



PRAYING WITH THEIR EYES CLOSED: REFLECTIONS ON THE DISENGAGEMENT FROM GAZA

SARA ROY

Israel's disengagement plan is widely hailed by the international community, led by the United States, as a first step toward the final resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the establishment of a viable Palestinian state. This essay is a refutation of that view. After presenting the current situation of Gaza as the result of deliberate Israeli policies of economic integration, deinstitutionalization, and closure, the author demonstrates how provisions of the plan itself preclude the establishment of a viable economy in the Strip. Examining the plan's implications for the West Bank, the author argues that the occupation, far from ending, will actually be consolidated. She concludes with a look at the disengagement within the context of previous agreements, particularly Oslo—all shaped by Israel's overwhelming power—and the steadily shrinking possibilities offered to the Palestinians.

When the missionaries came to Africa, they had the Bible and we had the land. They taught us to pray with our eyes closed. When we opened them, we had the Bible in our hand, and they had the land.

—*Jomo Kenyatta, first president of Kenya*

ON 9 JUNE 2005, the last legal hurdle to implementing Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon's disengagement from Gaza was cleared when the Israeli High Court approved the plan and its removal of all the Jewish settlements there. The settlers, though angered by the decision, were not surprised and vowed to oppose their coerced departure with all means possible. Considerable media attention in the United States has been devoted to the suffering of the Jewish settlers and the personal costs for them of the disengagement. This attention has served to thaw and then humanize the often violent and zealous settler population, and in so doing, to illustrate and amplify the sacrifices Israel is making for peace.

SARA ROY, a senior research scholar at Harvard University's Center for Middle Eastern Studies, has worked on Gaza for two decades and is the author of *The Gaza Strip: The Political Economy of De-development* (IPS, 2d edition 2001), among other works. Her new book, *Between Extremism and Civism: Political Islam in Palestine*, will be published by Princeton University Press.

By now a great deal has been written about the disengagement plan by both supporters and opponents. Many of the arguments in favor focus on the redeployment as an opportunity to break the near five-year-old political impasse between Palestinians and Israelis and usher in a new era of stability and peace. In April 2005, for example, President Bush stated that Israel's withdrawal will allow the establishment of "a democratic state in the Gaza" and open the door for democracy in the Middle East.¹ Tom Friedman was more explicit, arguing that "[t]he issue for Palestinians is no longer about how they resist the Israeli occupation in Gaza, but whether they build a decent mini-state there—a Dubai on the Mediterranean. Because if they do, it will fundamentally reshape the Israeli debate about whether the Palestinians can be handed most of the West Bank."²

Embedded in both statements are a set of assumptions: that Palestinians will be free to build their own democracy, that Israel will eventually cede the West Bank (or even consider the possibility), that Israel's "withdrawal" will strengthen the Palestinian position in negotiations over the West Bank, that the occupation will end or become increasingly irrelevant, that the gross asymmetries between the two protagonists will be redressed. Hence, the Gaza disengagement plan—if implemented "properly"—will provide a real (perhaps the *only*) opportunity for resolving the conflict and creating a Palestinian state. It follows that Palestinians will be responsible for their success, and that if they fail to build a "democratic" or "decent mini-state" in Gaza, the fault will be theirs and theirs alone.

A DUBAI ON THE MEDITERRANEAN?

It would be useful to consider what the Palestinians in Gaza have to work with to achieve success.

Today, there are over 1.4 million Palestinians living in the Strip. By 2010 this number will reach close to two million. The Gaza Strip has the highest level of fertility in the region—5.5–6.0 children per woman—and the population grows at a very high rate of 3–5 percent annually. Fifty years ago, 80 percent of the population had not yet been born. Fifty percent of Gazans are 15 years old or younger, with rapidly declining access to health care and education. The half of the territory in which the population is concentrated has one of the highest population densities in the world. In the Jabalya refugee camp alone, there are 74,000 persons per square kilometer, compared with 25,000 persons per square kilometer in Manhattan.³

Palestinians are currently experiencing the worst economic depression in modern history, according to the World Bank, primarily caused by long-standing Israeli restrictions (especially closure) that have dramatically reduced Gaza's trade levels (especially exports) and virtually cut off Gaza's labor force from their jobs inside Israel. This has resulted in unprecedented levels of unemployment ranging from 35 to 40 percent. Some 65 to 75 percent of Gazans are impoverished (compared to 30 percent in 2000), and many are hungry.

