



PERSPECTIVES

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What Should Be Learned from the Gaza Disengagement?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The debate over the interpretation of the clear and present danger emanating from Gaza in the wake of the 2005 unilateral disengagement holds the key to saving Israel from the dangers attending the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank.

In the summer of 2005, as Israel's unilateral disengagement from Gaza drew near, the self-styled "Council for Peace and Security" issued a declaration – signed by hundreds of former senior officers and security officials – that promised that "the disengagement will improve Israel's security situation." Fourteen years later, many of these "security experts" – including newly retired general turned leftwing politician Yair Golan – continue to maintain that the disengagement from the Gaza Strip altered Israel's security situation for the better. They base their claim mainly on comparisons between the number of wounded and killed in the period preceding the disengagement and in the years since.

They do not take into account, however, the massive disruption of the normal life of the country – from the ongoing suffering caused to many Israelis, to the huge investments poured into protecting communities and building another barrier with a price tag far exceeding 4 billion shekels, to the heavy cost of the three large-scale operations (2008-9, 2012, 2014) and the numerous rounds of fighting. The costs of Operation Protective Edge (2014) alone – including total military and civilian outlays and calculations for lost productivity – came out to over 10 billion shekels. The "experts" also ignore the balance of terror, and consequent loss of Israeli freedom of action, that Hamas has established with its rockets and that enables it to upset routines on the Israeli home front at will.

Above all, by making the number of casualties the main criterion by which to assess the security situation, as US generals did in Vietnam to cover up their

abysmal failures, the “experts” ignore the fact that a national-security equation does not by any means depend primarily on the number of wounded and killed. If that were indeed the key criterion, most struggles for national liberation would not have happened.

It is no coincidence that those claiming that the unilateral disengagement improved Israel’s security situation are also those who favor further withdrawals in the West Bank. The inevitable linkage between what has transpired in Gaza since the IDF’s departure and the uprooting of the communities in the summer of 2005, and what is likely to occur if a similar step is carried out in the West Bank, calls for comprehensive and critical reassessment of all that has happened in Gaza over the past 14 years.

To begin with, Israel’s withdrawal reinforced Hamas’s belief that Palestinian victory will be won through “resistance” and not by political means, à la the approach of Mahmoud Abbas. The advent of a sovereign Hamas entity in Gaza has many implications that require a serious reassessment of the Oslo process. One premise the disengagement undermined is that mutual concessions will create conditions for mutual recognition and acceptance of an end to the conflict. According to Hamas, it was not the yearning for peace that impelled the Israelis to withdraw from Gaza but operative and mental distress in the face of relentless “resistance”, similar to the panicky flight from Lebanon in May 2000. Hence the two-state solution has succumbed to a radical logic that paints it, according to Hamas’s former leader Khaled Mashal, in the colors of an ongoing phased strategy in the ceaseless struggle for Israel’s destruction.

For years Israelis have hoped for a spatial logic of separation, or, as Ehud Barak put it when he was PM, “They are there and we are here.” With Israel’s departure from Gaza the space was designed, in line with this logic, as a comprehensive border system with a security fence and a classic, rigid, military border regime. Thereby – supposedly – an ideal state of separation was achieved. And yet the massive military buildup of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad has posed a complex systemic challenge. For rockets, missiles and mortars, as well as explosive and incendiary balloons, the fence is not an obstacle. Nor does it inhibit the tunnel threat. The fence does contribute to the regular security routine, but in symmetrical fashion it also helps the enemy build up its power undisturbed. Under the protection of the fence and the spatial arrangement of separation, Hamas and Islamic Jihad have been able to form an organized military force, comprising battalions and brigades, replete with a concealed and protected arsenal of rocket fire and supported by an effective command and control system. None of this could have been built and maintained were it not for the spatial reality of separation, with its rigid demarcation between “here” and “there.”

Therein lies the basic difference between Hamas's organizational and operational capabilities in Gaza, well protected behind the security fence, and its organizational and operational difficulties in the West Bank – including in the Hebron region, where it is known to enjoy widespread popular support.

In other words, PM Ariel Sharon's decision to fully implement the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, including relinquishing the Philadelphi Route along Gaza's border with Egypt, created conditions that enabled Hamas and Islamic Jihad to amass large quantities of advanced weaponry. A similar move in the West Bank, in line with the Palestinian demand for control of the Jordan Valley, would likely put Israel's heartland, including its main economic and industrial infrastructure and Ben-Gurion Airport, under an unacceptable threat. Those are just some of the factors that must be given serious consideration with regard to any similar move in the West Bank.

These potential threats notwithstanding, all that has happened in Gaza since the summer of 2005 offers the silver lining that much can be learned from that earlier "test case." The results of this "human experiment" – experienced daily by residents of Israel's southern villages and towns – can contribute to the war over public opinion, casting serious doubts on the wisdom of "experts" who keep pushing for additional withdrawals in the West Bank up to the security-fence line. The "they are there and we are here" spatial arrangement was tried in Gaza, and it failed abjectly.

The debate over the interpretation of the clear and present danger emerging in Gaza following the disengagement holds the key to saving Israel from the dangers attending the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank.

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