

*A Dubai on the Mediterranean**

LAST APRIL [2005] PRESIDENT BUSH said that Israel's withdrawal from Gaza would allow the establishment of "a democratic state in the Gaza" and open the door for democracy in the Middle East. The columnist Thomas Friedman was more explicit, arguing that "the 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."

Embedded in these statements is the assumption that Palestinians will be free to build their own democracy, that Israel will eventually cede the West Bank (or at least 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 sides will be redressed. Hence, the Gaza Disengagement Plan—if implemented "properly"—provides a real (perhaps the only) opportunity for resolving the conflict and creating a Palestinian state. It follows that Palestinians will be responsible for the success or failure of the Plan: if they fail to build a "democratic" or "decent mini-state" in Gaza, the fault will be theirs alone.

Today, there are more than 1.4 million Palestinians living in the Strip: by 2010 the figure will be close to 2 million. Gaza has the highest birthrate in the region—5.5 to 6.0 children per woman—and

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the population grows by 3 to 5 per cent annually. Eighty per cent of the population is under 50; 50 per cent is 15 years old or younger, and access to health care and education is rapidly declining. The half of the territory in which the population is concentrated has one of the highest densities in the world. In the Jabalya refugee camp alone, there are 74,000 people per square kilometer, compared with 25,000 in Manhattan.

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

In 2004, a Harvard study concluded that by 2010 the increase in Gaza's population would require the "creation of some 250,000 new jobs . . . to maintain current employment rates at 60 per cent and the establishment of an additional 2000 classrooms and 100 primary healthcare clinics annually to bring access to education and public health services at par with the West Bank." Yet the Disengagement Plan states that Israel will further reduce the number of Palestinians working in Israel and eventually bar them altogether. The same Harvard study predicted that within a few years Gaza's labor force will be "entirely unskilled and increasingly illiterate." Between 1997 and 2004, the number of teachers per student declined by 30 per cent, with 80 students per class in government schools and 40 per class in UNRWA schools. Test scores for Palestinian children are well below the pass level, and the majority of eight-year-olds fail to advance to the next grade.

About 42 per cent of Gazans are now categorized by the World Food Programme (WFP) as "food insecure," that is, 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 per cent. An additional 30 per cent of the population is "food vulnerable", that is, under threat of becoming food insecure or malnourished.

Since 2000, the economy of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank has lost a potential income of approximately \$6.4 billion and suffered \$3.5 billion worth of physical damage at the hands of the Israeli Army. This

means, according to the U.N. Conference on Trade and Development, 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.” Yet the authors of the Plan are confident that “the process of disengagement will serve to dispel claims regarding Israel’s responsibility for the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.” They assume, in other words, that Gaza’s suffering 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 per cent of the territory—and the removal of 9,000 Israeli settlers will soon redress the situation. Israel’s primary role in creating Palestine’s misery and decline since it occupied the West Bank and Gaza in 1967 is expunged from the narrative.

There is no doubt that the destruction wrought by Israel over the last five years—the demolition of homes (some 4,600 between 2000 and 2004), schools, roads, factories, workshops, hospitals, mosques and greenhouses, the razing of agricultural fields, the uprooting of trees, the confinement of the population and the denial of access to education and health services as a consequence of Israeli roadblocks and checkpoints—has been ruinous for Palestinians, especially those in the Gaza Strip. But one need only look at the economy of Gaza on the eve of the uprising to realise that the devastation is not recent. By the time the second Intifada broke out, Israel’s closure policy had been in force for seven years, leading to unprecedented levels of unemployment and poverty (which would soon be surpassed). Yet the closure policy proved so destructive only because the thirty-year process of integrating Gaza’s economy into Israel’s had made the local economy deeply dependent. As a result, when the border was closed in 1993, self-sustainment was no longer possible—the means weren’t there. Decades of expropriation and de-institutionalization had long ago robbed Palestine of its potential for development, ensuring that no viable economic (and hence political) structure could emerge.

The damage—the de-development of Palestine—cannot be undone simply by “returning” Gaza’s lands and allowing Palestinians freedom of movement and the right to build factories and industrial estates. Enlarging its sliver of land—or Palestinian access to it—won’t solve Gaza’s myriad problems when its growing 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 workers access to jobs, something the Disengagement Plan not only doesn't address but in effect denies, the Strip will remain effectively a prison without any possibility of establishing a viable economy. Yet, it is the opposite idea—that with disengagement, development is possible—that Israel is trying to promote, in the hope that this will absolve it of any responsibility for Gaza's desolation, past or present.