In 2004, a Harvard study concluded that the increase in Gaza's population by 2010 will require the "creation of some 250,000 new jobs . . . to maintain current employment rates at 60 percent and the establishment of an additional 2,000 classrooms and 100 primary healthcare clinics annually to bring access to education and public health services at par with the West Bank."⁴ Yet, the disengagement plan states that Israel will further reduce and eventually bar Palestinians from working in Israel. Researchers on the same Harvard study also stated that in a few years, Gaza's labor force will be "entirely unskilled and increasingly illiterate."⁵ As for educational services, between 1997 and 2004, student-teacher ratios declined by 30 percent, with 80 students per class in government schools and 40 per class in UNRWA schools. Test scores for Palestinian children are well below passing, currently under 50 percent, and the majority of 4th graders fail to advance to the next grade.⁶

About 41 percent of Gazans are now assessed by the World Food Programme (WFP) to be "food insecure," defined as lacking secure access to sufficient amounts of safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development; in five areas of Gaza, the figure exceeds 50 percent. An additional 30 percent of the population is "food vulnerable," which places them under threat of becoming food insecure or malnourished.⁷

Since 2000, the economy of the Gaza Strip and West Bank has lost potential income of approximately \$6.3 billion. In addition, the economy has suffered over \$2.2 billion worth of physical damage by the Israeli army, which means, in effect, that the "occupied Palestinian territory has lost at least one fifth of its economic base over the last four years as a consequence of war and occupation."⁸

Yet, despite these conditions, the plan states: "The process of disengagement will serve to dispel claims regarding Israel's responsibility for the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip."⁹ This idea rests on another powerful assumption of the Gaza plan and the discourse surrounding it: that Gaza's agony is a recent phenomenon borne of the last five years of intifada, and that the return of the land taken up by military installations and settlements—anywhere from 15 to 30 percent of the territory—will easily redress the situation. Under this widely held notion, the context for understanding the disengagement begins in 2000, not in 1967. Israel's primary role in creating Palestine's misery and decline over nearly four decades is quite simply expunged from the narrative.

There is no doubt that the destruction wrought by Israel over the last five years has been ruinous for Palestinians, especially in the Gaza Strip—the demolition of homes (some 4,600 between 2000 and 2004), schools, roads, factories and workshops, hospitals, mosques, and greenhouses, the razing of agricultural fields and the uprooting of trees, the further undermining of the economy, the spatial imprisonment of the population and denial of access to education and health services resulting from near total closure. But one need only look at the devastated economy of Gaza on the eve of the uprising to realize that the devastation of Gaza is not recent. By the time the second uprising broke out, Israel's closure policy had been in force for seven years, leading to levels of unemployment and poverty that were, until then, unprecedented. Yet the closure policy proved so destructive only because of the near 30-year process

of integrating Gaza's economy into Israel's, which undermined the local economic base by making it deeply dependent on Israel. As a result, when Gaza was severed from Israel through closure, the means for self-sustenance no longer existed. Thus, closure and the destruction caused by the intifada occurred on a foundation already undermined by thirty-eight years of deliberate Israeli policies of expropriation, integration, and deinstitutionalization that had long ago robbed Palestine of its developmental potential, insuring that no viable economic (and hence, political) structure could emerge.

The destruction of Palestine's present (and any strategy for addressing it) can only be understood as part of its destroyed past. The damage—the de-development of Palestine—cannot be undone by simply “returning” Gaza's lands and by allowing Palestinians freedom of movement and the right to build factories and industrial estates. Enlarging Gaza's sliver of land—or Palestinian access to it—cannot solve Gaza's myriad problems when its burgeoning population is confined within it. Density is not just a problem of people but of access to resources, especially labor markets. Without porous boundaries allowing for the migration of workers to job markets, which the disengagement plan does not address and in effect denies, the Strip will remain an imprisoned enclave, precluding any viable economic solution. Yet, it is the opposite idea—that with disengagement development is possible—that Israel is striving to instill, since it will absolve it of any responsibility for Gaza's desolation, past and present.

