Olmert's Unilateral Option

An Early Assessment

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Front cover: Acting Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert (center), accompanied by Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz (far left), reviews a map of the Gush Etzion settlement bloc as he begins a tour of Israel's West Bank fence, February 7, 2006. Copyright AP Wide World Photos/Avi Ohayon/Israeli Government Press Office.

About the Author

David Makovsky is a senior fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Project on the Middle East Peace Process. He has written extensively on Israeli-Palestinian issues, including their implications for U.S. Middle East policy.

His recent publications include *Engagement through Disengagement: Gaza and the Potential for Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking* (The Washington Institute, 2005) and *A Defensible Fence: Fighting Terror and Enabling a Two-State Solution* (The Washington Institute, 2004), which focuses on Israel's security barrier and its relationship to demography and geography in the West Bank. He also authored *Making Peace with the PLO: The Rabin Government's Road to the Oslo Accord* (Washington Institute/Westview Press/HarperCollins, 1996) and contributed to a history of U.S. involvement in the Gulf War, *Triumph without Victory* (Random House, 1992).

Since 2000, Mr. Makovsky has also served as an adjunct lecturer in Middle Eastern Studies at Johns Hopkins University's Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies. His commentary on the peace process and the Arab-Israeli conflict has appeared in *Foreign Affairs,* the *New York Times,* the *Washington Post,* the *Los Angeles Times,* the *Wall Street Journal,* the *Financial Times,* the *Chicago Tribune, Foreign Policy,* and *National Interest.*

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Foreword

Unlike most Israeli candidates for prime minister, Ehud Olmert spelled out a very clear platform that he intended to act on if his party, Kadima, was to lead the Israeli government. His "convergence" plan, which amounts to withdrawing at least 60,000 settlers into settler blocs adjacent to the so-called Green Line, was spelled out in unprecedented detail as Olmert sought a mandate for his vision.

Although some may argue that he did not receive the mandate he sought, garnering only 29 of the 120 Knesset seats, the more relevant number may be the loss in power that the right suffered in the new Knesset, going from 70 seats to 50. The center-left parties now have an unmistakable majority, and those voting for the center-left knew well that their votes would constitute support for what Olmert intended and not support for those opposed to his plan.

With "convergence" or Israeli separation from the bulk of the West Bank now the aim of the new Israeli government, a multitude of issues must be considered: What will be the scope of the Israeli withdrawal? Will the evacuation involve both settlers and the Israeli military? Will any coordination with the Palestinians be possible? If so, what might it look like and what issues are most likely to be coordinated? Is the United States prepared to help Israel defray the costs, at least in part, of Israeli disengagement from the West Bank? Will the United States try to negotiate the route of the withdrawal line as the price for trying to gain support from the other members of the Quartet or for offering recognition or quasi-recognition of the new Israeli border? Can disengagement or convergence make an eventual peace agreement with Palestinians more likely?

David Makovsky addresses these and other questions in his lucid examination of the Israeli disengagement. For that reason alone, his study makes a real contribution. But David offers more than an exploration of these important issues. He offers insight into why "separation" became Israel's policy; how and why both Ariel Sharon's and Ehud Olmert's strategies evolved; and why Palestinians are likely to resist it, even while Hamas may find disengagement attractive if for no other reason than it requires so little of them.

Palestinians can choose to be passive observers of separation, taking comfort in Israel's withdrawal from a significant part of the West Bank even as they complain that Israel is imposing on them and leaving such issues as Jerusalem and refugees unresolved. But if Palestinians want to deal with the core issues of the conflict and have some say in how they are resolved, then they must also put themselves in a position where they are prepared to do their part of the bargain in any negotiation. So long as Hamas seems capable of preventing the Palestinians from negotiating or assuming any of their responsibilities toward the Israelis, it is hard to see what alternative exists to separation.

Ultimately, as David points out, the United States has a major role to play. If any coordination is to take place—or even the possibility of negotiations—the United States will need to create parallel discussions with the two sides on how we and they are prepared to approach separation. Indeed, should direct coordination prove difficult, the United States can mediate, offering either to help broker a real negotiation if the Palestinians can produce on their side or to work out some parallel understandings on how, where, and when separation might unfold and what each side will do.

The less the Palestinians are able to do on their side, the more Israel will seek to gain from the United States. The American readiness to respond to the Israelis on the borders will be influenced by how much contiguity exists for Palestinians and a state on their side

of the border—and whether the Israel Defense Forces remain in Palestinian territory even if the settlers are gone. The less territory the Israelis appear to annex, leaving room for the principle of a swap of territory, the further the United States is likely to go in accepting the Israeli border as a political border—even if it is not a fully recognized political border.

In the end, the Bush administration and the Israeli government will have to make hard calls. Although we should not expect a rush to make such decisions on either side, the reality of 2008 and the end of the Bush administration could lead both sides to make them. For Ehud Olmert, he may feel he can achieve his objective of resolving Israel's borders by 2010 only if he can reach an understanding with the Bush administration—which he may believe is more likely to be responsive than an unknown successor administration. Knowing that it is possible to conclude his administration with Israel ending most of its occupation and committed to withdrawing from the bulk of the West Bank, President Bush may feel that big decisions are required. If so, such decisions will take the kind of intensive, hands-on diplomacy that the Bush administration has been reluctant to undertake thus far.

But, as David points out, the potential gains from doing so could make peace far more likely over time. Conversely, shying away from this effort is likely to make separation less a way-station to greater stability and hope and more a new staging ground for confrontation.

Ambassador Dennis Ross
Former U.S. Special Middle East
Coordinator for the Peace Process

Executive Summary

The victory of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's Kadima Party in the March elections following the Hamas parliamentary victory appears to have moved the Arab-Israeli conflict from one dominated by bilateralism to one in which unilateralism seems to be the likely future course. Hamas sees bilateralism as undesirable because it seeks Israel's destruction, whereas Olmert views bilateralism as merely unfeasible given the current constellation of Palestinian power.

The Israeli undertaking to evacuate most settlements from the West Bank is historic, marking a decisive change that began in the aftermath of the 1967 war. In and of itself, their evacuation will not end the conflict between these two peoples, but it will likely minimize the abrasive scope of the conflict in such a manner that gradual resolution becomes more likely in the future. Whether a Palestinian state will emerge immediately in an evacuation's wake is far from certain, but the move certainly lays the groundwork for a two-state outcome if not a two-state solution.

In March 2006, Acting Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert stunned the world by making the pledge to dismantle the majority of Israeli settlements from the West Bank part of his party's campaign. Dubbing his plan "convergence," or consolidation, Olmert outlined a proposal that likely would mean removing at least 60,000 settlers from the majority of the West Bank and resettling them into existing West Bank settlement blocs that border the pre-1967 Green Line. A major question left unresolved is whether the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) will be evacuated along with the settlers, or whether they will remain to maintain the Jordan Valley and the Jordan River as Israel's security border on the east and to deal with the threat of Hamas and other terrorist challenges within the West Bank. A key issue is whether Olmert envisions a full-scale West Bank disengagement (comparable to the Gaza disengagement) or, rather, a civilian disengagement alone (comparable to the disengagement that occurred in the northern West Bank during the same summer of 2005). This is one of the main unknown variables, and it is likely to depend upon the level of support from the United States.

By consolidating West Bank settlers into blocs that Olmert has declared will always remain part of Israel, such as Ariel, Maale Adumim, and Gush Etzion, Olmert has presented a plan that would permit large contiguity in the West Bank for a Palestinian state and has begun to draw what may become the basis for Israel's future borders. Although Olmert was careful not to delineate the exact lines of the settlement evacuation, he made clear that Israel's security barrier would be the baseline in any Israeli examination of the evacuation of settlers. An estimated 193,000 Israelis live in the 8 percent of the West Bank that is between the pre-1967 boundaries and the current route of the barrier.

Olmert's plan comes at a time when many Israelis are seeking to reconcile their distaste for the role of occupying power vis-à-vis the Palestinians and their genuine belief that Hamas's ascent to power has made the concept of true partnership a chimera. This point is fundamental. While Olmert has put forth the prospect of negotiations with the more conciliatory Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas before proceeding to unilateralism, this option seems unlikely to be successful. Several factors militate against success, including Abbas's constitutional crisis with a Hamas bent on Israel's destruction, Israeli skepticism that Abbas can deliver a deal, and political realities in Israel where unsuccessful negotiations with the Palestinians have caused governments to fall in short order. It is this context that has given birth to Olmert's unilateralist option: Israel can

evacuate as much as possible from the "wrong" side of the security barrier, thereby minimizing—even if not completely eliminating—an occupation that began in 1967. Other factors have boosted this view among the Israeli public. In the wake of the failed realization of the goals of Oslo or the Roadmap, many Israelis support major actions taken outside the framework of bilateral negotiations if they will potentially enhance security. The 2003 decision to build a security barrier between Israel and the West Bank signaled a physical manifestation of the psychological disengagement from the Palestinians that is occurring in the mindset of the Israeli population. After having survived years of Yasser Arafat's rule and now facing a government led by Hamas, Israelis have few expectations of any progress being made on the Palestinian side. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's decision to disengage from the entirety of the Gaza Strip and small portions of the northern West Bank also signaled Israeli desire for action independent of any negotiation with the Palestinians.

Nevertheless, Olmert's Convergence Plan will face both domestic opposition and opposition from the Palestinians. Moreover, keeping Olmert's plan from becoming enmeshed in the ongoing crisis over Israel's response to the existence of a Hamas government on its doorstep will not be easy. Olmert has made clear he wants to isolate Hamas politically while avoiding a collapse of the PA that could lead to a policy consequence at odds with his objective of disengaging as much as possible from the Palestinians. At the same time, one cannot preclude that Israel will be forced into armed clashes with Hamas and like-minded groups before Israel pulls out.

The boldness of Olmert's plan should not be underestimated. He announced his intention before the elections to confront not just the settler movement but also those in Israel who believe the process of unilateral withdrawal of Israeli settlers creates pain without much gain.

His domestic critics will come from two directions: (1) those who view the West Bank as biblical patrimony and who therefore believe the biblical significance and resonance of large portions of the West Bank make relinquishing it religiously impermissible; and (2) other critics less focused on religion, who believe unilateralism is politically unwise because it could embolden extremists who will characterize withdrawal as retreat. Although the IDF was able to remove settlers from Gaza with virtually no violence, no guarantees exist that Israel will succeed in removing almost seven times as many settlers in the heartland of the biblical "Judea and Samaria."

The Palestinians also are unlikely to support unilateral action on Israel's part because they will view it as an attempt by Israel to secure its claims on settlement blocs outside the Green Line without negotiation and compensation for the Palestinians. If the past is a guide, any Israeli move is likely to be greeted with suspicion at best and more likely with outright hostility. Even if Palestinians judge that their self-interest is not served by torpedoing Israel's decision to remove settlers from most of the West Bank, violence could occur either during or after the operation—or both.

Palestinian attitudes toward Israel have long been characterized by skepticism of Israeli intentions, yet this does not necessarily mean outright rejection. A variety of actors could take steps that minimize Palestinian opposition even as the plan moves forward.

Undoubtedly, the international community, and especially the United States, will be important. Without active U.S. political and economic support as well as guarantees to Israel, there is no disengagement plan. The instinct of the Bush administration will be to support the Olmert government, as it has supported past Israeli governments that have embarked upon a course of withdrawal or evacuating settlers. Olmert has set November 2008 as the date by which his plan should be on its

way to completion in order to be on target to finish the evacuation during President Bush's tenure in office.

Olmert will have a variety of issues to raise with the United States. To this end, the United States and Israel should consider establishing a bilateral mechanism to discuss the issues related to Olmert's Convergence Plan. There must be someone in the U.S. government with responsibility for such coordination, who will head implementation after decisions are made on the highest levels of the U.S. and Israeli governments. Among the issues for discussion are the following: (1) Israel is likely to want American guarantees on the demilitarization of any territory evacuated by the Israeli military. If this is not feasible, pullout is likely to be of a purely civilian nature. (2) Olmert will want help to defray the expenses of a withdrawal, which will reportedly cost at least $10 billion and perhaps more to be expended over a multiyear period. (3) A very tough challenge for Olmert will be his desire to have the United States garner recognition for a border while other outstanding issues with the Palestinians, such as Jerusalem and refugees, remain. This issue has come into sharp focus in light of the fact that the UN Security Council has taken no steps thus far to recognize Israel's full withdrawal from Gaza as compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 242. It is exacerbated by the fact that the Palestinians are unlikely to recognize Olmert's Convergence Plan as creating the conditions for a Palestinian state with provisional borders, in accordance the second phase of the three-phased Roadmap, because they will be prone to view any Israeli unilateral action as arbitrary and against Palestinian interests.

While the international community will likely applaud Olmert's decision to withdraw settlers, it is unlikely to bestow international recognition in return. Olmert will find this reaction inadequate, which could have profound implications for his domestic political standing. The question is whether, short of international recognition, alternatives exist that could satisfy Olmert. These would have to enable him to demonstrate in some fashion that Israel is not responsible for the civilian Palestinian population in areas that Israel would evacuate and would contain some form of explicit acknowledgement that Israel's control of carefully defined and agreed-upon settlement blocs is essentially permanent. If a formula cannot be found that seeks to reach common ground with Israel on at least some of these issues, any incentive for Olmert to view the Convergence Plan as also a military disengagement (putting aside the security issue of having Hamas in power) would be further diminished; he would view it rather as strictly a civilian evacuation. Incurring security risk is difficult in any event with Hamas in power, and this risk is compounded by the lack of any tangible reward. In short, the scope of recognition and withdrawal are invariably linked.

