

WCFIA: In The News

## **Beyond the Gaza Disengagement, by Herbert C. Kelman**

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ISRAELI PRIME Minister Ariel Sharon's plan to disengage from the Gaza Strip by evacuating Israeli settlements there and withdrawing troops is scheduled to begin today. Advocates of a negotiated Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, based on a genuine two-state solution, have understandable misgivings about Sharon's ultimate intentions. Nevertheless, they have fully supported the Gaza initiative, and, indeed, they must do everything in their power to ensure its success.

Disengagement from Gaza would set an important precedent for evacuating settlements in the West Bank—an essential condition for establishing a viable, contiguous Palestinian state. It is particularly important that this precedent is set by Sharon, a key architect of the settlement project (even though, from Sharon's point of view, a major purpose of disengaging from Gaza is to make it possible to hold on to most of the West Bank and the settlements there). Failure of the Gaza disengagement would set the opposite precedent by demonstrating that the settler movement and its supporters—a distinct minority in Israeli society—can exercise a veto over any step toward peace, even a modest step that has the support of a broad consensus in Israeli society.

Along with their full support of the Gaza disengagement, advocates of a negotiated peace have rightly stressed the critical importance of carefully planning for the day after. Otherwise, the disengagement could easily become a dangerous trap for proponents of a two-state solution.

As a unilateral initiative, it has succeeded in marginalizing negotiations and diverting attention from efforts, such as the Road Map, to move toward establishment of a Palestinian state. It has focused the internal debate in Israel on the pros and cons of disengagement at the expense of addressing final-status issues. It has given Sharon an excuse for putting off negotiations toward ending the occupation of the West Bank and an opportunity, in the meantime, to continue expanding and consolidating West Bank settlements and erecting the separation barrier within the West Bank and the area of East Jerusalem. It has fostered within the Israeli public (despite its majority support for a negotiated two-state solution) a sense of pessimism about further progress and an inclination to put final-status negotiations on hold, while waiting to see what happens in Gaza in the aftermath of the disengagement.

This attitude, which plays right into Sharon's hands, probably reflects fatigue arising from the internal Israeli conflict over the evacuation of the Gaza settlements and reluctance to take further risks without assurance of Palestinian reciprocation, which, of course, cannot be offered in the absence of a bilateral process.

Perhaps the greatest threat to the peace process posed by the Gaza disengagement would be linking the resumption of negotiations to what happens in Gaza in the wake of the Israeli withdrawal. According to this view, further steps in the peace process would depend on evidence that Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas can establish an effective government in Gaza and prevent anti-Israeli violence. But the unilateral character of the Israeli withdrawal severely undermines the prospects for a post-disengagement Gaza that is governable, economically viable, and peaceful.

Unless there is detailed planning, in close coordination and cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and with the active support of the international community, Gaza may end up being cut off from the outside world, restricted in the ability to move people and goods across its borders, lacking in opportunities for economic activity and development, plagued by internal violence and lawlessness, and possibly devastated (if there is anti-Israeli violence during the disengagement, which is likely to draw a massive response).

If Gaza is left in disarray, Abbas will not be able to govern effectively or prevent terrorist actions, and he might even lose power. More generally, in order to maintain public support and control violence in the West Bank, as well as in Gaza, Abbas needs to achieve concrete benefits in the daily lives of the population and show progress in negotiations toward an end of the occupation and the establishment of a Palestinian state. Thus, to condition negotiations on Abbas's effectiveness in governing Gaza and controlling violence creates a vicious circle. Only coordination before the Gaza disengagement and the resumption of negotiations immediately after the disengagement will enable Abbas to govern effectively and control violence.

Under the circumstances, there are two clear priorities at this time for the proponents of a negotiated two-state solution.

First, in the preparation, execution, and follow-up of the Gaza disengagement, it is essential to assure in every way possible that Gaza emerges from the process as a secure, economically viable, and governable area, and to strengthen the hands of Abbas and his administration by enabling them to present concrete achievements on the ground and in the peace process to the Palestinian population.

The United States and its partners that drew up the Road Map must encourage Israeli and Palestinian coordination and cooperation for a secure withdrawal and disposition of the properties left behind in the settlements; by helping to plan and coordinate arrangements for mutual security and movement across Gaza's borders; by providing financial and technical assistance for economic development, for reopening the airport, and for building a seaport in Gaza; and by providing international observation and peacekeeping teams. The United States could make a significant contribution by appointing a high-level envoy and a team of monitors to help coordinate and implement agreements, as urged by Brit Tzedek v'Shalom, the US-based Jewish Alliance for Justice and Peace.

Second, it is essential to put the resumption of negotiations over the final terms of the two-state solution on top of the agenda for the coming fall. The United States and the international community can make important contributions by encouraging an immediate return to the negotiating table, reminding the parties of their obligations under the Road Map, and offering ideas for the outlines of a final agreement.

The most important work, however, needs to be done within and between the two societies, with an emphasis on countering the pervasive mood of pessimism and mutual distrust, reviving the lost sense of possibility, and creating a vision of a positive common future.

Joint, non-official Israeli-Palestinian efforts to formulate the terms of a final agreement, such as the Geneva initiative, have made extremely valuable contributions by demonstrating that a pragmatic solution to the conflict that addresses the vital concerns of both parties is possible. But, even though majorities on both sides have consistently supported a negotiated two-state solution, the two publics have not fully embraced these initiatives because of their profound mutual distrust. The initiatives ask the public to make major concessions, on deeply emotional and existential issues, at a time when they have no confidence that the other side will reciprocate and follow through on its commitments. The Gaza disengagement has, if anything, increased the level of mutual distrust and the reluctance to make risky concessions.

There is a need, therefore, to go beyond pragmatic formulations, essential though they be, in order to overcome the profound mutual distrust and assure the public that it is possible to negotiate a solution that is fair, safe, and conducive to a better future for both peoples. Calls for renewed negotiations and proposals for a final agreement, like the Geneva initiative, must now be complemented and framed by a joint vision of a principled peace, based on a historic compromise that meets the fundamental needs of both peoples, validates the national identity of both sides, and allows them to declare an end to the conflict consistent with the requirements of attainable justice.

A jointly constructed framework for a principled peace might include the following components:

- Acknowledgment of both peoples' historic roots in the land and authentic links to it.
- Expression of regret for the suffering that the two peoples have caused each other in the pursuit of their national aspirations.
- Recognition that this destructive conflict cannot be solved by military means and commitment to ending it with a historic compromise, whereby the two peoples agree to share the land to which both are so deeply attached in a way that allows each to fulfill its national aspirations in a state of its own, in peaceful coexistence with its neighboring state.
- Affirmation that the logic of the historic compromise requires each people to make adjustments in its national narrative—in particular, for Palestinians to accept limitations on the return of refugees to the state of Israel, for Israelis to remove settlements with extraterritorial rights from the Palestinian state, and for both to give up the claim to exclusive sovereignty over Jerusalem or its holy places—in order to enable the other to maintain its national existence and express its national identity in its own state.
- Development of a positive vision of a common future for the two peoples in the land to which both are attached and which they have agreed to share a vision that contemplates a secure and prosperous existence for each society, mutually beneficial cooperation in various spheres between the societies, regional development, and stable peace and ultimate reconciliation.

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