



Americans for Peace Now

Policy Paper

National Office

1101 14 St., NW. Sixth Floor
Washington, D.C. 20005
(202) 728-1893
www.peacenow.org

Disengagement, Negotiations, and the Quest for Peace & Security

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Nearly 1000 Israelis and more than 2500 Palestinians have lost their lives since violence broke out in September 2000. Successive attempts to devise and implement plans to reduce the level of violence and return Israelis and Palestinians to the negotiating table have failed utterly. Violence has continued to escalate, while across the Middle East America's credibility, and the credibility of America's commitment to Israeli-Palestinian peace, has diminished, taking with it the best chance for America to win the hearts and minds of people throughout the region regarding America's efforts in Iraq and the war on terror.

The disengagement plan of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, which envisions removing all settlers from Gaza and from four settlements in the northern West Bank, holds the potential for important progress in de-escalating the conflict and creating a new environment in which the security capacity of the Palestinian Authority can be rebuilt, and the context will be more conducive to a return to negotiations.

President Bush expended significant political capital when, as part of his endorsement of Prime Minister Sharon's plan, he embraced Israeli positions on key final status issues – issues which both sides have long agreed are to be left to final status negotiations between the parties. In embracing these positions, President Bush jeopardized the future of the negotiating process and weakened the prospects for the United States to serve as an honest broker between the two sides. The ultimate cost of this move in terms of American political capital may increase further if the plan that President Bush embraced is now jettisoned or significantly reduced in scope.

For the sake of American interests – including Israel's security and viability, peace and stability in the region, the ongoing war on terror, and efforts to stabilize Iraq – the U.S. must redouble its efforts to implement the President's vision for an Israeli-Palestinian peace that enhances Israeli security and ends the occupation that began in 1967.

Disengagement Is What Israel Wants & Needs

Prime Minister Sharon's commitment to withdraw all Israeli settlers from Gaza and parts of the West Bank reflects Israel's fundamental interests and places him squarely within the Israeli national consensus – a consensus that recognizes that settlements hurt Israel's security, economic prosperity, and demographic future. Implementation of Prime Minister Sharon's initiative can do much to improve Israeli security, reduce points of friction between Israelis and Palestinians, and create a new context more conducive to renewing negotiations. Even Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz, addressing an annual Israel Bar convention in Eilat, recently stated that, "Gaza is not the land of our forefathers" and that the Israeli presence in Gaza is an "historical error".

The May 2nd Likud party vote on Prime Minister Sharon's proposal was a non-binding, extra-governmental referendum, arranged outside of Israel's democratic process. A total of 55,000 "no" votes, out of a population that in the Feb. 2001 election included more than 4.5 million eligible voters, was all it took to reject a plan that polls consistently show enjoys broad support in the overall Israeli public. A Dahaf/*Yedioth Ahronoth* survey conducted on May 4th found that 62% of the general Israeli public supported the initiative, while just 32% were opposed, and even among Likud supporters, 55% said they support the initiative, while just 41% were opposed. The same poll, conducted on May 13th, found that 71% were in favor of the plan, and only 24% were against. Among Likud supporters, 63% supported the initiative, with 32% opposing.

The rejection of the disengagement plan by a tiny minority of the Israeli electorate must not be used as a pretext for failing to remove settlers from Gaza and parts of the West Bank. Nor should continued terrorism, whose real goal is to destroy any initiative that could lead to Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation, be rewarded with a freeze in efforts to extricate Israel from the settlements quagmire. This includes the recent horrific terrorist attack in Gaza which took the lives of a pregnant Israeli woman and her four innocent children. Likewise, continued IDF losses in Gaza, like those witnessed in recent days, must not become an excuse for sentencing another generation of Israeli soldiers to fight on this hopeless, pointless battleground.

President Bush has expressed strong support for Israeli Prime Minister Sharon's disengagement plan. In his letter to Prime Minister Sharon, he noted that the proposed withdrawals may mark "real progress" toward realizing his June 24, 2002 vision, and could make "a real contribution to peace." At the same time, President Bush has repeatedly assured Prime Minister Sharon, the Quartet, and the entire world that the United States remains committed to his June 24th vision and to the Road Map, and that the United States will "do its utmost to prevent any attempt by anyone to impose any other plan."

American Responsibilities

For the sake of American interests, including Israel's security and viability, peace and stability in the region, the ongoing war on terror, and efforts to stabilize Iraq, the U.S. must redouble its efforts to implement the President's vision for Israeli-Palestinian peace.

In pursuing disengagement, it is in America's vital interests to build bridges back to negotiations. A negotiated resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including an agreement on all final status issues, is rightfully an integral part of the President's vision and the Road Map. Just as improvements in the lives of Palestinians and progress towards statehood cannot be sustained unless Palestinian leaders finally take real and effective steps to fight terror, it is only through negotiations that Israel can achieve long-term security. Similarly, peace talks are the only tool that can provide the stability and the good faith so vital to American interests in the region.

President Bush paid a huge price in American political capital when he embraced Prime Minister Sharon's disengagement plan, since he also endorsed explicit, new American positions on issues that are supposed to be left to Israelis and Palestinians to decide: borders, settlements, and Palestinian refugees. While there is little substantive difference between these new explicit positions and the nuanced formulas discussed during earlier Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, those formulas involved explicit trade-offs and compromises from both sides. They were also part-and-parcel of a negotiations process, rather than declarations that are perceived by many, including the Palestinians, as interference with the substance of negotiations by siding with one party.

The U.S. must now redouble its effort to hold all parties to their commitments and obligations. Prime Minister Sharon's initiative must be translated, as quickly as possible, into action: withdrawal of all settlements in Gaza and parts of the West Bank, removal of all settlement outposts, a freeze on the growth of remaining settlements in the West Bank, and removal of all checkpoints that do not serve a strictly security function. The United States must help Israel coordinate these withdrawals, to the greatest possible extent, with the international community and with the Palestinians, to ensure that Gaza does not become an area ruled by chaos and terrorists. Finally, positive steps taken in Gaza must not be taken at the expense of future peace negotiations – negotiations which are the only way for Israel and the Palestinians to resolve fundamental differences and finally end the conflict. Removal of settlers from Gaza must not be used as a pretext for the de facto annexation of additional West Bank land, nor for the expansion of West Bank settlements and settlement blocs.

Moreover, excluding Palestinian moderates from any role in the disengagement plan leaves extremists to dominate the stage. Excluding the very people who are calling for negotiations and an end to violence discredits these positions and weakens the ability of all moderates – not only Palestinians, but throughout the Arab world – to confront radicals who argue that there is no benefit to pursuing dialogue with the U.S. or Israel, and that the only language that Israel and the U.S. understand is violence.

Americans for Peace Now works to enhance Israel's security through peace and to support the Israeli Peace Now movement. For more information please visit www.peacenow.org or call 202/728-1893.