The United States will be faced with alternatives. In the past few years, the United States and Israel reached tacit understandings on the contours of Israel's security barrier. This cooperation is likely to continue in 2006 and beyond with regard to practical understandings on the scope of the Maale Adumim and Ariel blocs that are not yet fenced in or linked up to the wider security barrier. When the United States and Israel have agreed on the scope of the barrier, the possibility exists that the White House could press Europe to recognize the fenced-in settlement blocs. However, Europe, and perhaps even the United States, is likely to avoid conferring diplomatic recognition on something done unilaterally—without the consent of the Palestinians. Alternatively, under one scenario, the actual geographic contours of the settlement blocs may not be recognized outright, but rather the United States will confer de facto acceptance that those reasonably defined blocs will be Israeli. Another option that is not mutually exclusive with this is that the United States could recognize Israel's

move to incorporate settlement blocs beyond the pre-1967 lines in the context of a promise by Israel to ultimately accept the principle of territorial compensation for the Palestinians from pre-1967 Israel, but only when a final status deal is in the offing. From Israel's perspective, offering a pledge of future compensatory concessions to the U.S. administration would have the benefit of regularizing the status of the nearly 193,000 West Bank settlers currently living in the blocs, and it could simultaneously serve Palestinian interests by signaling the ultimate contours of final status.

Additionally, should a Hamas government not be in power at the time Olmert's Convergence Plan is implemented, Olmert's unilateral plan could turn into U.S.-brokered bilateralism between Israel and Abbas, or his successor. In the meantime, the United States may seek to soften the unilateral conceptual contours of the plan. Specifically, with the United States already announcing it will maintain a dialogue with PA president Abbas, it may ask Israel to establish a parallel "consultative mechanism" with Abbas so the Palestinian leader can have input into the plan. Such a mechanism would not give the Palestinians a veto over Israeli actions, but it will enable them to have a voice in seeking to shape its outcome. In the consultative mechanism, for example, the parties can explore whether declaring a Palestinian state is desirable or feasible in areas that Israel chooses to evacuate. The two sides can also discuss an array of security and economic access issues inside the West Bank or between the West Bank and Gaza in the absence of terrorism.

Olmert's West Bank Convergence Plan is a massive historic undertaking. It will require extraordinary financial resources as well as an understanding that will probably need the attention and leadership of the Bush administration until the end of its term. These are issues that will not resolve themselves; the United States needs to maintain an active, diplomatic hands-on effort to ensure success.

Introduction

For the first twenty-nine years of Israel's existence, the founding Labor Party dominated national politics. When Labor faltered following the traumatic 1973 war, Likud took over for a large majority of the next twenty-nine years. In late 2005, former prime minister Ariel Sharon split Likud, upset that the party did not support him in the landmark Gaza pullout. The March 2006 election marked the first time that a third party—Kadima, which Sharon founded about a month before suffering a stroke in January 2006—won an Israeli election. Settlements scattered across the West Bank hold the potential to turn the Zionist project into a de facto binational state instead of hewing to its central objective of being a democratic and Jewish state. Bilateral negotiations seem remote now that Hamas—a movement sworn to Israel's destruction—controls the Palestinian government. Instead, Ehud Olmert campaigned on the promise of a new centrism, stressing the need to leave most of the West Bank and even parts of Jerusalem if no negotiating option exists that could yield final borders. He faces enormous challenges, ranging from the thousands of settlers furious about being evacuated from lands they consider Jewish biblical patrimony to the security nightmares posed by Hamas and like-minded groups. Olmert's political future—and perhaps the future of his nation—rides on that campaign promise.

The purpose of this paper is to understand the origins and forces driving unilateral West Bank disengagement, which was the basis of Olmert's election on March 28, 2006, and, on at least a preliminary basis, examine its implications for the relevant actors. Further assessments will be required as the process unfolds. As it stands now, the situation is not likely to lend itself to a healthy bilateral negotiating tack. If such a partnership were feasible, bilateral negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians would undoubtedly be preferable. Nevertheless, the times are extraordinary, and the implications cannot be ignored. Simply, the Israeli-Palestinian dynamic, especially under Hamas leadership of the Palestinians, creates a dysfunctional situation. Under the current difficult conditions, unilateralism—as properly pursued by Israel and in consultation with the relevant actors, especially Abbas—is the best prospect for advancing Israeli-Palestinian relations. The United States should therefore engage to facilitate that unilateralism through its contacts on all sides.

Evolution of Unilateralism

Olmert's plan comes at a moment when the Israeli public supports both separation from the Palestinians and unilateral action to achieve it, and the plan should be viewed as the culmination of many years of internal debate and experience in negotiating with the Palestinians. The 1993 Oslo Accords have both Israeli and Palestinian critics. Palestinians attacked the gradualist approach toward the scope of their authority in the West Bank and the accords' inability to curb settlement expansion. Israelis criticized the idea that security would emerge from a peace agreement that incorporated no consequences for Palestinian nonadherence to security cooperation. They believed Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat viewed the peace process as a decolonization rather than a reconciliation process.

Unilateralism in 2006 should be seen in the broader context of how peacemaking was approached. Bilateralism—with U.S. mediation assistance—was the favored approach in Israeli peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan and in negotiations with Syria, and it became the model for peacemaking efforts between Israelis and Palestinians from the 1993 Oslo Accords through the end of the Clinton presidency in 2000. The United States would either mediate or facilitate negotiations, but the paradigm was negotiations between the parties. The zenith of this approach was reached during the final six months of the Clinton administration, as the United States sought to broker a conflict-ending peace treaty at Camp David and in the months that followed. However, gradualist bilateralism, as embodied in Oslo, crashed when the effort to reach a comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian peace failed, and instead terror and violence broke out from 2000 to 2004. The failure to reach a deal and the outbreak of the Palestinian intifada toward the end of 2000 created a crisis of confidence so large that the parties began to doubt the very enterprise of peacemaking. Indeed, the ensuing four years of violence would take its toll on the parties. Trust was shattered not only with respect to the terms of the deal but also in the belief that a partnership could be rebuilt. This context, along with Israel's concern with being held hostage to the irresponsibility of the other side, explains Israel's decision to build a security barrier, pull out of Gaza, and now, contemplate further disengagement in the West Bank.

ORIGINS OF SEPARATION
The idea of physically separating the Israeli and Palestinian peoples is an old one. Calls for partition have long been rooted in the sense that Arabs and Israeli Jews have distinct nationalist claims over a small piece of land—claims that have been exacerbated by differences in religion, culture, and language. Accordingly, third-party efforts to divide Palestine and to place Arabs and Jews in separate geographic entities can be found as far back as the British government's 1937 Peel Commission report. A decade later, the 1947 UN partition resolution called for establishing separate Arab and Jewish states in Palestine and linking them through an economic union. In both of those instances, the proposed partition was accepted by the mainstream Zionist movement and rejected by the Palestinians. Widespread debate took place within the Zionist community, however, about whether giving up biblical land would be permissible, and only under David Ben-Gurion's leadership did the early Israeli community agree to the idea of partition.

An understanding of how the idea of partition has evolved in the Israeli political consciousness is important. Just as the notion of Palestinian autonomy gradually changed from an Israeli liberal platform into a consensus view, so, too, has support for a comprehensive

partition come to transcend Israeli party lines despite its liberal origins.

Following the failure of the 1947 UN resolution, the idea of partition first reemerged as a staple of Israeli Labor Party policy in the aftermath of the 1967 Six Day War. At the time, Labor envisioned a territorial compromise with Jordan, which had controlled the West Bank for the previous two decades. As with the earlier British and UN partition plans, Labor assumed that a border would be used as the means of separation—the idea of a physical barrier, such as a fence, did not develop until later.

Labor's vision did not come to fruition, however, in part because of Jordan's reluctance to negotiate and because by 1974 Israelis feared that a Palestinian state led by Arafat would constitute a threat to Israel's existence. As a result of these and other public concerns, the Likud Party swept to power in the 1977 national elections, and the idea of partition receded. Likud opposed such territorial compromise; indeed, the new leadership's support of the settlement movement in the West Bank was to some extent a means of making partition unthinkable.

The idea of partition would be revived in earnest with the 1991 Madrid peace conference and the election of Yitzhak Rabin in 1992. In many ways, Rabin was the father of separation. His victory was assured by his reaction to the murder of an Israeli teenage girl by a Palestinian killer in Jerusalem. Specifically, Rabin declared that Israel must "take Gaza out of Tel Aviv"; that is, it must create two distinct entities so that the two populations could avoid what he called *chikuch* (friction). Interestingly, Olmert uses the same language, saying "the daily friction creates violence. It is enormously expensive. There is no chance that it will develop positively for Israel. We have to converge into the settlement blocs and reduce the friction to a minimum."[1]

With the Oslo Accords of 1993 making the idea of partition inevitable, the quest for separation also became the quest for borders. Israeli liberals hoped that Israel would attain reconciliation with the Palestinians while the idea not only of separation but also of borders would gain prominence. Israeli conservatives feared this resolution, believing it would guarantee a Palestinian state on the other side of the border and the yielding of biblical patrimony. Though Rabin hoped that Arafat would fight terrorism as promised, the prime minister remained skeptical that this change would come to pass, leading him to envision a complementary physical mechanism for peace. Rabin first used the term "border" a year after the Oslo agreement was signed. After a rash of violent incidents—including a suicide bombing in Tel Aviv, a shooting in Jerusalem, and the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier—Rabin began to be more explicit. On October 19, 1994, Rabin announced his signature stance: "We have to decide on separation as a philosophy. There has to be a clear border."[2] After the next major terror attack, Rabin established the Shahal Commission (an interministerial committee headed by Moshe Shahal, his police minister and Labor colleague) to determine the optimal means of building a security barrier in the West Bank to separate Israelis and Palestinians. The commission recommended building a fence with several crossing points and opening or restricting access to those gateways depending on the level of Palestinian violence.

Starting in 1995, a separation barrier was indeed built around Gaza. It came amid infiltration by suicide bombers. Although the Gaza barrier would be rebuilt and fortified after the outbreak of the second intifada in 2000, the first Gaza barrier was built shortly after Oslo was inaugurated.

A separation barrier in the West Bank, however, was not built at that time, due in part to Rabin's assassination in November 1995. In

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[1]   Acting Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, interview with Nahum Barnea and Shimon Schiffer, *Yediot Aharonot* (Tel Aviv), March 10, 2006.

[2]   David Makovsky, "Rabin: We Need a Border with Palestinians," *Jerusalem Post*, October 20, 1994.

addition, building a fence was seen as politically sensitive because it could be viewed as implying a border, which the maximalists would see as not including enough land for Israelis and the minimalists would see as taking away too much land from the Palestinians. Agreeing on the barrier's route would be very difficult. Moreover, in the second half of the 1990s, the political context had changed.

The idea of separation was shelved because neither of Rabin's successors favored it, albeit for different reasons. Although Shimon Peres, who became prime minister after Rabin's assassination, occasionally paid lip service to separation, he feared it would impede Israeli-Palestinian economic integration, which he viewed as key for peace. Peres saw himself as a Middle East Jean Monnet—the spiritual father of the European Union. He dreamed of a "New Middle East" predicated upon integration rather than separation, a region in which borders would eventually become less important, if not irrelevant.

Binyamin Netanyahu, who succeeded Peres in 1996, avoided the idea of separation during his own tenure because the settler factions within his coalition opposed it. During the second intifada between 2000 and 2004, however, Netanyahu would become a vocal advocate of a fence. Both Peres and Netanyahu were able to sidestep the separation issue in part because the Palestinian Authority (PA) undertook a massive—albeit only temporary—crackdown on terrorists in the West Bank in 1996, arresting approximately 1,100 members of Hamas. Moreover, despite its many problems, the peace process of the late 1990s—the Hebron Accord (1997) and the Wye River Accords (1998)—dampened any discussion of unilateral separation.

The notion of separation was revived when Ehud Barak came to power in 1999. At the time of his election, the Israeli public had come to view separation as the prize and Palestinian statehood as its price. Israelis increasingly recognized that European-style recon-

ciliation was not within their short-term grasp, even if they welcomed the idea of regulated economic trade. This pessimism was rooted in Israel's growing unwillingness to entrust its security to Arafat, who had largely avoided confronting Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). (Rightly or wrongly, the Israeli public tended to credit a drop in attacks during 1998–1999 not to the peace process but rather to the prowess of the Israeli security services.) Barak proposed trying to achieve separation through bilateralism but, if it failed, to take unilateral action. For example, Barak pledged in his 1999 electoral campaign to attempt to make peace with Syria but to unilaterally withdraw the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) from Lebanon if no agreement was reached within the year. True to his promises, the IDF left Lebanon in May 2000. Over time, Barak would develop the same approach to the West Bank. After the Camp David summit of 2000 failed, he favored the idea of constructing a fence. As in the separation favored by Rabin, Barak favored gates for regulated economic interaction between the two peoples.

For their part, Palestinians complained that their standard of living was declining and that the pace of Israeli settlement construction had not slowed. As the promise of Oslo continued to sour—and as the PA's state-run media and school textbooks continued to denounce the moral legitimacy of Israel's existence—many began to feel that Israeli-Palestinian relations would, at best, remain in a state of "cold peace" for the indefinite future.

Against that background, Barak's election campaign couched peace in terms of disengagement, an approach that enabled him to outflank Likud and appeal to Israeli distrust of the Palestinians. Barak argued that the lack of trust was precisely what made separation imperative. He viewed a defined border as something that would enhance Israeli security and facilitate a two-state outcome. He did not see separation as severing any economic ties with

Palestinians, but rather as regulating them.[3] The failure of Camp David, the eruption of the second intifada, and Arafat's refusal to accept the so-called Clinton parameters in December 2000 all contributed to greater popularity for the idea of separation among the Israeli public, even though Barak himself crashed politically along with the hopes for peace.

