

Beware of Ariel Sharon Bearing Gifts
Yossi Alpher, International Herald Tribune, April 12, 2004

TEL AVIV - Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel is coming to the United States this week to seek the blessings of President George W. Bush for his plan to disengage from the Gaza Strip.

Disengagement is basically a good idea. The problem is that Sharon's motives are suspect in the eyes of Palestinians, the rest of the Arab world, and many Israelis: He appears to want Bush's approval not for "Gaza first," but for "Gaza (and a token four settlements in the West Bank) only."

As with the Palestinian state, the road map, and the separation fence, Sharon has co-opted a good idea and distorted it to advance his own counterproductive territorial aims.

Disengagement should be encouraged by the United States, Europe and the Arab world. But only if they understand how Sharon got this far, and undertake to channel his energies with serious pressures and constraints in the coming year.

Disengagement, and the security fence, began as proposals by Israeli "security doves" who recognized that there was no viable Palestinian leadership to negotiate with. They sought ways to reduce Israel's military commitment in the territories, keep out suicide bombers, and maintain Israel as a Jewish and a democratic state. Under conditions of conflict, only disengagement appeared likely to break the disastrous demographic-geographic interlock created by the settlements and the burgeoning Palestinian population under Israeli control.

Since 9/11 and the occupation of Iraq, most strategic military threats to Israel have been radically reduced by an enhanced U.S. presence in the Middle East, leaving Palestinian terrorism and the demographic threat looming large. The original advocates on the Israeli left and center of disengagement and a security fence along the 1967 border viewed it strictly as a security measure, designed to improve both Israel's and Palestine's situation, without precluding renewed negotiations over all extant issues - further territorial withdrawals, Jerusalem, refugees, etc. - once the security situation improved and the Palestinians came up with a more realistic leadership.

Sharon began to co-opt the idea about half a year ago, when it was clear that the public was fed up with his lack of a political program. But he advocates a limited disengagement, and conceives of it as a political rather than security program: Israel will withdraw from Gaza and a bit of the West Bank and effectively declare the political process over, or at least frozen for the indefinite future, thereby enabling it to strengthen its grip on greater Jerusalem and most of the West Bank.

Hence Sharon explains his version of disengagement to the Israeli public without reference to demography or suicide bombers, but rather as a measure designed to fill the political vacuum and prevent the international community from attempting to impose a more comprehensive territorial solution.

And he has turned a unilateral idea into a bilateral one - not an agreement with Yasser Arafat and the PLO, who truly do not qualify, but with Washington. Thus the Bush administration is now asked to provide Sharon with attractive guarantees that Israel will not soon be confronted with demands to

discuss refugee issues and a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, thereby enabling Sharon to gain the support of his fellow Likudniks.

Sharon also apparently sees in the popular disengagement idea a successful ploy for leveraging political support from the Israeli left and center in order to persuade the attorney general not to indict him on one or more charges of influence peddling. Israelis are overwhelmingly in favor of rolling back the settlement folly, even if the leader ostensibly initiating that step is the same one who built the settlements, and is up to his neck in legal problems. They desperately want to extricate the country from the Palestinian maelstrom and set it back on a course of demographic sanity.

If Sharon can exploit this shield of public support to get through the next few months unscathed, he could even conceivably drop the implementation of disengagement. After all, he still has not given the public a credible explanation for changing his mind about his 30-year-old settlement strategy of holding onto the land.

Palestinian leaders from Arafat on down are suspicious of disengagement. For one, it renders them superfluous as potential negotiators. More substantively, they fear Sharon's agenda of using very partial withdrawal to enhance Israel's occupation of most of the West Bank and to postpone a negotiated peace indefinitely.

In any case, the Gaza Strip after withdrawal will still not be a viable polity, insofar as it will be surrounded on land and sea by Israel. Arafat's Fatah movement is worried lest withdrawal precipitate a takeover of the Gaza Strip by the more militant Hamas. But the Palestinian public likes the idea of recovering territory, and the leadership can hardly reject getting something for nothing.

This brings us to Washington. Undoubtedly President Bush would rather not deal with Sharon's initiative or any other aspect of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict right now.

But Sharon has courageously grasped the initiative. If Bush brushes off Sharon's visit with ambiguous reassurances, the Israeli leader is liable to interpret them as a green light to turn a beneficial limited disengagement into a freeze on the peace process.

Instead, Bush should exploit Sharon's own political dilemma to lock him further into the vision of a genuine two-state solution based on the 1967 lines, and to oblige him to carry out his road map commitments regarding settlements.

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