THE TERMS OF DISENGAGEMENT

Leaving aside Israel's primary responsibility for what Gaza is today, the plan itself cannot possibly initiate any real development process. It states that Israel will evacuate the Gaza Strip—except for the 100-meter-wide Philadelphi corridor on Gaza's border with Egypt—and redeploy outside it. Israel subsequently agreed to withdraw from the Philadelphi corridor in favor of Egyptian military control, but the terms are still being deliberated, with strong opposition from within the Israeli cabinet and parliament. Pending the final disposition of the corridor, the Israel Defense Forces has begun to erect a wall along the 12 kilometer long corridor that will consist of “8 meter high concrete plates, [that] could easily be removed. . . . The new wall will be interspersed with observation posts and a new road for heavy armored vehicles is being paved on its southern side.”¹⁰

But whether or not Israel eventually withdraws from the Philadelphi corridor (or gives Palestinians control over their own seaport and airport, as is also being discussed) is ultimately irrelevant to Palestinian development over the longer term. For even with these changes, the plan still gives Israel “exclusive authority” over all air space and territorial waters, which translates into full control over the movement of people and goods into and out of the Strip. Israel will also “continue, for full price, to supply electricity, water, gas and petrol to the Palestinians, in accordance with current arrangements.”¹¹ In other words, Gaza's continued economic dependency, and Israel's continued security, political, and economic control of the Strip, are assured.

As for the perimeter separating the Gaza Strip from Israel, a second fence is already under construction. This new fence

is being constructed to the east of the existing fence on Israeli territory and creates a buffer zone around the Gaza Strip 70 kilometers long and several hundred metres wide. The fence will be augmented with a series of optical and electronic sensors that will indicate any attempts to cross it. "It will enable us to better prevent illegal entries of Palestinians from Gaza," an Israeli Defence Force (IDF) source [stated] . . . "We are witnessing an increase in attempts to cross the existing fence around Gaza, though mostly by workers seeking employment rather than terrorists[.]"¹²

There is no reference in the disengagement plan to linkage with the West Bank, though there has been some discussion of a rail line between the two territories.¹³ Based on Israel's total disregard of Oslo's affirmation that the West Bank and Gaza Strip are "one territorial unit," it seems clear that Israel will not tolerate a genuine territorial linkage, despite the fact that there are only forty-eight kilometers (thirty miles) separating Gaza and the West Bank.¹⁴ With the plan, then, the population of Gaza will be effectively sealed in, and the national dismemberment of the Palestinians, long a cornerstone of Israeli policy, will arguably have been achieved, at least with regard to the West Bank and Gaza.¹⁵

The part of the plan that relates to the West Bank calls for the evacuation of four of the 120 Jewish settlements in "an area" to the north of Nablus, allowing for territorial contiguity for Palestinians there. However, in a July 2005 decision by the Israeli security cabinet, Israel will "retain security control of the territory around the four West Bank settlements and keep existing military bases in the area," which translates into Israel's continued control over the northern West Bank after the evacuation of the four settlements.¹⁶ In other regions of the West Bank, the plan states, Israel will "assist . . . in improving the transportation infrastructure in order to facilitate the contiguity of Palestinian transportation."¹⁷ This "contiguity of transportation" will have to accommodate the following conditions:

- A planned 620 kilometer wall (of which 205 kilometers have been built) made of nine meter high concrete slabs and impermeable fences,¹⁸ constructed on confiscated West Bank lands; at best, Palestinians will have access to only 54 percent of the West Bank once the wall is completed, deepening the dispossession and isolation of Palestinian communities;
- Twenty-nine settler highways or bypass roads spanning 400 kilometers of the West Bank, explicitly designed to provide freedom of movement for 400,000 Jewish settlers while imprisoning three million Palestinians in their encircled and isolated enclaves;