SHARON AND DISENGAGEMENT

The next step toward unilateralism came early in the second intifada. In the peak of the Oslo years, Israel had given responsibility to the PA for fighting terror in the territories and tried not to enter areas under PA control. During the second intifada, however, Israel decided that it would go wherever terror was occurring and in 2002 entered West Bank towns during Operation Defensive Shield. Israel acted on its own rather than in cooperation with the PA.

An important next step in unilateralism came that same year, when Israel began to build a security barrier. It had a twofold purpose: fight terror and enable a two-state outcome. At the peak of the suicide bombings, 84 percent of the Israeli public supported the barrier. Indeed, terror in the areas where the barrier was constructed dropped sharply. Somewhat ironically, Ariel Sharon, who succeeded Barak as prime minister in February 2001, actually began construction of the West Bank fence—a measure originally championed by the opposite end of the Israeli political spectrum. As one of the principal architects of the settlement movement, Sharon had long argued that a fence would create a de facto Palestinian

state in the West Bank and leave many Israeli settlements stranded within it. During the mid-1990s, he had wholeheartedly dismissed the idea of such a barrier. In January 1995, for example, he wrote: "Won't these fences be sabotaged? Won't they be penetrated? Where will the forces to secure this system come from? From what budgets? It is difficult to fathom such silliness."[4] He reiterated this view upon assuming office in 2001. He told an interviewer, "I see no possibility of separation. ... I don't believe in 'We're here and they're there.' In my opinion, practically speaking, the possibility doesn't exist."[5]

A key factor that led Sharon to change his mind and espouse separation was the effect of violence on Israeli public opinion. Two months after Sharon assumed office, Barak warned him, "When there are seventy dead Israelis, you can resist the fence, but when there are 700 dead Israelis, you will not be able to resist it."[6] Indeed, growing public sentiment in favor of a security barrier was overwhelming. By February, 84 percent of Israelis—equaling the entire Jewish population and a fifth of all Israeli Arabs—favored the construction of a barrier.[7] A critical moment was the 2002 Netanya hotel bombing during Passover that led to Israeli reentry into the West Bank in Operation Defensive Shield. In this context, support for the barrier remained steady at an extraordinarily high level, due to the effectiveness of the barrier in halting more than 300 attempted infiltrations in Gaza and a drop in suicide attacks after construction of the barrier began in 2002. Some say the drop in attacks was related to the success of the Israeli security

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[3] In remarks made just before the Camp David summit, Barak declared: "Israel will insist upon a physical separation between itself and the independent Palestinian entity to be formed as a result of the settlement. I am convinced that a separation of this sort is necessary for both sides. It is essential to Israel in order to guarantee its internal security and safeguard its Jewish identity, unity and strength; and it is essential to the Palestinian nation in order to foster its national identity and independence without being dependent on the State of Israel…Still separation does not mean severance, which is neither possible nor desirable. On the contrary, separation by means of clearly marked and fenced borders with controlled passageways will promote a healthier relationship as well as economic and multidisciplinary collaboration based on shared interests and mutual respect." Ehud Barak, "Peace as My Paramount Objective," *Middle East Mirror* (London), June 28, 2000.

[4] Ariel Sharon, "The Silliness of Separation," *Jerusalem Post*, January 27, 1995.

[5] Ariel Sharon, interview by Ari Shavit, "Sharon Is Sharon Is Sharon," *Haaretz* (Tel Aviv) April 12, 2001.

[6] Ehud Barak, conversation with author, Tel Aviv, December 5, 2002, and reconfirmed in separate conversation with author in January 12, 2006. As of this writing, 1,100 Israelis had been killed by Palestinian violence during the second intifada between 2000 and 2004.

[7] Ephraim Yaar and Tamar Hermann, "Peace Index: February 2004," Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research, Tel Aviv University.

services in breaking up terror cells as the intifada progressed, but key senior Israeli security officials like Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz and former head of the Shin Bet Avi Dicter said the barrier was pivotal.

Sharon's change of heart extended beyond the narrower issue of building a physical barrier, and it led him to question other premises that in the past caused him to oppose withdrawal of settlers. Culminating in a speech to the United Nations that he gave in September 2005 where he said the Palestinians had not just needs but the right to a state of their own, Sharon's approach toward a two-state solution was evolving.[8] The constant in Sharon's thinking throughout was his view about what constituted a security threat to Israel's existence. For decades, he viewed such a Palestinian state as threatening the Zionist project. In the last years, he came around to the view that the parties might differ on aspects of a two-state solution, including the issue of Jerusalem and borders, but the principle of separate political entities for Israelis and Palestinians was preferable for a variety of reasons: safeguarding the character of Israel as a Jewish state; relieving Israel of economic and moral burdens at home and allowing it to become a non-pariah state in the international community; and defusing Arab enmity, even though Sharon was a lifelong skeptic on the question of whether the Arab world would ever accept the moral legitimacy of Israel as a Jewish state. They had refused to do so throughout the 120 years of the Zionist project. Taken together, these views led Sharon to believe a two-state solution would no longer impede Zionism but facilitate it, despite implacable Arab attitudes. Instead of dismissing partition as he had in the past, Sharon began to endorse it as he came to see the status quo as bad for Israel. When asked explicitly about dividing the land in spring 2003, Sharon replied: "I believe this is what will happen. It is necessary to see things in a very realistic way. In the end, there will be a Palestinian state … I don't think that we need to rule over another people and run its life. I don't think that we have the strength for that. It is a very heavy burden on the public, and it raises ethical problems and heavy economic problems."[9]

Moreover, Sharon's thinking about withdrawal from Gaza seems to have been affected by several strategic considerations that could help Israel in shaping a two-state solution. First, unfavorable trends as it related to the Jewish-Arab demographic balance played a role, although he rarely expressed that concern publicly. Second, Sharon saw that by giving up Gaza, which he viewed as not strategically vital for Israel and even as a liability, he could secure strategic West Bank assets, such as the settlement blocs. Third, the timing of his new thinking was not coincidental. Although many would contest whether he was a strategic thinker, Sharon imagined himself as such, determining issues on the basis of a broader context. In the wake of the second intifada and other world events, the context had changed indeed. By 2003, the war in Iraq propelled a U.S.-led drive to demonstrate to the world that the United States was serious about making progress on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. In 2003, the United States and its allies issued a Roadmap for Peace, a set of guidelines that was supposed to culminate in a two-state solution. President Bush became the first U.S. president to explicitly say a two-state solution was official American policy. Amid these developments, Sharon's thinking began to change: that same year he declared that controlling the Palestinians could make Israel more vulnerable rather than more secure.

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[8] On September 15, 2005, Sharon declared in a speech at the UN General Assembly: "The right of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel does not mean disregarding the rights of others in the land. The Palestinians will always be our neighbors. We respect them, and have no aspirations to rule over them. They are also entitled to freedom and to a national, sovereign existence in a state of their own." Available online (www.pmo.gov.il/PMOEng/Communication/PMSpeaks/speech150905.htm).

[9] Ariel Sharon, interview by Ari Shavit, "PM: 'Iraq War Created an Opportunity with the Palestinians We Can't Miss,'" *Haaretz* (Tel Aviv), April 14, 2003.

Although he did not believe a grand deal with the Palestinians was possible, Sharon believed action was in Israeli interests. Unlike Ehud Olmert, Sharon did not necessarily fear Israel was on the verge of losing its Jewish demographic majority, but he did seem to reject the premise that formerly underlay Zionism—namely, that time is on Israel's side. Sharon's long-standing view had been that time would either harmonize Israeli and Palestinian views or allow Israeli determination to prevail. Now, given new winds in the international community, the status quo was bad for Israel. This belief became more pronounced in the wake of Mahmoud Abbas's resignation as premier in 2003, when the political vacuum led to diplomatic initiatives that Sharon deemed hostile, such as Yossi Beilin's Geneva Accords. Beilin would be received by U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell.

Former leaders of Israel's security services gave interviews bemoaning the status quo and fearing the worst for Israel. Already committed to the idea of withdrawal from some areas, Sharon took the next step and initiated a unilateral pullout from Gaza at the end of 2003, regretting the lack of Palestinian partnership. Although his erstwhile friends in the settlement movement cried betrayal, Sharon believed he was acting in a fashion that was not a favor to the Palestinians but was advancing the Israeli national interest in trying times. Referring to a letter that he carried from a Gaza settler bitterly complaining about disengagement, Sharon told an interviewer in 2005: "She is right in her arguments, but she doesn't bear the responsibility of the Jewish people on her shoulders. This responsibility is incumbent upon me."[10] Whereas the world viewed Israel as a regional power and Sharon as one of its military leaders, Sharon viewed Israel as a fragile country in a hostile neighborhood. Above all, Sharon dedicated his life to ensur-

ing Israel was not vulnerable. If separation and establishing a barrier helped protect Israel, he did not view those actions as a cardinal sin: his main mission was guaranteeing Israel's physical survival. Sharon's early experience was as an infantry commander in 1948, trying to secure the road to Jerusalem. Of his thirty-six-member unit, twenty-five were either killed or injured, including Sharon himself. As Sharon biographer David Chanoff, put it: "Sharon's formative experiences had little to do with this notion of Israeli power. Victory in 1948 left him depressed and anxious, brooding over losses and beset by nightmares. That deep-seated sense of Israel's vulnerability never left him until the moment of his collapse."[11]

Indeed, despite his reputation as head of the settlement movement, Sharon was never a religious ideologue who opposed yielding land because it was sacrosanct. In his 2003 interview, he declared, "Look, this is the cradle of the birth of the Jewish people. All of our history is connected to those places: Bethlehem, Shilo, and Beit El. And I know that we will have to separate from some of those places."[12] In general, he never viewed himself as a dyed-in-the-wool Likudnik, despite being its leader. Rather, his own roots were part of the pragmatic Labor Party, which was generally viewed since the pre-1948 days as favoring action over ideology—a trait associated with Israel's founder David Ben-Gurion and not his rival and first Likud leader Menachem Begin, who was known primarily as an orator.

In 2005 Sharon led a unilateral Israeli disengagement from the Gaza Strip and northern West Bank. Historians will debate whether coordination between Sharon's government and PA leader Mahmoud Abbas could have been greater in the Gaza pullout and the run-up to disengagement or whether Abbas could have taken steps in the aftermath of disen-

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10 Ariel Sharon, interview by Ari Shavit, "The General" *The New Yorker* (Tel Aviv), January 23, 2006.

11 David Chanoff, "The Landscape I Saw through Ariel Sharon's Eyes," *Forward*, March 17, 2006.
12 Ibid.

gagement to bolster his hold on Gaza. One can debate whether those missteps or fitful U.S. diplomatic involvement affected the outcome, but the Hamas victory in January 2006 sealed off any prospect for partnership in the near future.

That sequence of events created the political context for an angry Ariel Sharon to bolt from the Likud Party that he founded, creating the new Kadima Party, which emerged victorious in the March 2006 elections even though Sharon disappeared from the stage after a massive brain hemorrhage in early 2006. Sharon's departure from Likud shattered the party. With Sharon at the helm, the party won thirty-eight seats in 2003, but without him, they won a minuscule twelve. Although other factors were at work, the supreme irony was that the founder of Likud in 1973 would cripple the party with his absence decades later. This fracturing of Likud would be a seminal part of Sharon's political legacy.

Olmert's Ideological Journey

In one interview, Olmert said his "goal was an absolute separation between the Jewish and Palestinian populations. Israel's long-range interest is to separate.… The days in which every terrorist held the key to the agenda of our lives are over."[1] In reaching this conclusion, Olmert has traversed more ideological terrain than Sharon with regard to his views on the West Bank. Olmert was a second-generation Israeli Revisionist who was born and bred on the ideology of Eretz Yisrael. When Olmert changed his mind, the change was far more dramatic and sweeping than Sharon's. If Sharon initially viewed time as Israel's ally, Olmert viewed it as Israel's enemy. For the last three years, Olmert has made it unambiguously clear that he would like to see Israel pull out of most of the West Bank because the entire future of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state hangs in the balance. Moreover, Olmert's evolution is more representative of the journey that Israeli society has undergone as a whole.

Olmert was born into the "fighting family" of Menachem Begin's pre-state-of-Israel Irgun militia and subsequent Herut Party. His father, Mordechai Olmert, hailed from Russia but came to pre-state Israel by the circuitous route of China. Mordechai became active in the Herut movement, serving as an emissary abroad and heading its settlement division during the pre-1967 years. His son Ehud was involved in right-wing politics from his college days. Ehud joined a party that was a factional offshoot of Herut, which split amid dissatisfaction with Begin's hostility to his rivals, taking Mordechai with them. After the 1967 war, the group favored massive settlement of the West Bank.[2] When Sharon melded together the Likud in 1973, Olmert joined and his career in the Likud began in earnest. As a fiery young Knesset member in the 1970s, Olmert defied the venerable Menachem Begin over the 1978 Camp David accords between Israel and Egypt, which called for full withdrawal from the Sinai and offered a blueprint for Palestinian autonomy.[3]

Over time, Olmert, along with Dan Meridor, another second-generation Herut member and close friend, became the two young troubleshooters who would become indispensable to Likud prime minister Yitzhak Shamir in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Shamir was not knowledgeable about the United States, and these two westernized attorneys helped to smooth over differences in dealing with Secretary of State James Baker in the run-up to the landmark 1991 Madrid conference. As such, both Olmert and Meridor became known both to the administration of George H. W. Bush and to American Jewish supporters, often giving speeches in New York and elsewhere.

While serving as mayor of Jerusalem for much of the 1990s, Olmert relied on a governing municipal coalition predicated upon a close relationship with the growing religious sector in the city, especially the ultra-orthodox. Although some believed that the ultra-orthodox would not share the national-religious commitment to the settlements but would prefer to wait and redeem the land upon the arrival of the messiah, in fact, the younger among them proved very hawkish. Many of them now populate two of the largest settlements in the West Bank. As mayor, Olmert twice inflamed tensions with moves that were

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[1]   Acting Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, interview by Nahum Barnea and Shimon Schiffer, *Yediot Aharonot* (Tel Aviv), March 10, 2006.

