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Palestinian-Israeli crossfire

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AN ISRAELI VIEW

The most feasible approach

by Yossi Alpher

This is an appropriate time, one week before the official launching of disengagement from the Gaza Strip and northern West Bank, to revisit the concept of unilateralism that underpins this move. I would argue that, taking into account circumstances on all sides, this is on balance the best approach today and for the immediate future.

Undoubtedly a bilateral, negotiated peace process with strong American backing is preferable. But that does not appear to be a viable option for the next few years. A unilateral approach, on the other hand, is viable and feasible. While it

Forgoing the negotiating process is a certain way of missing the chance that the disengagement plan will jumpstart a process of settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict--an opportunity that was enhanced by the death of Arafat and the changes in the leadership of the Palestinian Authority. Launching a negotiating process would mean embarking on a difficult path with no certain results. But it would take advantage of this opportunity, while at the same time retaining the possibility of going back to unilateralism in case of failure.-
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A PALESTINIAN VIEW

No "concessions" intended

by Hisham Ahmed

One of the reasons Benjamin Netanyahu cited when he tendered his resignation on August 7 was that he did not want to be a party to what he called "concessions" to the Palestinian side without Israel getting anything in return.

Indeed, on the surface it might seem strange that an Israeli prime minister should evacuate settlements unilaterally without securing anything from the Palestinian Authority in negotiations.

But that would certainly be a superficial interpretation of why Ariel Sharon chose to withdraw from settlements unilaterally. On the contrary, Sharon, it seems, is intent on going down in history as the only modern-day Israeli prime minister, a list that includes Netanyahu, who has consistently and utterly refused to negotiate with the Palestinian side--whether the Palestinian Authority or the PLO. In this way, he is unique among Israeli leaders since the Oslo Accords were signed.

In fact, the reasons behind Sharon creating a unilateral disengagement plan are manifold, but none has anything to do with "concessions".

First and foremost, Sharon, as has been previously acknowledged by some of his closest aides, intends to freeze the peace process rather than inject it with new life. Withdrawing from four small settlements in the northern West Bank and all settlements in the Gaza Strip allows him time to do what he feels is most strategically in Israel's long-term interest: to tighten his grip on the West Bank and tighten the noose around Jerusalem.

Withdrawing from the Gaza Strip is a price worth paying for this, because holding on to settlements there is too costly, both in military and in financial terms, and because politically the Strip holds no great sway in Israeli public affections.

In addition, acting unilaterally leaves him in no debt to the PA. He is under no obligation to follow up with anything else anywhere else, and he is free to act as he sees fit and when he chooses to do so vis-a-vis the Palestinians.

He also achieves another strategic objective with a unilateral plan, namely that of keeping the Palestinians on their toes and at odds with each other. He is leaving an area of Palestine that is a stronghold of the opposition to the PA and in which the PA is at its weakest. Sharon would like to see nothing more than intra-

Palestinian fighting, and withholding information about the withdrawal serves this end. As differences deepen between the PA and various factions over what might or might not happen, and what to do in each case, chances increase that a full-scale civil war will break out.

Internally, Sharon is sending a strong message to Israeli hardliners. A unilateral plan is not a concession, and does not come about after negotiating with what he for a long time now has called "terrorists". In other words, Sharon is telling right-wingers that what he does he does solely for Israel and in Israel's interests.

But Sharon wants to have his cake and eat it. Acting unilaterally has a large public relations element to it. By withdrawing he is sending the message to the international community and especially the US that even without "concessions" from the Palestinian side--e.g., collecting arms--he is still prepared to implement part of the roadmap. This way he refocuses international pressure on the Palestinian side, evident already in the enormous media attention devoted to how Palestinians will react to taking "control" over the Gaza Strip.

Furthermore, he can do so safe in the knowledge that, with a unilateral plan, he has not committed himself to any other part of the roadmap. Thus, he appears to be making tough choices for peace to the outside world, and, at the same time, acting solely in the interest of Israel to his own constituency.

Sharon has many reasons for acting unilaterally, but certainly not one of them is about giving anything free to the Palestinians, as his former finance minister suggested. As for Netanyahu, there is little but political opportunism in his decision to resign and garner favor with Israeli hardliners.- *Published 8/8/2005*
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