be willing to step in to fill the vacuum and potentially confront the Palestinian population, the PA is the only party capable of assuming security responsibilities over evacuated areas. To enable that, the following is needed:
 - Israeli attacks on the PA security forces must be stopped.
 - Security cooperation with the PA must be resumed.
 - Help must be provided to rehabilitate the Palestinian security forces.
 - Israeli attacks on Palestinians must be stopped.

- The Siege on President Arafat must be ended.

- Economic measures are put in place to give significance for the withdrawal. A withdrawal that does not bring tangible benefits and change of life quality will not generate sustainable support. To create economic benefits around the withdrawal two things are needed:
 - Significant development projects that will inject funds and job opportunities into Gaza. These include, *inter alia*, rebuilding the air and sea ports, and rehabilitating the infrastructure and property damaged during the last three years.
 - Sustainable linkage with the West Bank economy to ensure balanced development of the Palestinian national economy.

Conditions to be met by the PA

The PA must demonstrate that:

- It is willing and able to resume security control over the evacuated areas. Otherwise, there will be no value for engaging with the PA.
- It is using this opportunity to fulfill its Roadmap obligations. Otherwise, the argument that cooperation with the PA will only strengthen a regime that is not interested in peace will be strengthened. In particular:
 - The PA must demonstrate that it will use this opportunity to consolidate its security forces.

- The PA must demonstrate a plan to undertake the specific security measures required by the Roadmap.
- The PA must create an efficient, transparent system for managing the areas and properties left after the evacuation. This will be part of the general reform efforts required by the PA through improving the existing relevant institutions (e.g., the land registry and the court system) and through the creation of new institutions (such as a claims commission) to fill any legal or institutional vacuum created by the withdrawal.

Advantages and Disadvantages of PA Engagement

PA engagement with the withdrawal has some advantages and disadvantages. Many of these are dependent on the final shape of the withdrawal plan. The assumption here is that there is interest by Israel and the US to maximize the benefits of the plan.

If the plan is presented as a unilateral *fait accompli* that does not address the above conditions, then it is not advisable for the PA to engage.

Advantages

- Strengthening the PA's domestic authority:
 - A withdrawal done in a political context will be seen as a victory and tangible achievement for the PA's political line and negotiation approach and will strengthen it vis-à-vis elements in Palestine that oppose this approach, in particular Hamas and local warlords.
 - A process of rebuilding security capabilities in preparation for the withdrawal will help reestablish central security control.
 - The reassertion of the PA as the only Palestinian side capable of bringing in international benefits can help in any future ceasefire talks.
- Reactivating US political engagement. The US cannot continue its disengagement if an effective bilateral process is underway. The US can be drawn into the process by three arguments:

- In an election year, the US will not be interested in the withdrawal plan being seen as destroying the pillar of its policy in the conflict (i.e., the Road Map).
 - The US will not be interested in the chaos created by a purely unilateral withdrawal, especially if this chaos spirals into violence that requires immediate US intervention.
 - The US is not interested in strengthening Hamas and other such forces at a time when it will be advocating the "New Middle East Initiative" this summer.
- Avoiding the characterization that there is no partner on the Palestinian side. Failure to engage will be pointed out as another example that the Palestinians are only rejectionists.
 - Reviving the Roadmap. Especially if the process of coordinating the withdrawal is utilized to leverage wider Roadmap action as a tool for insuring the success of an orderly withdrawal from Gaza.
 - An Israeli and US acknowledgement that PA security efforts require a political context will help undermine the security-first approach and strengthen parallelism.

Disadvantages

- Giving a domestic cover to PM Sharon. Sharon can point out to his domestic constituency that even the Palestinians support his unilateral approach and are engaging in it. This will disarm the opposition in Israel and might strengthen tendencies in Labor to join or at least provide a safety net for the coalition.
- Risking Palestinian opposition. Some Palestinians will attack a government that is engaged on the grounds that this legitimizes Sharon's unilateral disengagement policies.