[2]   *Political Dictionary of the State of Israel* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Publishing House, 1993), p. 119.

[3]   Interestingly, Olmert supported Moshe Dayan's idea of unilateral autonomy for Palestinians in the West Bank. See Dan Margalit, *I Have Seen Them All* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Zimora-Bitan, 1997), p. 271.

cheered by his hawkish backers. First, Olmert urged then prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu to open an underground tunnel in Jerusalem's Old City, close to the sacred Temple Mount (though not underneath it as Arafat notoriously claimed). Riots ensued, leaving fifteen Israelis and seventy Palestinians dead. Then, after the 1997 Hebron accord under which the Israeli military would exit much of the city, Olmert insisted that Netanyahu open up a new Jewish neighborhood in East Jerusalem (Har Homa/Jebl Gneihm), which was deemed controversial in U.S. eyes because it blocked Palestinian contiguity with Bethlehem and other Arab neighborhoods in East Jerusalem. The issue of Har Homa created friction between the Netanyahu government and the Clinton administration.

Nevertheless, countervailing forces also influenced Olmert. As mayor, Olmert often appeared on the scenes of blown-up buses and markets, witnessing the pain of victims and consoling their families. Such experiences may or may not have helped moderate his views. And in 2000, while he was furious over then prime minister Ehud Barak's concessions in Jerusalem's Old City and on the Temple Mount as part of the "Camp David II" diplomatic effort, he did not complain when Barak agreed to yield several Arab neighborhoods in East Jerusalem. He did not argue that the move violated the principle of what many Israelis consider "indivisible" Jerusalem—although such a reaction would have been in keeping with Olmert's earlier politics. In his 2006 campaign, he freely said that certain Palestinian pockets of East Jerusalem should be ceded by Israel. Olmert's tenure as mayor of Jerusalem and the reality of grappling with the daily problems of running the city for much of a decade appear to have led him to accept certain limits on ideology.

Olmert's family also factored into his evolution. His wife, Aliza, an artist, has frequently argued with her husband over politics during their thirty-five years of marriage, and she even admitted that she often voted against his Likud Party. And in a society that views mandatory military service as a patriotic duty, Olmert's son Ariel became a conscientious objector. Another son, Shaul, signed a petition urging soldiers not to serve in the West Bank, and Olmert's daughter Donna volunteers for a group monitoring the treatment of Palestinians passing through West Bank checkpoints. Olmert spoke openly of his family's influence in this recent campaign.

Major changes in Olmert's views toward the end of 2003 seem to have been guided by four factors. First, the failure to obtain peace meant that the current West Bank occupation could not continue indefinitely in light of the unfavorable demographic trends that threatened the character of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. In a newspaper interview, he said the demographic threat of parity imperiled the Jewish state, an issue more important than whether the United States could assist Israel in containing Yasser Arafat.[4] Second, time was not on Israel's side because defeat of the two-state solution would be replaced with international and Palestinian calls for a "one-state" solution, a euphemism for the destruction of Israel. The specter of a one-state solution scared him more than a two-state solution; Israel's failure to implement either would lead to "international isolation."[5] Third, he feared the implications of such demographic trends for Israel's relationship to the Jewish diaspora, which would undermine both support for Israel and for the idea of the centrality of Israel as relevant to Jews around the world. Fourth, Mahmoud Abbas's resignation as prime minister in 2003 meant that bilateral negotiations were not around the

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[4] The Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics greeted the Jewish New Year in September 2003 by suggesting that the Arab population—combining Israeli Arabs with West Bank and Gaza Palestinians—was approaching parity with the Jewish population. Although the issue of incipient parity has recently been questioned, the demographic issue is still considered serious.

[5] Ehud Olmert, interview by Nahum Barnea in Jerusalem, *Yediot Aharonot* (Tel Aviv), December 2, 2003.

corner, and the U.S. ouster of Saddam Hussein would not spill over in a favorable direction on the Palestinian issue.

After nearly three years of the second intifada, 2003 brought some hope. The more moderate Abbas was the Palestinian prime minister, and many looked to him to lead his people away from the dead-end leadership of Arafat. However, within 130 days, Abbas resigned. Two weeks later, in September 2003, Olmert spoke at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy's annual Weinberg Founders Conference and first suggested that without the prospect of peace talks, Israel would have to move unilaterally.[6] In the same speech, Olmert complained about Palestinian terror, which he noted fed into the antipathy of Likud activists for a two-state solution.[7] In a conversation with this author afterward, Olmert felt time was not on Israel's side.[8]

Olmert made his views on unilateral action explicit in a bombshell Israeli newspaper interview that December.[9] In that interview, he made clear that over the last few years, he changed a worldview that he had developed over his lifetime; Israel needed to make "strategic decisions."

The trigger for that interview was a memorial service a few days earlier. Sharon was scheduled to give the annual speech at the Sde Boker kibbutz gravesite of Israel's iconic founder David Ben-Gurion, but he canceled because of illness and asked Olmert to stand in his stead. Speaking at the gravesite of Ben-Gurion, Olmert declared: "The greatness of Ben-Gurion was his capability not just to lift a vision of generations to the sky but also to limit what was possible to the circumstances of time. This is the dilemma that faces every great leader, whose supreme responsibility for the fate of the nation rests on his shoulders. And thus said Ben Gurion: 'And let's assume that with military means we could conquer all of Western Eretz Yisrael. And I am sure we could. Then what? We'll be one state. But that state will want to be democratic. There will be general elections. And we will be a minority ... when it was a question of all the land without a Jewish state or a Jewish state without all the land we chose a Jewish state without all the land.'"[10]

In 2005, serving as Sharon's deputy, Olmert would become the most vocal cabinet minister for the Gaza disengagement plan, which a large segment of the population hotly opposed. Tellingly, on the eve of the Gaza pullout, Olmert publicly asked posthumous forgiveness from Menachem Begin for voting against the 1978 Camp David accords. "I

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[6] In his remarks at the Washington Institute Weinberg Founders Conference on September 20, 2003, Olmert said: "If things do not start to move, the Bush administration will be busy with other things. And if that happens, there is always room for the State of Israel to take unilateral steps to provide more security and stability. Such measures will be independent of any cooperation or agreement with the Palestinians. They would have good results in terms of security, but would indefinitely delay the chances for a meaningful political dialogue. Therefore, the real choice is between a return to the Roadmap's framework of a decisive war against terror—mostly by the Palestinians—on the one hand, and unilateral Israeli measures to create total separation between Israelis and Palestinians on the other."

[7] Ibid. Olmert declared: "The truth is that the Israeli government never had, and still does not have, the flexibility that some assume it has. This must be recognized. A year ago, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, talking to the Central Committee of the Likud Party, proposed that the Likud agree in principle to the future establishment of a Palestinian state. He was outvoted by a majority in his own party. It is true that he was subsequently reelected to the leadership of the Likud, and then was reelected prime minister. But the majority of the party's delegation in parliament opposes the two-state solution. Recently, the Likud Party held another convention where the prime minister and I found it difficult even to make our presentations. We were booed by the majority of those in attendance because we were representing government policy with regard to the release of prisoners and a possible two-state solution. When we had a cabinet vote on the release of prisoners, the vote was tied. We had to make some last minute changes in order to get a majority. This is not because we have a weak prime minister or a divided government. This is because there is a strong public opinion in Israel—which happens to be a democratic country, something uncommon in the Middle East—that is tired of making compromises that are met only by more terror."

[8] In a private conversation after the session, Olmert said: "Israel cannot wait forever," adding, "it has to move if there is no chance for negotiations." See David Makovsky, "Israel's Unlikely Transformer," *Washington Post*, April 2, 2006.

[9] Ehud Olmert, interview by Nahum Barnea in Jerusalem, *Yediot Aharonot* (Tel Aviv), December 2, 2003.

[10] "Olmert's Bombshell," *Middle East Mirror* (London), December 5, 2003. Of these remarks, Olmert said that when Sharon asked him to speak, he asked the prime minister to fax him his planned remarks. Those remarks were about the need to cede parts of biblical Israel. Olmert thus believed that he had Sharon's political imprimatur, but in the eyes of the Israeli public, it was Olmert who pressed Sharon. David Makovsky, "Israel's Unlikely Transformer," *Washington Post*, April 2, 2006.

voted against Menachem Begin," Olmert said. "I told him it was a historic mistake, how dangerous it would be, and so on and so on. Now I am sorry he is not alive for me to be able to publicly recognize his wisdom and my mistake. He was right and I was wrong. Thank God, we pulled out of Sinai." The implementation of the Gaza disengagement undoubtedly spurred Olmert, who saw that twenty-five settlements located in the Strip and the northern West Bank were evacuated without a single injury to soldier or settler. Moreover, Israeli public support never went below 58 percent despite massive protests by the settlers. The failure of the settlers to halt the Gaza pullout made supporters of West Bank disengagement believe a second pullout was possible.

Two final steps were key in Olmert's rise to power: Sharon's break from the Likud and Hamas's parliamentary victory. The first was the result of a sequence of events initiated by Amir Peretz's victory as head of the Labor Party in November. Peretz pulled Labor out of the government and triggered early elections. Sharon was forced to decide whether he would run as head of the Likud in the new balloting, having just barely beat back a challenge from his rival Netanyahu, who attacked the premier for pressing Gaza disengagement without the support of his party. In mid-November 2005, Sharon decided to break from the Likud Party that he founded in 1973. Secret polling prior to Sharon's decision indicated that a new party led by Sharon would be able to garner approximately thirty-six mandates, and polls immediately after Sharon made his decision public showed the new Kadima Party garnering close to forty mandates and the Likud shattered as it plummeted from forty seats to nine—the greatest fall in Israeli political history. Shimon Peres, who was defeated in the Labor primary by the trade union leader Amir Peretz, joined Sharon, thus bringing together the two figures who defined the poles of Israeli politics over the last three decades. With

Sharon felled by a massive stroke on January 4, 2006, Olmert became the leader of the party. Early polls confounded doubts that the nascent party would survive lacking Sharon's presence and any institutional infrastructure. Nevertheless, given questions of Olmert's gravitas, the policy direction of an unknown party, and a high number of undecided voters, Olmert saw his poll numbers slipping over a several-week period.

In March 2006, Acting Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert stunned the world by making a part of his party's campaign pledge the dismantling of the majority of Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Dubbing his plan "convergence," Olmert outlined a proposal that would see at least 60,000 settlers removed from the majority of the West Bank and resettled into existing West Bank settlement blocs that border the 1967 Green Line.[11] By consolidating West Bank settlers into blocs such as Ariel, Maale Adumim, and Gush Etzion—which Olmert has declared will always remain part of Israel—Olmert has presented a plan that would enable greater contiguity in the West Bank for a Palestinian state and has begun to draw what may become the base for Israel's future borders. Rarely in the annals of Israeli politics are controversial ideas introduced in an election campaign, because they can potentially alienate key swing constituencies. However, Olmert was faced with a dilemma. He both lacked the gravitas of his predecessor Ariel Sharon and had not previously been elected himself as premier. Complicating matters further, his Kadima Party was a new creation. Those factors created a sense of uncertainty in the eyes of the public, as evidenced by the high number of undecided voters reported by pollsters. In that context, Olmert decided to be explicit about his post-election plans.

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[11]   Israeli officials privately suggest that an estimated 7,000 Israelis live in outposts deemed illegal under Israeli law and therefore are not counted in official tallies. However, it is currently unclear how many of these residents are registered as living in officially recognized West Bank settlements and how many are not included in the Interior Ministry's records as living in the West Bank.

Although Olmert's approach may have cost him approximately ten seats in the election itself, it carried both the advantage of clarity and the possibility of being able to preempt those critics who had charged in the past that Yitzhak Rabin, Ehud Barak, or Ariel Sharon had no mandate to make concessions because they did not run on that platform. Olmert views his election as a mandate for future action.

Olmert's and Kadima's subsequent victory are turning points in a number of ways in terms of Israeli public attitudes toward peace and the future of the West Bank. First, at the very moment that Hamas was swept to power while advocating a one-state solution and the elimination of Israel, Israelis firmly endorsed a two-state solution, sidelining any maximalist vision of settlers. The lack of synchronization with the Palestinians should not hide the fact that the victory effectively ends the debate in Israel on the wisdom of at least an ultimate two-state solution. Only the pro-settlers party (National Religious Party/National Union)—holding 9 of the 120 Knesset seats—was elected on an explicitly antiwithdrawal platform. Most of the other parties—holding approximately 70 seats—explicitly endorsed withdrawal and did not rule out unilateral disengagement.

Second, this election marks a new approach of the leading party in Israel having an explicit platform favoring the idea of unilateral disengagement from West Bank territory. Although Kadima did not get as much support in the polls for this idea as expected—winning twenty-nine seats rather than forty—the victory remained a major achievement. Kadima is a party that did not exist until Ariel Sharon broke away from Likud in the fall of 2005. Yet it won the elections despite losing its most recognizable name. (The new Pensioners Party announced at the end of April 2006 that its seven seats would become part of a parliamentary bloc with the twenty-nine-member Kadima, bringing the total Kadima bloc to thirty-six.)

Olmert's Plan

Olmert appears poised to go much further than his predecessors in yielding territory by removing settlements from most of the West Bank without reciprocal Palestinian moves. With Hamas now in power and prospects of partnership appearing bleak, Olmert is making clear that Israel can no longer be held hostage by the irresponsibility of the other side.

