

Ha'aretz Editorial on Sharon's Unilateral Disengagement Plan 2/9/04

Addressing reservations that many in the Israeli peace camp have about Prime Minister *Sharon's* disengagement plan, *Ha'aretz* wrote in a lead editorial, "Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plan for dismantling Gaza Strip settlements stirs incredulous responses. Indeed, there is cause for a large measure of skepticism regarding the seriousness of Sharon's intention to carry out what he has declared within a reasonable period of time—the doubts stem from his statement's departure from well-known positions he has held for dozens of years, and from the fact that his declarations as prime minister have been empty rhetoric. Even if there is a tendency to believe that this time the decision is genuine and the plan is real, not everyone in the peace camp is thrilled about the unilateral withdrawal proposal. Members of this camp have raised objections that stem from their suspicion that Sharon is setting a trap for the Palestinians and for the world at large. He will indeed withdraw from the Gaza Strip, and also perhaps from isolated points in the West Bank; however, in exchange, he will try to tighten Israel's hold of large areas, and the many settlements, in the West Bank. In the eyes of these critics, Sharon's political outlook has remained constant. At first glance, withdrawal from the Gaza Strip appears to be a move toward a division of land and reconciliation between two peoples. But as these detractors see it, the move is actually designed to strengthen the main thrust of the settlement movement, in Judea and Samaria, and obstruct the Palestinian effort to achieve viable independence in the future. The skeptics fear that withdrawal from the Gaza Strip that is conducted without an agreement or understanding with the Palestinian Authority is liable to foment chaos on the ground, and that Hamas will rise from the anarchy and oust Palestinian Authority forces. To such considerations must be added one other, genuine, worry: the Israeli withdrawal might be perceived and depicted by terror organizations as collapsing and escaping from terror, and such a perception could very well encourage continuation, rather than stifling, of the violent Intifada." (*Ha'aretz*, 2/9/04)

Ha'aretz continued, "Just as doubts concerning Sharon's intentions to carry out this move are understandable, fears about the outcome of the move, should it be implemented, are legitimate. However, none of this overshadows the genuine potential laden within this step. Certainly, there is no real cause for peace-seekers in Israel and throughout the world to oppose the proposed unilateral withdrawal, its conspicuous flaws and incompleteness notwithstanding. The removal of Israeli civilians and soldiers from densely crowded, hostile districts in Gaza will bring about a welcome saving of human life and state resources. Contradicting the message of Zionist prophets of doom, the move would prove that there is still cause for hope that Israel can rectify the historic mistake that threatens its vitality. By withdrawing from the Gaza Strip, Israel will prove that it has the strength and courage to dismantle settlements. Looking ahead: as to the possibilities that the prime minister intends to dupe those who long for an end to the dispute, and that Palestinian extremists will step up their efforts to vanquish Israel as a result of the withdrawal, the future does not belong to either of these gainsayers. Life and the desire for peace and prosperity, common interests among the majority of both peoples, are destined to be stronger than any illusion or scheme whose purpose is to foil the vision of two states living together in peace." (*Ha'aretz*, 2/9/04)