

# Israel's Majority Has Spoken: It's Time to Leave Gaza



*Prime Minister Ariel Sharon: "Recent events are likely to constitute a turning point in Middle Eastern history." (11/11/04)*

*President George W. Bush: "I believe we've got a great chance to establish a Palestinian state, and I intend to use the next four years to spend the capital of the United States on [creating] such a state... We'll do what it takes to get a peace." (11/12/04)*

Three momentous developments have delivered fresh hope to the majority of Israelis who seek an end to Israeli rule in the West Bank and Gaza, a secure peace for Israel and a Palestinian state.

**First, on October 26th, the Israeli Knesset, by a vote of 67 to 45, approved Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plan to remove Israeli settlers and troops from the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank.** We congratulate the citizens of Israel for taking this crucial step. Americans for Peace Now is proud that our Israeli sister organization, Shalom Achshav, played a key role in mobilizing support for disengagement prior to the Knesset vote. Now that the will of the Israeli majority has been expressed in the Knesset, APN calls upon the settlers and their supporters to accept this democratic decision.

**Second, the death of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, who has, time and again, served as a barrier to peace, has made possible the return of moderate Palestinian leaders like former Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas.** Abbas, who has succeeded Arafat as Chairman of the PLO, has consistently opposed terrorism and supported peace talks with Israel. Now there is a dramatic window of opportunity to launch a new peace process with responsible and empowered Palestinian leaders such as Abbas.

**Third, the reelection of President George W. Bush presents an opening for the White House to take new initiatives aimed at returning the Road Map for Peace to the center of its agenda.** We call on the Bush administration to work with the Palestinian Authority and Israel to ensure that Palestinian elections are held, as required under the Road Map and Palestinian law. This move, more than any other, would bestow greater legitimacy on new Palestinian leaders, empowering them to rein in violence and to negotiate with Israel.

## A U.S. Role In Coordinating Israel's Disengagement with Moderate Palestinian Leaders is Vital to Israel's Security

Israeli military analysts have warned that the risks to Israel's security will increase if Israel's disengagement is not coordinated with moderate Palestinian forces willing and able to secure the areas Israel evacuates. An evacuation of settlers and IDF forces that is coordinated with responsible Palestinian leaders is most likely to enhance Israel's security. Here are some key steps that the U.S. and Israel should take to bolster the new Palestinian leadership, enabling them to demonstrate that replacing violence with dialogue brings positive results to their people:

**Settlements:** President Bush has now committed to spend the political capital of the United States to find a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that includes the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. What should the President do to match his deeds to his words?

In recent years, over 100 Israeli settlement outposts have been built throughout this territory, in addition to 145 settlements, many in areas heavily populated by Palestinians. Such unilateral Israeli settlement construction and expansion obstructs the territorial continuity of a Palestinian state, prejudicing the outline of a future peace deal, and undermining Palestinian faith in negotiations with Israel.

To inspire confidence in a credible renewed peace effort and to strengthen the hand of Palestinian moderates, the Bush Administration should insist on Sharon's fulfillment of his Road Map obligations to immediately remove Israeli settlement outposts, enact a comprehensive settlement freeze, and improve Palestinian mobility within the occupied territories.

**Elections, Israeli Forces and Palestinian Freedom of Movement:** "How do you conduct elections in 60 days if the Israeli [forces] are still all over Gaza and areas of the West Bank?" asked an American official. (NY Times, 11/14/04) Fair elections can succeed only if campaign workers can move freely from town to town. The United States should encourage Israel to ease its restrictions on movement between Palestinian cities and on roads in the occupied territories. This strategy would pave the way for free and fair Palestinian elections, enabling the moderate Palestinian leadership to gain fresh legitimacy and new powers - especially increasing control over a consolidated Palestinian security body - through the ballot box.

**Security:** The United States, along with Egypt and Jordan, should train and equip a new Palestinian force, as now proposed, while U.S. monitors oversee a renewed Palestinian effort at security cooperation with Israel.

**Prisoners:** Instead of releasing hundreds of Palestinian detainees to extremists like Hezbollah, Israel should free a sizable contingent of high-value political prisoners to enhance the stature of Palestinian moderates.

## Renewing the Peace Process

**A Broader West Bank Disengagement - Gaza First, Not Gaza Last:** Israel should coordinate a withdrawal from areas of the West Bank and Gaza with Palestinian leaders who are willing and able to take security responsibility for areas Israel evacuates.

The majority of Israelis and their representatives recognize that most settlements are a tremendous economic and diplomatic liability for Israel and a threat to their security. Approval of the Sharon disengagement plan sets an important precedent for the evacuation of other West Bank settlements, bringing closer the day when Palestinians and Israelis can live side by side in two states in peace and security.

**President Bush-Appoint a Presidential Envoy to Revive Negotiations:** The President must commit our nation to vigorous and persistent engagement in the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To this end, he should appoint an internationally respected envoy at the highest level to pursue full implementation of a coordinated disengagement plan and a renewal of negotiations leading to a final status accord.

In the past, American presidents have succeeded in bringing about lasting peace agreements between Israel and her Arab neighbors. They did so by maintaining a steadfast commitment in the face of numerous obstacles.

Israeli leaders and their new Palestinian counterparts can be brought back to the negotiating table through President Bush's committed and persistent leadership in support of a negotiated two-state solution. Meeting this challenge would be an unparalleled achievement for his presidency. He should take all steps necessary to renew the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and thus advance America's historic contribution to regional stability, global security, and international peace.

To learn more about how you can help promote Shalom Achshav and Americans for Peace Now's efforts here in Chicago, across the US, with our elected officials in Washington, and in Israel, see our local web site at [www.chicagopeacenow.org](http://www.chicagopeacenow.org) or contact

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