Although Olmert's plan for the West Bank bears a resemblance to Sharon's disengagement from Gaza, it does differ in some ways that distinguish it from its predecessor. Unlike Sharon's plan, which moved settlers from Gaza into Israel proper, Olmert plans to consolidate the majority of West Bank settlers in settlement blocs that he hopes to incorporate within Israel's future borders, thus allowing settlers to remain in portions of the West Bank.

OLMERT'S APPROACH

From various public interviews and statements, the following elements of Olmert's unilateralist approach emerge:

- Israel's security barrier is the baseline for new lines, although modifications are possible.[1]

- Settlements that are located on the east, or wrong side, of the barrier, will be evacuated. This move will involve at least 60,000 settlers. Ninety-two percent of the West Bank is located east of the barrier, and the overwhelming majority of the West Bank's Palestinian population lives east of the barrier.

- Israel's security border will run along the Jordan River. Olmert seems to create speculation that he may envisage a narrower Jordan Valley area than that favored by Sharon, an ex-general who recalled eastern front attacks in 1948 and 1967, predating the 1994 peace treaty with Jordan.[2] Israeli military planners today often focus on Route 90, the Jordan Valley's sole north-south axis road just a few kilometers from the river.

- Israel will seek to retain settlement blocs, which—with the exception of Ariel—are adjacent to the pre-1967 Green Line. The blocs are in areas that are inside sections of the barrier that are either already completed or scheduled for completion. An estimated 193,000 settlers lived in those areas at the end of 2005, according to the Israeli Interior Ministry's settler statistics. This area constitutes 8 percent of the West Bank. It does not include East Jerusalem, an area that Israel calculates separately from the West Bank. The main blocs that Olmert seeks are Gush Etzion, located south of Jerusalem; Maale Adumim, located east of Jerusalem; and Ariel, located in the northern West Bank.[3]

- Although Olmert says "undivided" Jerusalem will remain under Israeli sovereignty, he subsequently qualified this statement to define how he envisaged an undivided Jerusalem. This scenario would mean Israeli

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[1]   In a March 10, 2006, interview to *Haaretz* (Tel Aviv), Olmert stated: "I believe that in four years time, Israel will be disengaged from the majority of the Palestinian population, within new borders, and the route of the fence—which until now has served as a security fence—will be adjusted according to the new layout of the permanent borders. There may be cases in which we move the fence east and there may be cases in which we move the fence west, according to the layout that we will agree upon."

[2]   Ibid. Olmert declared, "In any case, our border will run along the Jordan [River]. This is a result of strategic considerations that we cannot give up on." In an interview on Israel Army Radio on March 20, 2006, he said Israel's security border would be the Jordan Valley.

[3]   In the same *Haaretz* March 10 interview, Olmert declared: "The principle that will guide me in this dialogue is withdrawal into the large settlement blocs and thickening these settlement blocs. I do not want to get into their precise definition at present, but everyone knows that Gush Etzion will remain within the State of Israel and that the Ariel bloc will remain within the State of Israel, and that the separation fence around Jerusalem will remain within the State, and Maale Adumim."

control of the Old City and Mount of Olives, sometimes called the Holy Basin, as well as adjacent Palestinian neighborhoods. Olmert made explicitly clear that he would relinquish many Arab neighborhoods that are both inside and on the outskirts of Jerusalem. According to Danny Seideman, a geographic expert on Jerusalem, the net effect would be linking 140,000 of the 240,000 Palestinians in Jerusalem with the Palestinians of the West Bank, while Israel would retain 100,000.[4]

- Olmert seeks negotiation with the United States and the international community to gain support not just for the withdrawal, but also for viewing the areas that Israel will retain as either "recognized borders" or lines that approximate realistic borders.[5]
- With regard to former Shin Bet head Avi Dicter's view that the IDF will maintain a presence in the West Bank,[6] Olmert has commented that he "will keep all military options to be able to combat terrorism effectively everywhere."[7]
- The pullout of settlements will occur by 2010.

TALKS WITH ABBAS?

During the election campaign, Olmert set forth the steps for how he would proceed once elected. He would first seek to negotiate with Palestinian president Abbas, a promise he reinforced by repeating his pledge during his victory speech on election night on March 28.[8] However, if negotiation is not successful, Olmert would move to his unilateral plan of *hitkansut,* or convergence or consolidation, of the settlements. Some have held out hope that Israel could negotiate with Abbas in his capacity as head of the Palestine Liberation Organization. However, as discussed below, a variety of reasons exist for skepticism that this channel alone can produce a deal. At the same time, not to give Abbas an opportunity to provide input that could shape Israel's course would seem unwise. Therefore, even if classic bilateralism is not an option, Israel has ample reason to maintain a "consultative mechanism" with Abbas even within the framework of a unilateral Israeli move. Such a move would dampen Palestinian fears about Israel's intentions and provide them with a vote, even if it is not a veto. Moreover, if Hamas falls from power during the upcoming years and before Israel fully implements its approach, Israel could have time to consider turning unilateralism into a broader bilateral framework.

Nevertheless, four reasons militate against the general axiomatic principle that a bilateral agreement is preferable to unilateral action. First, to pretend that Hamas is not in power is delusional. Hamas and not just Abbas will be pivotal in determining whether a bilateral deal is successful. It seems very unlikely that Hamas would enable Abbas to reach an agreement with Israel or, if it allows him to reach an agreement, whether Hamas will adhere to its implementation. For example, Abbas cannot realistically obligate Hamas to a host of provisions, including those in the field of security, without Hamas's consent. Yet, Hamas has made clear that its policy objective is the destruction of Israel and not an agreement on the 1967 lines with territorial adjustments.

Second, a bilateral negotiation could not be divorced from current security realities. Abbas will want to put security restrictions on

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[4]   Author interview with Seideman in Washington, April 6, 2006.

[5]   In a March 10, 2006, interview with *Yediot Aharonot* (Tel Aviv), Olmert said that after disengagement, "Israel will look different, it will be inside other borders, which even if they are not officially recognized, will receive practical backing from the truly important elements in the world. None of this will entail our conceding any security options."

[6]   On March 5, 2006, Dicter declared: "We have no intention of carrying out a military withdrawal because we don't have a partner that will combat terrorism. The stage of fully transferring West Bank territories (to the Palestinians) will only take place after a Palestinian Authority is established the can prove it will fight terrorism."

[7]   Ehud Olmert, interview by Lally Weymouth, "A Conversation with Ehud Olmert," *Washington Post*, April 9, 2006.

[8]   Ronny Sofer, "Olmert: We Need to Evacuate Jews," Ynet (Tel Aviv), March 29, 2006, available online (www.ynetnews. com/articles/0,7340,L-3233592,00.html).

Israel's freedom of action to deal with terror. However, in the era of Hamas, Israel is likely to want a margin of flexibility to deal with this clear and present challenge. Third, unrelated to Hamas, given the track record of 2005, whether Abbas possesses the leadership to deliver a deal is unclear (plus remaining gaps between Israel and Abbas on final-status positions on whether Palestinian refugees can return to Israel). To Abbas's credit, he is a man who has withstood death threats and remains publicly and privately committed to a two-state solution with Israel, standing in stark contrast to Arafat who viewed violence as the path for Israeli concessions. (Moreover, Abbas won his presidency by a margin larger than Hamas won the parliamentary elections in 2006.) Nonetheless, in 2005 when Abbas wielded sole power, he was often ineffective in translating his moderate intentions into concrete policy, with two exceptions: reaching understandings with Hamas in largely maintaining the de facto ceasefire known as the *tahadiyya* (calm) and ensuring quiet during Israel's pullout from Gaza. Even those achievements were not completely owing to Abbas's own effectiveness, but rather were the result of Hamas's choosing to participate because the actions furthered its own self-interest in the run-up to the Palestinian elections, which had been originally scheduled for July 2005. Hamas did not want to be seen as undermining an Israeli withdrawal, and its pledge for calm helped strengthen its political role and secure the electoral victory.

Other than this calm, Abbas was not able to implement his oft-made pledge to consolidate the competing dozen security services or come up with a plan for postwithdrawal Gaza so it could be an economic success. Instead, Gaza during the second half of 2005 was engulfed in chaos where kidnappings and armed gunmen became regular occurrences. The PA's decision to increase salaries and the number of people on its payroll while sustaining a monthly deficit of almost $60 million resulted in a loss of fiscal authority that was so extreme that the World Bank was forced to halt its regular payments even before the Palestinian election. Abbas blames Israel for a lack of coordination in the run-up to withdrawal, and with some justification, because Sharon was fighting a base within the Likud that was hostile to the very idea of withdrawal. Nonetheless, the international community was keen on helping Abbas translate the withdrawal into tangible gain, and Abbas and the PA were not up to the challenge. Therefore, given the experience of 2005 combined with the Hamas parliamentary victory, skepticism exists in Israel and beyond whether Olmert's pledge to at least attempt bilateralism will be successful, although hope might be revived if the Hamas government resigned. Some argue that Abbas should be put to a test to measure his ability and willingness to reach some kind of deal, while others say the true test is Abbas's success in standing up to Hamas now. Abbas argues that he will put any negotiation to a broader referendum to gain legitimacy for it among all Palestinians. Implicitly, this approach would give Abbas the imprimatur to seek to dismiss the Hamas government after a deal is reached and a referendum is held. If such a test is held, it needs to occur in fairly short order given the time constraints.

TIME IS SHORT

The fourth factor militating against a bilateral deal is the fragility of Israeli governments when it comes to the Palestinian issue. Successive leaders in Israel from the start of the 1990s—Yitzhak Shamir, Yitzhak Rabin, Benjamin Netanyahu, Ehud Barak, and Ariel Sharon—all found their rule either imperiled or ended due to problems in dealing with Palestinians. Olmert's political momentum seems clearly linked to embarking on and concluding a successful political initiative, rather than engaging in trial and error.

Olmert's shift to unilateralism is likely to occur early. Time is in short supply for a variety of reasons. First, given the multiplic-

ity of parties and Israel's electoral system, coalitions do not always last three years, let alone the prescribed four and a half years. The pullout of tens of thousands of settlers is a massive effort, and Olmert's ability to complete the task in this term is far from certain, even if he begins immediately. Second, like most leaders, Israeli prime ministers have the most political momentum in the wake of victory. Stalling on his main agenda is a major political risk for Olmert. During the election campaign, Olmert pledged a domestic dialogue within Israel before he brings a plan to the United States. Whether that pledge will be maintained remains unclear. Third, Olmert has made clear that he will seek the same partnership on withdrawal that Sharon had with the Bush administration. Therefore, Olmert has suggested that he would like to reach understandings with Bush that are on their way to implementation—

even if not completed—before the president leaves office in 2008.[9] Much is at stake for Olmert and Kadima. Failure by Olmert to move on the West Bank pullout and to implement his central campaign promise and the organizing principle of his Kadima Party would entail profound risk for both Olmert and Kadima's political future. Olmert cannot delay his unilateral disengagement plan for too long. This pressure to act does not necessarily preclude the prospect that Olmert and the Palestinians will find it mutually useful to maintain bilateral consultations throughout the process of withdrawal. Even amid a lack of progress, the mere presence of talks has value to a variety of players in easing the perception of unilateralism while essentially proceeding on a unilateral basis. As such, talks could subtly shift from negotiations to coordination about aspects relating to the impending Israeli pullout.

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[9]   Yuval Karni, "Target Date: Withdrawal within Two Years," *Yediot Aharonot* (Tel Aviv), April 10, 2006.

Domestic Challenges to Olmert's Plan

A myriad of challenges will affect Olmert's West Bank disengagement plan, including Palestinian, American, and international reaction, which are dealt with later in a separate section. Several sets of domestic challenges face Olmert in winning support for his plan. They can be divided roughly into four categories, although they are related: durability of the governing coalition, public support, opposition among the pro-settler community, and economic cost of disengagement.

Although Olmert had the advantage of running on his program as the basis of his campaign and no longer has the fractured base that Sharon held in the Likud when dealing with the Gaza pullout, he has other disadvantages. First, areas in the West Bank that are to be evacuated have religious resonance, whereas Gaza, in contrast, was generally seen as a liability by most Israelis. Places like Beit El and Shilo are mentioned prominently in the Bible and therefore may arouse more passion. Second, the number of settlers to be evacuated is at least in the range of 60,000, whereas the number removed from Gaza and the northern West Bank reached no more than 9,000. Third, Olmert will not have the two attributes that Sharon possessed, and their lack could make for a harder road ahead: gravitas in dealing with issues such as security and credibility as the former architect of the settlement movement that gave Sharon special standing in saying that he must evacuate the settlements. Olmert is counting on the fact that since Sharon broke the taboo in dismantling settlements, Olmert will find it easier to invoke Sharon's action and continue the effort.

DURABILITY OF THE ISRAELI COALITION

The March 2006 election has seen a shift from support for religious right-wing parties from 69 to 50 seats, which is a drop of over 25 per-cent. The center-left parties constitute the remaining 70 seats in the 120-member Knesset. (The new seven-member Pensioners Party is counted in this last total because it has made clear that it would support disengagement if its social welfare demands are met.) This new balance of power is a major shift in Israeli politics and appears to be the largest proportion of seats for center-left parties since the 1977 shift from Labor to Likud. With this base of 70, Olmert hopes that he will have the means to implement disengagement.

