

Gaza Pullout: Hope or Hype?

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Israel's recent pullout of troops and settlers from the Gaza Strip (August 2005) has been widely hailed throughout the world as progress towards peace. In fact, it is a trick. It is designed to halt the peace process indefinitely and prevent the emergence of a viable Palestinian state.

The Sharon government is giving up Gaza in order to hold onto, and eventually annex, the West Bank. Gaza is just one step in the plan.

First Israel isolated and destroyed the Palestinian Authority under Arafat. It urged President Bush to have no dealings with the Palestinian leadership until Arafat stopped all terrorism by all Palestinian factions. From his house arrest, Arafat was supposed to do what the Israeli army itself couldn't do.

In the intelligence scandal that broke out in Israel last year, Israeli officials admitted that Arafat had not been plotting to destroy Israel and was still willing to negotiate along the lines of the Oslo agreement. But that isn't what we've been told all these years. Arafat was portrayed as the evil Svengali directing all the terrorism. Every terrorist attack was blamed on him and used as a reason the US should not be talking to him. Israel complained that it had "no partner" for peace negotiations. But in truth it did not want a partner and made sure that it would never get one. Arafat died in November 2004.

Israel's aim was to stop negotiating with the Palestinians altogether. Instead, it would negotiate with Washington. In April 2004, the US said Israel would be able to keep the large settlement blocs on the West Bank, built illegally since 1967. It formally legitimized the fruits of an illegal annexation policy: on the understanding that Israel would give up Gaza and be flexible about the rest of the West Bank.

Another step in the plan is to weaken Arafat's successor, Mahmud Abbas. Abbas does not have Arafat's international standing and thus is less dangerous to Israel's agenda. Israel has given him an impossible job. He is called upon to crack down on the Palestinian militant factions, the so-called "terrorist infrastructure," even though the Palestinian Authority security forces are chronically under-armed.

As *The Economist* noted (1/29-2/4/2005, p. 47), the PA troops in Gaza are "woefully underpowered...no weapons larger than a Kalashnikov or transport tougher than small armored cars....[An observer said] the PA can no longer stop the Islamic current by military means. These

organizations used to be weak but now they are among the mainstream on the Palestinian street."

Despite the PA's weakness, Israel in April opposed a Russian plan to give the PA more troop carriers, etc., even though the plan was supported by the US (Ha'aretz 4/27/05). Israel says it wants Abbas to crack down, but denies him the means to do so. And when, out of weakness, he instead tries to negotiate truce deals with the militant factions, Israel claims he is not doing enough to fight terrorism!

Clearly Abbas is in a no-win situation. If he tries to crack down, he risks civil war. If he does not, he risks any future progress towards a Palestinian state. The situation in the territories deteriorates day by day. Civil strife, economic collapse, social breakdown loom for Abbas. Meanwhile, Israel continues to build its wall and expand its settlements; continues de facto annexation of the West Bank. The Palestinian state is off the agenda forever because Israel can still say it "lacks a partner for peace."

This analysis is not mere speculation.

Dov Weisglas, Sharon's former chief of staff, exposed the true nature of the scheme in a candid interview last year (Ari Shavit, "The Big Freeze," Ha'aretz magazine, 8 Oct. 2004):

The disengagement is actually formaldehyde. It supplies the amount of formaldehyde that's necessary so that there will not be a political process with the Palestinians....The disengagement plan makes it possible for Israel to park conveniently in an interim situation that distances us as far as possible from political pressure. It legitimizes our contention that there is no negotiating with the Palestinians....The withdrawal in Samaria [i.e., the northern West Bank] is a token one. We agreed to only so it wouldn't be said that we concluded our obligation in Gaza....On the other hand, in regard to the large settlement blocs, thanks to the disengagement plan, we have in our hands a first-ever American statement that they will be part of Israel [i.e. President Bush's official letter to Sharon, 14 April 2004].

The significance [of what we did] is the freezing of the political process. And when you freeze that process you prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state and you prevent a discussion about the refugees, the borders and Jerusalem. Effectively, this whole package that is called the Palestinian state, with all that it entails, has been removed from our agenda indefinitely. And all this with authority and permission. All with a presidential blessing and the ratification of both houses of Congress.