

Senat No. 271 on Political Issues

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Security Implications of Disengagement from the Gaza Strip and Northern Samaria

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In this edition of *Senat*, we analyse the immediate direct and indirect implications for security of the Israeli government's disengagement plan.

A land division is currently responsible for the defence of the settlements and all military operations in the Gaza Strip, with an additional auxiliary land brigade stationed in Northern Samaria. The disengagement will reduce friction with the Palestinian population and free IDF forces presently assigned to the defence of Gush Katif and Northern Samaria settlements for assignment to other tasks, including support of forces defending the security barrier. It is expected that the auxiliary brigade can be disbanded shortly. If the tranquillity continues as part of the political process, it will be possible to disband the divisional command in the Gaza Strip, an action that will eventually save resources by facilitating unification of the Southern and Central Division Commands. Alternatively, the redeployment of IDF forces along the Gaza Strip's periphery will require a preliminary investment of millions of shekels, primarily for construction of strategic depth by means of a dual defence barrier that will include systems for the gathering of intelligence, communications, and advanced control and supervision.

In any case, the Israeli Security Agency, which has benefited from direct contacts with the Palestinian population until now, will be obliged to revise its pattern of operations in order to adjust to the new circumstances, particularly with respect to intensified use of technology rather than the activation of agents.

The continued presence of the IDF after disengagement from Northern Samaria and the Philadelphia Route along the Gaza Strip–Egyptian border is likely to perpetuate several points of friction, a situation that will demand investment of forces and strengthened defences. The effective deployment of Egyptian forces is likely to neutralize IDF weakness in this area; nonetheless, Israel will be required to maintain its strength at the determined level until either another arrangement is devised or a permanent settlement is concluded with the Palestinians.

Israel may very well convince the Palestinians to shift the terminal for shipment of goods entering the Gaza Strip from Egypt to the Nitzana border crossing, which remains under Israeli control. It should be recalled, however, that in the past, the Israelis rejected a similar solution regarding passage of the civilian population. Israel is required to assume that members of Islamic terrorist organizations will find their way to the Gaza Strip under this regimen. Despite this threat, Israel will be unable to demand control over transfer points if it wants to affirm cessation of its responsibility over Gaza to the international community.

The Salience of Disengagement as a Unilateral Action

In the absence of relations between Israel and the Palestinians, the benefits of the disengagement from the Gaza Strip and Northern Samaria will be highly limited. If the Palestinians perceive of the disengagement as an isolated step taken for the purpose of postponing renewal of the dialogue now as well as after the elections scheduled in both entities, then the probability of a lasting cease-fire will decline sharply. In such a case, the violent confrontation will flare up with even greater intensity than in the past.

Another factor likely to influence the Palestinian position and thus sustainability of the ceasefire is internal Palestinian politics. Inclusion of Hamas within official Palestinian Authority as well as PLO institutions, in addition to permitting it representation accurately reflecting the support it enjoys on the street, may culminate in attenuation of the terrorist activities initiated by Hamas' military branch. This decline may reflect the responsibility that Hamas is expected to display toward the Palestinian people with respect to the anticipated Israeli response as well as the legitimacy it begs to obtain from the international community.

If Palestinian violence is renewed, the terrorists will no longer be required to concentrate their attacks within the Gaza Strip and Northern Sharon; hence, they will seek new and more distant targets, especially within Israel's borders.

We should remember that the IDF's presence in the settlements did not affect Palestinian capacity to launch rockets from cities or villages. To thwart that threat now as then, forces will be required to penetrate the launch areas. Due to the dense population and level character of land, the imminent danger to forces during small-scale operations is quite great. The IDF is therefore likely to prefer responses from the air; large-scale land operations may likewise be conducted on occasion, for periods of time that will vary according to the anticipated results and the operation's costs.

Implications of Disengagement Within the Framework of an Overall Plan

If the unilateral disengagement is perceived as the first stage in an overall plan for ending the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians, whether within the framework of the road plan or some other bilateral arrangement, then the chances are good that the fragile ceasefire will be sustained and lead to close security coordination in the war against terror. Progress on this point is expected to be accompanied by improvements in the lives of Palestinians and their economy. Such a framework will require thorough coordination aimed at renewing operations at Dhaniya Airport, construction and operation of the Gaza seaport as well as construction and safeguarding of a passageway between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, whether by road or rail.

Future political measures, which will include evacuation of additional settlements, will also be accompanied by redeployment of the IDF in Judea and Samaria. These steps will require reactivation of security cooperation and consultation, but not shared patrols.

These measures are likely to reduce the scope of the forces assigned to protect the isolated settlements and the long roads leading to them, an event that will allow the IDF to undertake flexible, dynamic operations and focus on intelligence gathering. The planned transfer of the border crossings and control points to a civilian authority will free hundreds of soldiers for qualitative operations and reduce the raw, unwanted friction between the IDF and the Palestinian population.

Under both scenarios, fear will remain that the IDF's departure from the Philadelphia Route will encourage entry of long-range weaponry, for example. In the wake of the disengagement, the current absence of a full-proof deterrent to the firing of Kassam rockets will extend the weapon's range to Israeli population centres.

Conclusion

We can conclude that the immediate security implications of the disengagement plan's execution are obvious and almost anticipated. During the coming year, the pattern of security operations may shift between effective full cooperation with the Palestinians and violent confrontation. Realization of the two scenarios is dependent on the relations that develop between the parties with respect to continuation of the negotiations toward a final settlement and how, if it all, Hamas is to be integrated into Palestinian governing institutions.