Three precedents in the last eleven years suggest that the coalition that governs is not always the same coalition that makes historic decisions. After the Oslo Accords were signed in the White House in 1993, the religious Shas Party formally left the coalition but initially refused to submit a no-confidence vote against the Rabin government. This disinclination enabled the Rabin government to survive, even if it barely did so with the passage of the Oslo II agreement in 1995 and a last-minute switch by a backbencher from the opposition. The National Religious Party and a religious immigrant party also abandoned the Barak government on the eve of the fateful Camp David summit in 2000. Because no agreement was ever reached there, how it would have passed the Knesset remains unclear. In 2004 and 2005, parties abandoned Sharon's coalition when he announced his plans to pull out of Gaza at the very time he was facing major opposition within his own party. Sharon reconfigured his government, brought in Labor, and relied on the opposition's Meretz Party to help win Knesset passage. Whatever coalition Olmert now configures involving members of the religious right, he knows that seventy members—whether in the government or opposition—must not let such a key vote fail. The issue is somewhat complicated. Olmert may prefer not to rely on the ten Arab parlia-

mentarians' votes, given the sensitivity of withdrawing from lands that Israeli Jews view as biblical patrimony. Pressure could be put on Olmert to have sixty-one Jewish votes in the Knesset. At present he has only sixty.

ISRAELI PUBLIC OPINION

Although the coalition looks rather durable, Israeli public support will remain dependent on other factors, such as Olmert's leadership, perceptions of the effect of withdrawal on security, and international backing. An unknown factor will be whether intense settler opposition will sway the public. When it came to the Gaza withdrawal, massive and sustained settler protests that lasted for a year did not cause public support for Sharon's plan to drop below 58 percent. Given the factors previously mentioned, ranging from the number of settlers likely to be affected to the historic significance of the West Bank locations, whether the same results will apply this time is unclear.

Other factors are more evident in shaping public opinion. First, Olmert's leadership will be key. Filling Sharon's shoes will not be easy, even if one sees the election of a civilian to grapple with national security issues as a sign of maturity on the part of the Israeli electorate. Some wonder whether he will seek to establish his credentials on security by making tough, and perhaps even harsh, retaliatory strikes in the wake of terror attacks. Moreover, Olmert will need to demonstrate a threshold of competence on day-to-day issues of governance to win support of the public. Second, although some analysts expect that, in order to consolidate its authority and win support, Hamas will have no interest in launching sustained terror attacks when Israel withdraws, no guarantee exists that PIJ or the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades will refrain. The lack of attacks in the wake of the Hamas victory ensured there was no surge for right-wing Israeli parties on the eve of the Israeli election. Contrary to the view of critics who argue that a surge of attacks is likely to soften Israel, if the past is a guide, attacks bolster right-wing

critics of a government seeking to make territorial concessions—it is what led to Labor's defeats in 1996 and 2001. Therefore, so long as Hamas is in power and Israel has not ended the firing of Qassam rockets from northern Gaza, it is distinctly possible the IDF will continue patrols throughout the West Bank. This approach could rob critics, who are likely to insist that withdrawal of settlers bolsters Islamist militancy, of a key claim. With the IDF patrolling and Israel's security barrier in place, the prospect is less likely that this claim will gain prominence, and it will limit the prospect of Hamas rocket attacks against Israeli urban areas. This question about whether the IDF will or will not remain in the West Bank after the withdrawal of civilians is one of the biggest unknown variables. It may be a function of the security situation, the continued presence of Hamas, and whether Olmert will have an incentive to pull the IDF out if he is unable to obtain the international legal recognition that he seeks.

If Olmert decides to withdraw the military from the West Bank, he will need to convince the Israeli public that the outcome will be different from the Gaza disengagement. Although the PA now officially controls 100 percent of Gaza territory and the Gaza-Egypt border, chaos and anarchy have been the rule and Hamas has filled the power void. Terror attacks on Israel have not stopped, and Israel is plagued with daily Qassam rocket attacks from Gaza—more than 500 rockets have been fired since disengagement. Israel is in even more danger now because the rockets can be fired from northern parts of the Strip that were previously restricted and can threaten cities such as Ashkelon and key strategic facilities. Additionally, the Gaza-Egypt border is poorly run and porous, allowing weapons to be smuggled into Gaza for the purpose of attacks on Israel. Olmert must be able to confront the public belief that withdrawal from Gaza has not made Israel more secure; to the contrary, it has increased Israel's security threats and may have helped Hamas in the elections. Olmert

must convince the public that withdrawal from large portions of the West Bank will not result in Qassam rockets being fired on Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. (Even if Olmert retains the IDF in the West Bank to conduct patrols, he and Defense Minister Amir Peretz—the Negev-based Labor leader whose campaign was premised on alleviating the neglect of the poor—will very possibly relocate IDF bases to the Negev in order to spur assistance to Israeli "development towns," urban areas in geographically peripheral areas that have often been neglected throughout Israel's history.)

Another likely component shaping Israeli public support is whether Olmert can achieve U.S. and international acquiescence, if not outright support, for the settlement blocs—which, except for Ariel, are adjacent to the Green Line. The parameters of this issue will be spelled out later, but a major international achievement is politically important for Olmert. The fact that an estimated 193,000 settlers can remain in their homes will enable Olmert to demonstrate to his public that he secured the Sharon vision of keeping the settlement blocs at least a de facto part of Israel and that it is a prize worthy of the difficult price of withdrawal that Israel must undertake. If he succeeds in keeping the settlement blocs, Olmert's critics will not be able to claim that Israel yielded something for nothing. (The question for Olmert is whether his push for defining the line of withdrawal along the settlement blocs now will force him sooner rather than later to address the security and legal or extra-territorial status of the Jordan Valley frontier, and to reach a broad understanding about this topic with Jordan's King Abdullah. However, these issues and their implications on how to make Israel's borders secure need to be subjects of a separate study.)

EXTENT AND INTENSITY OF SETTLER OPPOSITION

The third factor in the Israeli domestic political context that could be important is the ex-

tent and intensity of opposition among the settlers and their sympathizers. As noted previously, this factor ultimately did not play a decisive role when it came to Israeli public support for the Gaza withdrawal. The West Bank may be different, however, given the areas of biblical resonance and the fact that many more settlers will be affected. There are approximately 72 settlements east of the barrier. Two of these settlements—Beit El and Qiryat Arba—have populations of over 5,000. In addition to their biblical significance, these settlements and Ofra, another major settlement east of the barrier, are the home of the settler national leadership. (Additionally, the issue of 400 Jews living in Hebron is an extremely sensitive topic and ideas need to be explored whereby decisions on this population's future could be postponed until final status negotiations with the Palestinians.)

The massive settler protest in early 2006 over the Amona outpost—illegal under Israeli law—that turned violent was the settlers' shot across the bow. Because the Gaza pullout occurred without any violent clashes, the settlers seemed to fear their move would be interpreted as weakness and thereby invite further disengagements in the West Bank.[1] The tough response by the Israeli police to the protesters is interpreted as a need by Olmert, who became acting premier just before in the wake of Sharon's stroke, to be firm with the settlers whom he felt were testing him. Sixty-seven people were hospitalized after the fracas. (Interestingly, while Sharon tended to bathe the settlers with words of admiration, Olmert dispensed with this blandishment and called the residents of Amona "law-breakers."[2]) It remains

[1] Herb Keinon, "Olmert Takes Tough Stance against Settlers. Yesha Council: Declaration of War," *Jerusalem Post*, January 19, 2006. "Olmert has declared war on United States," settler leaders said in a media release on Wednesday. "We suggest that Olmert first learn something about this complicated subject before he goes on the war path" said the Council of Jewish Communities of Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip. "We urge Olmert not to listen to the evil advice he is getting from his advisers."

[2] Tal Rosner, "Olmert: Clear Illegal Outposts," Ynet, January 18, 2006, available online (www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3202368,00.html).

unclear whether Olmert's indication to the Labor Party in post-election coalition negotiations that he intends to dismantle dozens of such illegal outposts will trigger a political war of attrition with the settlers and therefore slow Olmert's political momentum toward his wider objective.

The settlers know they are faced with a tough decision. They may feel that they were too easy when it came to being evacuated from Gaza, but at the same time, shooting IDF soldiers is not an option for the majority of them. Although extreme action cannot be completely ruled out, the majority of settlers are unlikely to resort to deadly violence. First, they believe it is religiously impermissible to shoot a fellow Jew, and second, they realize that doing so would be political suicide because the public would never tolerate it. The IDF remains a citizens' army with military conscripts coming from across Israel, and for all its problems, it is still sacrosanct. Moreover, the rabbinic leadership of the settlement and religious Zionism movement demonstrated in the run-up to and the wake of Gaza withdrawal that it was appalled by those settlers who viewed Gaza withdrawal as triggering separatism from Israel and from the Zionist enterprise by joining the more ghettoized ultra-orthodox. Religious Zionism's ideology is predicated on influencing and interacting with the broader public; therefore, it cannot afford a separatist approach. One cannot rule out future Amonas or that the settlers will focus on the religious significance of places evacuated and thus seek to raise the temperature in the country, as well as make the nonreligious argument that unilateral withdrawal only encourages the rise of Hamas. Yet, since the Gaza pullout, the settlers have come to believe that they do not have public opinion on their side. This recognition is a major change from the past and evident when the leader of the Yesha settlers' council said that he thought Olmert viewed a tough hand in dealing with Amona as being politically expe-

dient in an election campaign.[3] This changing self-image needs to be factored into how one anticipates the settlers' public relations campaign.

Three elements could be critical for Olmert in thwarting this charge by the settlers and their sympathizers. First, Israel may consider applying the same Knesset legislation that existed in the run-up to Gaza withdrawal, providing automatic compensation for voluntary exit for settlers slated to be evacuated. If, as polls indicate, half of the settlers on the wrong side of the barrier are prepared to leave if they are properly compensated, this legislation could significantly narrow the range of confrontation with the estimated 60,000 settlers. It will not eliminate the problem given the ideological predisposition of those who chose to live in more remote settlements and would be evacuated, but halving it would be important. Israel should consider increasing compensation for those who choose to leave on their own accord before being evacuated.

Second, obtaining an explicit quid pro quo from the United States before withdrawal that settlers in the blocs can remain there would be politically important for Olmert. Beyond the importance for the Israeli public at large, it could demonstrate the cleavages among the settlers, proving that the movement is not monolithic but rather comprises subgroups with different interests. If handled correctly, the bloc settlers could see Olmert's plan as the best hope for broader support of their long-term status. This recognition would deprive the nonbloc settlers of the intense support of a potential key ally. Third, Israel needs to learn the lessons from the Gaza pullout in how it relocates settlers, especially because relocation will be a much larger endeavor when it comes to West Bank settlers. Undoubtedly, the task surrounding the Gaza pullout was exacerbated by the refusal of many settlers to

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[3]   "Clashes Erupt as Israeli Police Clear Settlers," Agence France Presse, February 1, 2006. "Olmert's decision (to evacuate Amona) was clearly a political one which only serves to divide the people," Bentzi Lieberman, head of the Yesha settlers' council, told AFP.

deal with the Disengagement Administration, believing such a move created de facto legitimacy for the withdrawal. Nonetheless, the Israeli Comptroller-General sharply criticized the government for its woefully inadequate handling of the endeavor, and this criticism is used by the settlers to assert that further withdrawal is not practical.[4] The need to handle the withdrawal better than was done in Gaza suggests that Israel will require much more lead time, resources, and planning when it comes to the West Bank. Olmert needs to establish a Convergence Administration immediately in order to properly plan for such a major move. Housing solutions must be found before settlements are evacuated, especially if settlers are to be relocated in existing settlement blocs. It also suggests that disengagement from the West Bank will take years.

ECONOMIC COSTS OF WEST BANK DISENGAGEMENT

The cost of disengagement from the West Bank is likely to be very high even if it is spread over a number of years. In an April 2006 interview, Israel's top central banker and former senior official at the International Monetary Fund, Stanley Fischer, said he thought it was possible that a West Bank disengagement envisaged by Olmert could cost $25 billion. Others say the figure is in the $10 billion to $20 billion range.[5] The Gaza disengagement is estimated to have cost $2 billion to $3 billion, including compensation amounts provided to 9,000 Gaza and northern West Bank settlers, relocation costs, military redeployment, and the like. If one assumes that a West Bank pullout involves eight times the number of people as in Gaza, the figure comes to $24 billion.

Olmert will face domestic criticism that even the estimated $1 billion aid to help defray the cost of the Gaza pullout was not considered in the United States because of Hurricane Katrina, and U.S. opposition to the settlement enterprise has been known since it began in the late 1960s. Nonetheless, the international community has just as consistently favored Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank, so it is likely to find a way to be helpful in terms of grants, loans, or loan guarantees. When faced with past pullouts, the United States has been helpful in providing assistance in the military redeployment dimension. Olmert hinted to the *Washington Post* that he would approach the United States on that issue.[6] Although compensation for settlers relocating inside the Green Line may run against longtime U.S. opposition to settlements, removal of settlements has also been a U.S. priority. Creative ideas should be explored, including a suggestion by a wealthy Gulf Arab figure in the summer of 2005 who was considering buying Gaza settlements from the Israelis to house Palestinian refugees and other Palestinians upon Israel's exit. In general, the United States and Israel need to create a bilateral channel to discuss how to defray the costs as well as the many different aspects of West Bank disengagement.

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[4]   "Israel Failed Settlers in Gaza," BBC News, March 8, 2006. Israel's Comptroller-General Michael Lindenstrauss said, "Severe failures have been found in the preparation of the different bodies to absorb the evacuees, which both harmed the way they were handled and caused unnecessary suffering in a process that was in any case extremely emotionally charged and painful."

   "The failures in preparation, in budgetary allocations, in the recruitment of essential manpower for the Disengagement Administration and in the absorption of the evacuees in the local authorities were not caused, mostly, by lack of suitable laws and procedures, but by foot-dragging in the activities of the responsible bodies." The comptroller found that the Disengagement Administration had "a highly limited number of employees"—just 17 workers—four months before the withdrawal.

[5]   Stanley Fischer, interview by Sever Plotzker, *Yediot Aharonot* (Tel Aviv), April 7, 2006.

[6]   Lally Weymouth, "A Conversation with Ehud Olmert," *Washington Post*, April 9, 2006.