- Twenty-four planned tunnels in the West Bank (of which seven are completed) that will connect Jewish settlements to each other and to Israel;¹⁹
- The planned construction of 6,400 new settlement housing units in the West Bank;²⁰
- The isolation of East Jerusalem—the commercial and cultural heart of the West Bank—from Ramallah and Bethlehem and the rest of the West Bank;
- The separation of the northern and southern West Bank; and
- The separation of Gaza, Hebron, Bethlehem, Ramallah, Jericho, Tulkarm, Qalqilya, Salfit, Nablus, and Jenin.²¹

None of these elements is in any way mitigated by the plan; on the contrary, their persistence is assured. The territorial fragmentation institutionalized by the plan ends any hope of Palestinian territorial and national unity and contiguity, and it can only accelerate Palestine's gradual depopulation, continuing what the Oslo process had begun. Yet, despite its brutality, the Gaza disengagement agreement—like Oslo, Camp David, and Taba before it—is surrounded by an almost seamless and comforting silence that is shattering in the facts it conceals.

Whatever else it claims to be, the Gaza disengagement plan is, at its heart, an instrument for Israel's continued annexation of West Bank lands and their physical integration into Israel. This is all but spelled out in the plan itself. Thus, "[i]n any future permanent status arrangement, there will be no Israeli towns and villages in the Gaza Strip. On the other hand [and here, Israel is atypically transparent], it is clear that in the West Bank, there are areas which will be part of the State of Israel, including major Israeli population centers, cities, towns and villages, security areas and other places of special interest to Israel."²² In all but the evacuated area in the northern West Bank, Israeli settlement in the West Bank can continue unimpeded. Throughout, whether under Labor or Likud, Israel has engaged in a zero-sum struggle for control of Palestinian lands in the West Bank, and with the Gaza disengagement plan it clearly believes this struggle can finally be won. Far from paving the way for more concessions and withdrawals, the unilateral disengagement can only consolidate Israeli control, bringing Palestinians greater repression, isolation, and ghettoization. How, given all this, can the current plan represent a political or policy departure from previous ones or an act of Israeli courage or magnanimity, as many have argued? Why should disengagement be regarded as a new opening or opportunity, let alone a watershed event?

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“DISENGAGEMENT” AND OCCUPATION

The international community, led by the United States, would like to weave the disengagement plan into the road map, believing it to be a first step toward a comprehensive solution for the Palestine problem involving a viable Palestinian state alongside Israel. Yet under the terms of disengagement, Israel's occupation is assured. Gazans will be contained and sealed within the electrified borders of the Strip, while West Bankers, their lands dismembered by relentless Israeli settlement, will continue to be penned into fragmented geographic spaces, isolated behind and between walls and barriers. Despite this terrible reality, the word “occupation” has been removed from the political lexicon, as would an insult or obscenity. PA President Mahmoud Abbas, an architect of Oslo, never once used the word “occupation” in any of the agreements he helped draft. Yet, it was the gap between Oslo's implication that the occupation would end, and the harsh reality that emerged instead, that led to the second Palestinian uprising. At the Sharm al-Shaykh summit between Abbas, Sharon, and Bush in February 2004, again the word “occupation” was not mentioned.

The final version of the Gaza disengagement plan makes no reference to it either, but the original 18 April 2004 version is explicit about what clearly is one of the plan's main goals: upon completion of the evacuation of the Gaza Strip, the plan states, “there will be no basis for claiming that the Gaza Strip is occupied territory.”²³ The fact that the clause was omitted from the 6 June 2004 revised plan by no means indicates a change in Israeli priorities. Indeed, one of the most striking elements of Geoffrey Aronson's revealing technocratic study of the plan, commissioned by an international donor and based on a series of interviews with Israeli officials, is Israel's obsessive focus on legally ridding itself of occupier status in the Gaza Strip.²⁴ It would appear that this intensity is really about obtaining international acquiescence (however tacit) in, and vindication of, Israel's full and unquestioned control over the West Bank—and eventually Jerusalem—even while retaining control over the Strip in a different form.

With the Gaza plan, it is possible that Israel may, for the first time and with pressure from the international donor community, be able to secure Palestinian endorsement of what it is creating. In this regard, the disengagement plan can be seen as yet another in a long line of Israeli attempts to extract from the Palestinians what it has always sought but has so far been unable to obtain: total Palestinian capitulation to Israel's terms coupled with the acknowledgment of the legitimacy of Israeli actions. This is what former Prime Minister Ehud Barak demanded of Yasir Arafat at Camp David in July 2000 when he insisted on an end-of-conflict/end-of-claims clause, and this is what Sharon, in his own way, is insisting on as well: almost total Palestinian surrender to Israeli dictates and the suffocating reality they have created, formalized in a plan that would recognize those dictates as justified. Tragically, the Palestinian leadership continues to view the Gaza disengagement as a first step in a political process toward the resumption of negotiations for final status talks, refusing to accept that the disengagement from Gaza *is* the final status and that the occupation will not end.

As for the international community—particularly the foreign donors—almost the entire focus has been on “developing” the Gaza Strip. This attention is painfully reminiscent of some of the analytical and structural mistakes of the Oslo period, particularly with regard to three key assumptions: (1) the preexisting structures of occupation—Israeli control and Palestinian dependency—will be mitigated, perhaps even dismantled; (2) Israel’s withdrawal from the Gaza Strip will create a political, economic and bureaucratic opening that will shift, if not change, the priorities of the protagonists from issues of territory and security to the economic interests of entrepreneurs and nations; and (3) innovative modes of thinking with respect to economic cooperation will lead to political stability and peaceful coexistence in the Middle East. Economic cooperation, and the tangible benefits that result, will build trust and create a template for peace.²⁵

If these assumptions proved so utterly unfounded with regard to the Oslo agreements (where, at least initially, there was a modicum of bilateralism and cooperation), how will they fare under a unilateral disengagement plan that makes no secret of being a *diktat*, and at a time when the structures of occupation and Israeli control are far more deeply entrenched? Furthermore, given Israel’s continued occupation and control over Gaza’s borders, and the plan’s declared aim “to reduce the number of Palestinian workers entering Israel to the point that it ceases completely,”²⁶ there is good cause to expect that the Israeli authorities will use economic pressure to ensure control and extract political concessions much as they did during the Oslo period.²⁷ Despite this—arguably because of it—international donors are again displaying the same unwillingness to politically confront the occupation and its most pernicious measures as they did ten years ago. Rather, they seem resolved to mitigate the damage, aiding the Palestinians even if it means the imposition of an unjust solution, whatever their private reservations may be. In so perverse an environment and in the absence of a more activist political posture aimed at challenging Israel’s structure of control, international assistance will not eradicate poverty but simply modernize it. In so doing, donor aid—despite its critical importance—will solidify the structures of occupation by simply ignoring them. Under this scenario, how could Palestine ever become a producing society?

THE SHRINKING CONTOURS OF AGREEMENT

With the international community eager to be rid of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict once and for all, Palestinian powerlessness is arguably more acute now (with Gaza disengagement) than before (with Oslo). As with the losses incurred during the Oslo period, the Palestinians’ continued dispossession is regarded as the price of peace, not as a reason for conflict. So defined, Palestinian legitimacy, at least for parts of the international community, no longer derives from the justice and morality of its cause but from Palestinian willingness to concede to terms largely if not entirely imposed

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by Israel. Thus, with the Gaza disengagement plan, the Palestinian quest for minimal justice entailing a state in 22 percent of their homeland, once dismissed as utopian, is now derided as short-sighted and selfish. Within this construct, the asymmetries between occupier and occupied are not only sanctioned but their institutionalization is lauded as progress, removing any possibility that could meaningfully end Israeli domination.

There is an appalling sameness about Israel's plan to disengage from Gaza when compared with earlier agreements, notably Oslo: a common thread runs through all of them, molding the terms, predetermining the outcomes. Like its predecessors, the disengagement plan is hailed as an act of courage, as yet another example of Israel's desire for peace, its willingness to make concessions and sacrifices without demanding equivalent concessions of the Palestinians who are the real aggressors, repeatedly refusing Israeli generosity. In this "peace" initiative, as in others, Israel seeks, and will no doubt secure, control over Palestine while ceding all responsibility for it.