Implications for the Palestinians

No one should expect the Palestinians to embrace a unilateral Israeli move. If the past is a guide, any Israeli move is likely to be greeted with suspicion at best and more likely with outright hostility. This approach is likely to express itself in two ways. First, Palestinians will be unwilling to view an Israeli withdrawal, even including the military, as constituting the basis for the second phase of the Roadmap, namely the establishment of a state with provisional borders. Even non-Hamas Palestinians have viewed this second phase as a trap that will cause the world to abandon their remaining grievances: East Jerusalem and the return of refugees to Israel and not just to Palestine. The international community will be hard pressed to call the area a state, if it is against the wishes of the Palestinians. They are likely to use this opposition to ensure that the Arabs, Europeans, and perhaps the United States not recognize the Israeli move. The second expression of Palestinian opposition could come in the form of violence. Even if Palestinians judge that their self-interest is not served by torpedoing Israel's decision to leave most of the West Bank settlements, as was the case with Gaza, when dire predictions running up to the move in the summer of 2005 did not occur, violence could occur after the West Bank disengagement has already taken place. The launching of Qassem rockets from northern Gaza after the Israeli pullout exemplifies this possibility. The reasons are multiple.

First, Palestinians see any Israeli presence in the West Bank as illegitimate; therefore, Israeli removal is viewed as a Palestinian entitlement. No Israeli concession in the West Bank is likely to be large enough to satisfy the Palestinians. Instead of focusing on seeing the cup 92 percent full, the Palestinians are more likely to view it as being 8 percent empty. In the Palestinian view, piecemeal approaches

may lead the world to forget the unresolved questions. In the Israeli view, final status is desirable, but it is not feasible with Hamas in power.

Second, Palestinians are likely to view a unilateral drawing of the line by Israel as an issue of principle they cannot accept. They will not want Israel to write the rules even if the new lines are very comparable to the lines that Bill Clinton favored at the end of his presidency. Therefore, they will vow not to acquiesce to Israeli control of settlement blocs in the remaining 8 percent of the West Bank.

Third, Palestinians will view the move as a preemptive means to avoid dealing with difficult final status issues such as control of religious sites in Jerusalem, even if Olmert makes territorial concessions in the city. Palestinians will likely view the "liberation" of Jerusalem as both a nationalist and a religious rallying cry. Even if Hamas allows a West Bank disengagement to take its course, Israel must realize that terrorism will not end. Leading Arab officials in Egypt and Jordan say that as long as the status of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif is not resolved, Hamas and other like-minded groups will find a rallying cry for more attacks.[1] Therefore, if Israel expects that West Bank disengagement will end the prospects of terror, it is probably mistaken. (The same could be true even if a successful bilateral treaty were reached.) Senior former security officials and Kadima senior aide Avi Dicter have articulated this expectation of future terror attacks, with the latter publicly insisting the IDF must continue patrolling the area to ensure that Hamas does not launch rocket attacks against Israeli urban areas. So long as the IDF remains in the West Bank,

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[1] This author interviewed Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit in Cairo on January 3, 2006, as well as in sessions in Amman, Jordan, on January 4, 2006, with Jordanian Prime Minister Marouf Bahit and Foreign Minister Abdelelah Khatib.

Israel will not have to worry about final status security arrangements. These will only be agreed on when a final status deal is reached involving the Jerusalem holy sites and the refugee issue.

Fourth, if the IDF remains, it will provoke a negative Palestinian reaction. Instead of focusing on what will surely be a lighter Israeli presence because the IDF will not have to protect the settlers, the Palestinians will focus their ire on continuing IDF patrols and continued Israeli control of international borders. They will also claim that this arrangement does not solve economic access issues between Gaza and the West Bank.

Fifth, this sense of Palestinian grievance is exacerbated by a Hamas government that views Israel's very existence as illegitimate. Inevitably, despite Israel's move to evacuate settlements in most of the West Bank, this disengagement will be ensnared in the overall negative dynamic with Israel, where suicide bombings could trigger Israeli retaliation that Hamas will define as "aggression." The new prime minister of the PA and leader of Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh, has rejected the idea of unilateral disengagement, not because it is unilateral, but because he deems it insufficient. Given Hamas's call for Israel's destruction, what would be a sufficient withdrawal for Haniyeh remains unclear. Hamas has declared that if Israel would return to the 1967 ceasefire lines and would enable all Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and not just to a West Bank/Gaza state of Palestine, the best Israel could hope for is a long-term truce, not peace. Yet the international community believes that flooding Israel with refugees would be tantamount to the destruction of Israel. Thus, Hamas's minimum immediate demands and Israel's maximum concessions do not converge.

Sixth, Palestinian domestic considerations could be exacerbating factors. The poisonous rivalry between Hamas and Fatah could play itself out by having their respective militant groups, such as the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Bri-

gades and the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, as well as PIJ, competing to see which could launch more attacks against a mutual enemy—Israel. This deadly rivalry occurred in 2000 before the second intifada, and it endured during that intifada when the groups sometimes worked together and sometimes competed. Those groups see no inconsistency in simultaneously viewing the unilateral move by Israel as a "conspiracy" to maintain adjacent settlement blocs and seeing a major Israeli withdrawal of settlements as a victory that should be chalked up to the forces of "resistance." As such, they will point to an Israeli pullout as a vindication for using suicide bombings, despite ample evidence to the contrary. For example, Israel wanted to yield Gaza at the first Camp David summit in 1978 and at the second one in 2000. Nevertheless, those groups will insist it was their "resistance operations" that modified Israel's policy toward willingness to yield Gaza in 2005. Therefore, Israel must assume that, driven by enduring grievance and proof that their tactics are successful, Palestinians may put unilateralism under fire, or, even if the Palestinians hold fire until later, terror will not abate with the civilian pullout on the other side of the security barrier.

CONVERGENCES ON THE ROAD TO DISENGAGEMENT?
Palestinian skepticism of Israeli intentions, which has long characterized Palestinian attitudes toward Israel, does not necessarily mean the Palestinians will seek to prevent Olmert from implementing the Convergence Plan and instead maintaining the status quo. The Palestinians can recognize its benefits.

Ironically, since neither Hamas nor Israel seeks to negotiate with the other, unilateralism would ostensibly be less problematic for Hamas than it would be for the PA. In fact, one can imagine Hamas tacitly welcoming such a pullout because it would reduce the number of settlers without requiring a quid pro quo concession from Hamas. Moreover,

disengagement could provide Hamas with the quiet that it seeks to consolidate its authority during the few years when disengagement would be implemented. Furthermore, fear that Gaza disengagement would occur under fire did not materialize; no Palestinian faction wanted to be blamed for halting the withdrawal of settlers. Both scenarios need to be considered when it comes to West Bank disengagement—nonviolence and violence. For example, although Hamas may find quiet to be in its interest, it has also made clear that it should not be counted on to restrain others, such as PIJ or the Fatah al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. Therefore, Israel may have to consider the prospect that West Bank disengagement will occur under fire.

TANGIBLE BENEFITS FOR THE PALESTINIANS

A pullout of settlers and possible redeployment of the military would provide very tangible benefits. First, the move will lay the groundwork for a two-state outcome, even if it is not yet a two-state solution. If Israel is to withdraw settlers from close to 92 percent of the West Bank—very close to the Clinton parameters of 95 percent of the land—the basis of a two-state outcome is evident. The debate over the West Bank has profoundly changed in the last few years. Until a few years ago, many wondered whether Israel sought "Bantustans" in the West Bank, as critics claimed in the past when they expected Sharon to yield only half of the West Bank. However, with Israel deploying a security barrier over just 8 percent of the West Bank, suddenly most fair observers would admit that the

debate has indeed shifted and the Bantustan allegation has become obsolete.

Another benefit will be more Palestinian mobility. Even if the IDF continues patrols, it probably will not maintain its current deployment of fixed bases. The IDF deployment will be lighter than in the past because the army will not have to safeguard tens of thousands of settlers. The Palestinians should be able to feel the difference. In operational terms, this scenario would provide contiguity for the Palestinians, enabling them and their security services to enjoy mobility and travel—barring emergency—unimpeded along the major north-south spinal road of the West Bank, Route 60, where the IDF routinely has checkpoints as a precaution. If the IDF withdraws east of the barrier, the pullout will provide the Palestinians with key contiguity. If the IDF does not pullout, the civilian evacuation at least lays the groundwork for a contiguous two-state outcome.

Third, the Palestinians have always viewed the settlers in the harshest of terms, blaming them for issues relating to land and water. Those settlers who live east of the security barrier have often been among the most religiously ideological. Therefore, their removal could eliminate some friction between the two societies. Nevertheless, the Palestinians would be gravely mistaken if they viewed the move as the start of the dismantling of Zionism or even the phased removal of the 193,000 settlers inside the barrier. Olmert sees himself as a pragmatist who seeks to strengthen Israel, not as someone who is seeking what he would consider to be an Israeli surrender.

Implications for U.S. Policy and the International Community

Undoubtedly, the international community, and especially the United States, will be important in making Olmert's plan something that wins broad support and creates greater stability rather than instability. The international community and the United States will want to know how Olmert's unilateralism will lead to Israeli-Palestinian mutuality and two-state coexistence.

WHITHER THE ROADMAP?
With the election of a Hamas government in the Palestinian territories and an Olmert government in Israel, both sides prefer unilateralism. Of course, their outlooks differ. Israel does not see bilateralism as politically feasible with Hamas in power, and Hamas does not see bilateralism as being desirable because it seeks Israel's elimination. Within this political context, it is hard to envision the Roadmap as providing a meaningful framework. Some would argue that the Roadmap cannot die because it was never truly born—given that it was not negotiated between the parties. Regardless, the international community might need to envision a new framework for the future. Nevertheless, the principle of trans-Atlantic unity among the Quartet members—the United States, Europe, Russia, and the United Nations—does have value because it seeks to ensure that international actors are not played against each other. The Quartet, which is the consultative body that gave birth to the Roadmap, has created certain baseline international understandings. The emergence of further understandings would be useful in this period of West Bank disengagement.

In the immediate aftermath of the Kadima election, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was careful not to rule out unilateralism, even if the international community's preference has been bilateralism. Rice made clear that the U.S. position on bilateralism was premised upon the principle of partnership, which is now in serious doubt because Hamas refuses to accept Israel's existence. When asked about unilateralism, Rice replied: "I would note that if you're going to have a negotiation though, you have to have partners. And the Palestinian government that has just been sworn in does not accept the concept of a negotiated solution. What they say is that they retain the right to violence; they do not accept that the other party is actually legitimate or even has the right to exist. On that basis with that government, it's going to be hard to imagine a negotiation. So that's the reason that I think you're getting so much from both the Quartet and from many of the Arab states that there needs to be a recognition by the new Palestinian government that negotiation requires two parties and it usually requires you to recognize the right to exist of the other party as well as the primacy of negotiation and not to support violence."[1]

POTENTIAL ISRAELI REQUEST FROM THE UNITED STATES AND LEARNING THE LESSONS OF GAZA
Judging from statements made by Olmert both in the run-up to the election and in its aftermath, he clearly seeks understandings with the Bush administration. In his first interview with a non-Israeli publication since his election, Olmert told the *Washington Post:* "If we [come to] share the conviction that the Palestinians are not ready for genuine and meaningful negotiations, then I will try to reach an

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[1] Remarks made by Rice to reporters en route to Berlin, Germany, March 29, 2006; available online (www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/63836.htm).

understanding with the administration as to what steps Israel should take—what should be the border of Israel in order to reduce the level of confrontation between United States and the Palestinians to a minimum."[2]

It is safe to say that U.S.-Israeli consultation is at the foundation of Olmert's disengagement approach. After all, his predecessor Sharon saw it as vital to his decision to implement a Gaza withdrawal and engaged in many rounds of consultations with the Bush administration in the run-up to the August 2005 pullout.

For Olmert, the United States is even more important than it was for Sharon, because Olmert's objective is more ambitious. He will seek to make clear that the scope of withdrawal and recognition are linked. Olmert is likely to raise the following issues with the United States: (1) Israel is likely to want American guarantees on the demilitarization of any territory evacuated by the Israeli military. If this outcome is not feasible, pullout is likely to be of a purely civilian nature. (2) Olmert will want help to defray the expenses of a withdrawal, which will reportedly cost at least $10 billion and perhaps more that will be expended over a multiyear period. (3) A very tough challenge for Olmert will be his desire to have the United States garner recognition for a recognized border while other outstanding issues with the Palestinians remain, such as Jerusalem and refugees.

Sharon did not campaign for international recognition of a Gaza border even though Israel's withdrawal was total: both military and civilian, including entrance to Gaza from Egypt that is not under Israeli control. The situation in the West Bank is far more complex because Israel will not be fully evacuating the entire territory. Critics will charge that Israel's pullout is a stealth attempt to annex the remainder of the land. Some will seek baseline understandings about Israel's inten-

tions for the land from which Israel evacuates and the land it retains. Not only the critics may seek this assurance; Olmert himself has made clear that he wants recognition of Israel's new border for political as well as legal reasons. As noted previously, Olmert seeks to demonstrate to his public that although Israel is yielding the vast majority of the West Bank, where a minority of settlers lives, the United States and the international community will accept that Israel is retaining the settlement blocs adjacent to the pre-1967 boundaries. Olmert views this recognition not only as a political dividend but also as providing him with the political backing needed in the Knesset and the public to carry out the mammoth task of evacuating at least 60,000 settlers against their will, many of whom believe the move is as religiously impermissible as it is politically unwise. In other words, Israel will be betraying religious patrimony without even having an agreement to point to as the prize for the price it is paying. Moreover, the financial cost of evacuation is very high. Without U.S. diplomatic and economic assistance, no convergence plan can exist. In short, the U.S. dimension is absolutely vital for Olmert.