Another common feature is the sheer weight and accepted legitimacy of Israeli unilateralism: the power of Israel to impose its own terms virtually unchallenged by domestic or international forces. In the case of the disengagement plan, however, Israeli unilateralism becomes open and explicit: even the fiction of consultation is dispensed with; as a unilateral *plan*, rather than an *agreement*, it is unapologetically imposed. This is a nuance, however, and the earlier agreements, too, were drawn up to preclude the possibility of negotiations on substantive issues where Israel was unwilling to make any concessions. Similarly, the disengagement initiative makes explicit, in a way that Oslo did not, that Israel is really negotiating with the United States, not with the Palestinians, over how far it can go in dispossessing them. Despite Bush's promises to Abbas regarding the contours of the Palestinian state and how it will be established, the United States will, in the end, accept, as it always has, what Israel wants and does. According to Aaron Miller, a former State Department official who was deeply involved with the Middle East peace process, during his near twenty-five years in government there never was "an honest conversation about what the Israelis were actually doing on the ground. Nor were we prepared to impose, at least in the last seven or eight years, a cost on the Israelis for their actions."²⁸

Finally, Israeli unilateralism is evident in another, more subtle, way having to do with the starting point for negotiations. History, to which Israel and the Jewish people cling so tenaciously, is denied to the Palestinians, whose mere invocation of it is decried as obstructionist and unhelpful. Thus Palestinians are rendered mute, and their historic compromise of 1988—when they conceded 78 percent of the country where they had constituted two thirds of the population and owned all but 7 percent of the land in order to settle for a state in the West Bank and Gaza—is rejected (if remembered at all) as a legitimate point of departure. Rather, the Palestinians must begin negotiations at whatever point Israel (backed by the United States) says they should, a point that keeps contracting in line with the diminished realities Israel has imposed on the Palestinians. The result of Israel's ever shrinking "offers" is that compromise becomes more difficult if not impossible, and Palestinian violence is more likely

to erupt. With the Gaza disengagement plan, Israel's generous offer has gone from a weak cantonized entity in the West Bank and Gaza to the encircled and desperately impoverished enclave of the Gaza Strip—1 percent of historical Palestine. In this regard, the plan to disengage from Gaza (while encircling it and absorbing the West Bank) is the starkest and most extreme illustration to date of Israel's power to determine and reduce what there is left to talk about.

A CONCLUDING THOUGHT

Of course, it is better for Israel to leave Gaza than to remain there and for some sort of renewal to begin. As the analyst Jennifer Loewenstein has argued, "All of us should support the evacuation of the settlements from Gaza and the withdrawal of Israeli occupation forces from the Strip on the grounds that international law demands them. But equally, we should oppose Sharon's Disengagement Plan for the cynical motivations that inspired it and the reality its execution is going to create."²⁹

Israel's "withdrawal" from Gaza aims yet again to create practical realities that will contain and fragment Palestinians and diminish their collective and personal aspirations—now through a Palestinian mini-state in Gaza. In a context so politically attenuated and devoid of meaning and purpose, historical memory recedes and with it the notion of a national identity and the sense of purpose and attachment to which it gives rise. Must Palestinians withdraw from the future and from the past into a present that lays waste, and be grateful?

Today in Gaza and the West Bank, ideas and discourse have given way to a devastating internecine conflict. People seek power over philosophy, order over liberty, and for many, death over life. Israel and the United States worry that the Islamists will ascend politically. But the real threat lies deep within society, with the waning of resolve, injury to being, disabling of families and communities, and disintegration of youth—where the whole of society is rapidly ceding to its wounded and afflicted parts. Can the Gaza disengagement plan, with its promise of restricted and externally controlled autonomy, be expected to redress any of this?

For Palestinians, the taking of their land has always been the primary issue distinguishing Israel's occupation from earlier ones. Although the problem of land is often presented in political terms, its impact on the individual and society is profound, shaping not only the way people live but who they are and how they define themselves. By taking so much more away from Palestinians than has any other agreement since the occupation began, the disengagement plan will prove disastrous for everyone, including for Israel. Seldom has a political decision so sealed the fate of an entire people as cruelly as this one.

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