Nevertheless, the Gaza disengagement precedent is not encouraging for Olmert on two fronts. First, prospects for recognition by the international community look bleak. Even though Israel has lost control of the Egypt-Gaza border in the wake of the Gaza pullout, Israel did not obtain a UN Security Council resolution verifying an Israeli exit in keeping with UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338; indeed, Israel never asked for such a resolution partly because it feared the 100 percent withdrawal in Gaza could set a precedent for 100 percent withdrawal in the West Bank. But even if Israel would have asked, it is most likely that recognition of the pullout as a fulfillment of Resolution 242 would not have been forthcoming. The international community would have been sympa-

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[2]   Lally Weymouth, "A Conversation with Ehud Olmert," *Washington Post*, April 9, 2006.

thetic to Palestinian concerns that so long as the sea coast and airspace are controlled by Israel, it is not acceptable to them. This argument is most likely to repeat itself now, when it comes to a unilateral move in the West Bank. The inability of the international community to find such a compromise formula dramatically drives down Israel's incentive to remove the IDF from all areas evacuated by settlers. If Israel is going to be deemed responsible for the future welfare of the Palestinian public by the international community, it has no incentive to incur any further risk. It is not far-fetched to say that, if the international community does not find a way to acknowledge the far-reaching nature of Olmert's move, it guarantees that the IDF will remain east of the security barrier indefinitely.

ALTERNATIVE U.S. RESPONSES

The United States and Israel must have an honest, ongoing, intimate, and wide-ranging bilateral mechanism to discuss the Convergence Plan. Someone in the U.S. government must have responsibility for such coordination, who will deal authoritatively on this issue after decisions are made at the highest levels of the U.S. and Israeli governments. When faced with Olmert's demands, the United States is likely to have two sets of responses: both procedural and substantive.

On the procedural level, the United States may ask Olmert to soften the unilateral conceptual contours of the plan. One such aspect, as previously mentioned, might be the establishment of a parallel informal or formal consultative mechanism with Abbas so the Palestinian leader can have input into the plan. Such a mechanism would not give the Palestinians a veto over Israeli actions, but it will enable them to have a voice in seeking to shape its outcome. In the consultative mechanism, for example, the parties can explore whether declaring a Palestinian state in areas that Israel chooses to evacuate is desirable or

feasible. They can also discuss an array of security and economic access issues inside the West Bank or between the West Bank and Gaza in the event no terrorism occurs. At the same time, the United States would seek to informally consult with Abbas on this issue, as well.

On the issue of recognition, the United States has different alternatives. First, some background is required. In his June 24, 2002, speech on the Middle East, Bush said that the United States supports Israel's quest for "secure and recognized borders." Moreover, on April 14, 2004, Bush sent Sharon a public letter that stated, "In light of new realities on the ground, including already existing major Israeli populations centers, it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949, and all previous efforts to negotiate a two-state solution have reached the same conclusion. It is realistic to expect that any final status agreement will only be achieved on the basis of mutually agreed changes that reflect these realities."[3] On May 26, 2005, however, Bush seemed to vitiate this commitment to Sharon. Standing alongside Mahmoud Abbas in the Rose Garden at the White House, Bush declared: "Any final status agreement must be reached between the two parties, and changes to the 1949 Armistice lines must be mutually agreed to."[4] The first statement says it is "unrealistic" for Israel to return to the pre-1967 lines (or 1949 armistice lines—small but not meaningful differences exist between the two terms) while the May 26 statement says that the Palestinians have a veto, since the lines must be "mutually agreed to."

In short, the United States will be torn. On one hand, the United States keenly understands

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3 Letter of President George W. Bush to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, April 14, 2004; available online (www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/04/20040414-3.html).

4 Statement of President George W. Bush in the Rose Garden, May 26, 2005; available online (www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/05/20050526.html).

what Olmert proposes is a historic undertaking for Israel that incurs significant political risk, especially when the prospects of negotiation with Hamas are not realistic and the alternatives could be either protracted stalemate or protracted violence. On the other hand, the United States will be concerned that any declaration by it will not be supported by European allies. Failure to provide Olmert with the imprimatur he seeks could jeopardize the massive withdrawal of settlers and open the door to unsavory options. But providing Olmert with a pronouncement that will be subsequently undercut, as happened in 2005, would be viewed as counterproductive and cynical.

The United States has a few options. According to one option, Bush will view an Israeli military withdrawal as very important, and it is consistent with both his June 24 and April 14 letters. The latter makes clear that the armistice line of 1949 or the pre-1967 lines are no longer realistic. In this sense, he could fulfill his own written commitment to Sharon to support the idea of "Jewish population centers" by recognizing the settlement blocs as Israeli. Therefore, he could say the United States recognizes the new border as a permanent border that fulfills UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338. As such, he will be renouncing his May 2005 remarks to Abbas. Nevertheless, in the final months of his second presidential term, it is possible that Bush may decide to undo the May 25 statement and thereby leave his personal imprint on the map of the Middle East and the course of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Critics will charge that the United States cannot recognize a unilaterally declared border, and the Europeans will almost certainly not recognize it either. According to these critics, if Israel wants American backing for an Israeli presence along the Jordan Valley or for the annexation of settlement blocs, this weight can only come to bear in a final status situation where all issues are on the table, including Jerusalem and refugees.

Interestingly, whether or not the United States recognizes this, a practical discussion at the highest levels of the U.S. and Israeli governments will inevitably occur early in Olmert's tenure because Israel is seeking to complete its security barrier. At each step since 2003 when the United States blessed the route and made alternative changes which the Israeli cabinet would adopt, Israel and the United States have held quiet talks between Rice and Sharon envoy Dov Weisglass regarding the barrier's route. Left unresolved for now is the scope of the Maale Adumim and Ariel blocs. Israel says it would like to complete the barrier by the end of 2006, possibly early 2007. However, it is impossible to come even close to meeting those deadlines without a bilateral meeting of the minds on these two zones.

A second option is that Bush announces that the United States sees Israel's move as very close to fulfilling Resolutions 242 and 338. In this scenario, the blocs may not be recognized outright, but rather Israel will seek wider acquiescence that the specific blocs will be Israeli and therefore Olmert can relocate at least some of the nonbloc settlers inside the blocs.

A third option also exists. Although Olmert's boldness may have tested the political limits of the Israeli consensus and therefore nothing more can be asked from him at this time, the United States could put forward a position of its own. Although the United States could support the expansion of Israeli territory without compensation to Palestinians, as noted above, Washington could also recognize Israel's move to incorporate settlement blocs beyond the 1967 ceasefire line in the context of a promise by Israel to compensate the Palestinians with territorial concessions from pre-1967 Israel. A commitment to land swaps could serve Israeli interests by regularizing the status of the nearly 193,000 West Bank settlers currently living in the blocs, while serving eventual Palestinian interests by

signaling the ultimate contours of a final status deal in the future.

Advocates of this option will view it as useful in attracting European support—or at least deterring European mischief. Everyone knows that Israel will have its hands full in evacuating more than 60,000 settlers, and believing that Israel will then evacuate another 193,000 is not realistic. Israel wants clear territorial lines within which it can build up residential areas without international objection, enabling it to incorporate nonbloc settlers so long as it does not do so on the privately owned land of individual Palestinian farmers. The settlers would derive many advantages from ending their limbo status, which has lasted forty years. Suddenly, whatever its legal moves, the international community may look differently at the blocs because they will not be seen as coming at the expense of the Palestinians. U.S. consideration of the principle that "territorial compensation" should ultimately be made could reconcile those two competing impulses. It will enable the United States and Israel to have constructive conversations on

the size of the fence for both the Ariel and Maale Adumim blocs. Like using a credit card, Israel will essentially buy now and pay later. An understanding that such territorial compensation will ultimately be needed could temper the size of the blocs that Israel will seek, while at same time allaying international suspicions. (How territorial compensation is determined and finally calculated in principle and practice needs to take into account a variety of factors and requires its own study.)

Needless to say, a U.S. view that areas need to be swapped in principle would be implemented only if the parties reach a negotiated final status agreement. Israel would not be providing territorial compensation at this time. Even if the United States rather than Israel advocates ultimate territorial compensation, the idea should provide an incentive to the Palestinians to modify their demands away from the "right of return" on refugees and insistence on being the sole sovereign of religious holy sites in Jerusalem, and make final status talks a real possibility in the future.
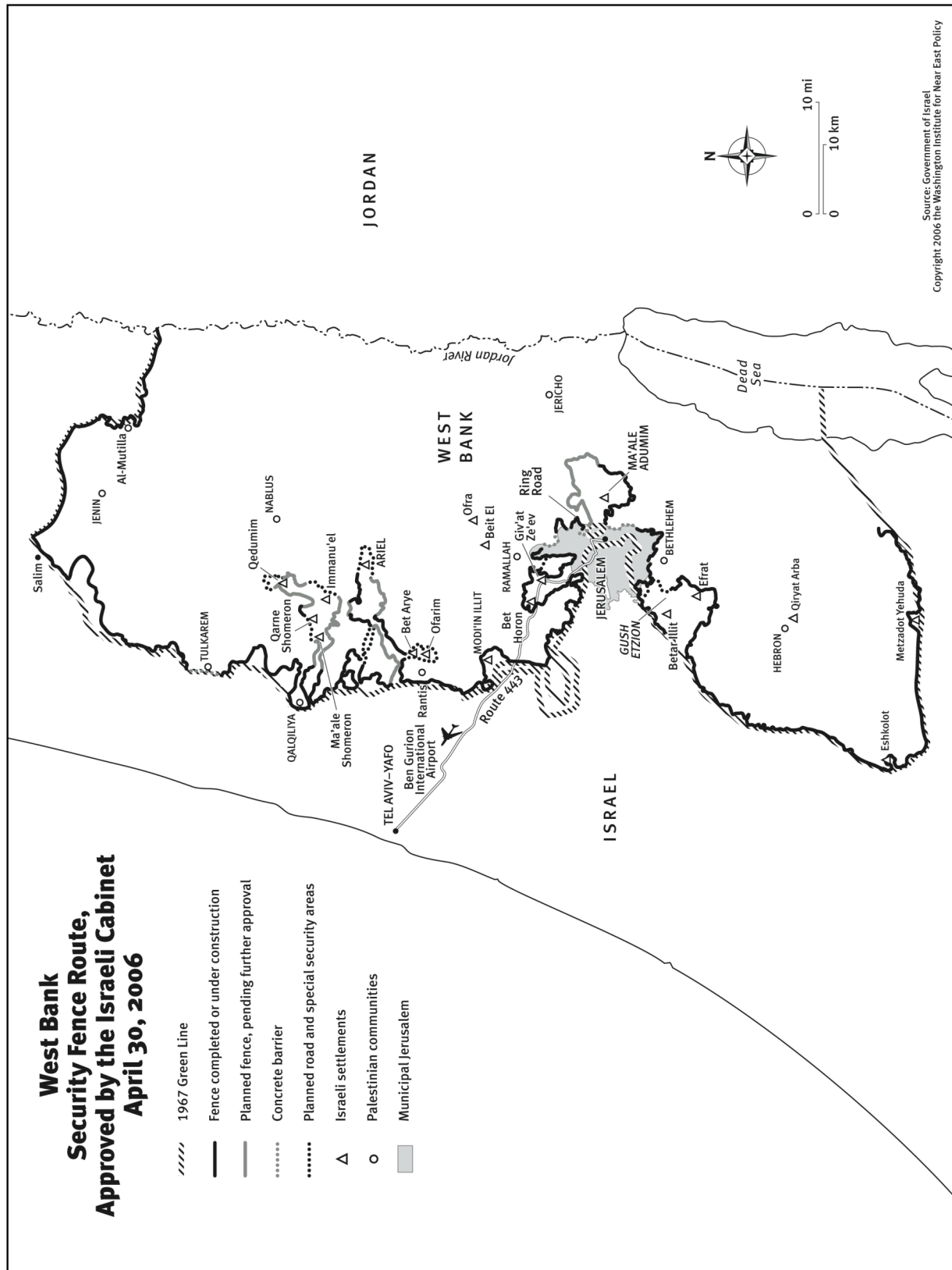
Conclusion

The Israeli-Palestinian dynamic has fluctuated over the last fifteen years between negotiation and conflict. Beginning with Israel's establishment of a security barrier, continuing with Gaza disengagement and now the likelihood of Olmert's West Bank option, the trend has been for Israel to use unilateralism as a means of gradually eliminating its conflict with the Palestinians. Hamas sees bilateral negotiations as undesirable because it seeks Israel's destruction, whereas Olmert views bilateralism as merely unfeasible given the constellation of Palestinian power.

The undertaking to disengage in the West Bank is historic because it will end the presence of Israeli settlers in most of the West Bank, which began in the aftermath of the 1967 war. In and of itself, Olmert's move will not end the conflict between these two peoples, but it will minimize the scope of the conflict in such a manner that resolution becomes more likely in the future. The move has become politically possible because of the consequences of the Israeli election.

If handled incorrectly, unilateralism can potentially be destabilizing. If handled correctly, however, unilateralism can lay at least the foundation for a two-state outcome even if not an immediate two-state solution. Olmert will seek to ensure a set of understandings with the United States that would be dedicated to producing such an outcome.

Olmert's West Bank Convergence Plan is a massive undertaking. It will require extraordinary financial resources as well as an understanding that it will probably need the attention and leadership of the Bush administration until the end of its term. These are issues that will not resolve themselves; the United States needs to maintain an active, diplomatic hands-on effort to ensure success.

West Bank
Security Fence Route,
Approved by the Israeli Cabinet
April 30, 2006

//// 1967 Green Line

—— Fence completed or under construction

—— Planned fence, pending further approval

········· Concrete barrier

•••••• Planned road and special security areas

△ Israeli settlements

○ Palestinian communities

▢ Municipal Jerusalem

Source: Government of Israel
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