Even if we leave aside Israel's primary responsibility for the state Gaza is in today, the Plan itself stands in the way of any real development. According to the Plan, Israel will evacuate the Gaza Strip—except for the 100-meter-wide Philadelphi corridor on the border with Egypt—and redeploy outside it. Israel subsequently agreed to withdraw from the corridor in favor of Egyptian military control, but the terms are still being deliberated, and there is strong opposition from within the Israeli cabinet and parliament. Pending the final disposition of the corridor, the Israeli Army has begun to erect a wall along its 12 kilometers that will consist of “eight-metre-high concrete plates that could easily be removed . . . The new wall will be interspersed with observation posts and a new road for heavy armoured vehicles is being paved on its southern side.”¹

Whether or not Israel eventually withdraws from the Philadelphi corridor (or gives Palestinians control over their own seaport and airport, which is also under discussion) is ultimately irrelevant. For the Plan gives Israel “exclusive authority” over Gaza's airspace 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.” Israel will also continue to collect customs duties on behalf of the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli shekel will remain the local currency. Further, the Israeli government is building a new terminal at the point where Gaza, Israel and Egypt meet, that would require Palestinian labor and goods to go through Israeli territory. Israel's Interior Ministry retains full control over the issuing of Palestinian identity cards and all population data—births, deaths, marriages—and all Palestinians must continue to be registered with the ministry. There would be no point in the PA acting unilaterally and issuing Palestinian identity cards because Israel

controls the international border crossings and Palestinian movements within the West Bank.

As for the perimeter separating the Gaza Strip from Israel, a second fence is already under construction. It is being built to the east of the existing fence on Israeli territory and creates a buffer zone around the Strip 70 kilometers long and several hundred meters wide. The fence will be augmented with optical and electronic sensors that will detect any attempts to cross it. "It will enable us to better prevent illegal entries of Palestinians from Gaza," an Israeli army source said. "We are witnessing an increase in attempts to cross the existing fence around Gaza, though mostly by workers seeking employment rather than terrorists."

There is no reference in the Disengagement Plan to any link between Gaza and the West Bank, though there has been some discussion of a railway line between the two territories. The Oslo agreement stated that the West Bank and Gaza Strip were "one territorial unit," but it seems clear that Israel will not tolerate a genuine territorial link between them. With implementation of the Plan, the population of Gaza is effectively sealed in, and the national dismemberment of the Palestinians, long a cornerstone of Israeli policy, has been achieved, at least with regard to the West Bank and Gaza.

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 July the Israeli security cabinet determined that Israel would "retain security control of the territory around the four West Bank settlements and keep existing military bases in the area." In other regions of the West Bank, Israel will "assist . . . in improving the transportation infrastructure in order to facilitate the contiguity of Palestinian transportation." This "contiguity of transportation" will have to accommodate the following conditions:

1. A planned 620-kilometer wall (of which 205 kilometers have been built) made of nine-meter-high concrete slabs and impermeable fences, constructed on confiscated West Bank land; at present 10 per cent of all Palestinians—242,000 people—are isolated in the closed military zone between Israel's border and the western side of the wall, and 12 per cent are separated internally from their land

because of settler roads and housing blocks. At best Palestinians will have access to 54 per cent of the West Bank once the wall is completed.

2. Twenty-nine settler highways or bypasses spanning 400 kilometers of the West Bank, explicitly designed to provide freedom of movement for 400,000 Jewish settlers while imprisoning 3 million Palestinians in their encircled and isolated enclaves.
3. Forty planned tunnels in the West Bank (of which 28 have been completed, compared to seven a year ago) that will connect Jewish settlements to each other and to Israel.
4. The planned construction of 6,400 new settlement houses in the West Bank. At least 42 settlements are being expanded and colleges, hotels, commercial areas and parks being built.
5. 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.
6. The separation of the northern and southern West Bank; and the separation of Gaza, Hebron, Bethlehem, Ramallah, Jericho, Tulkarm, Qalqilya, Salfit, Nablus and Jenin.

The Plan puts an end to any hope of Palestinian territorial and national unity and contiguity, and can only accelerate Palestine's gradual depopulation, continuing what the Oslo process began. Yet, like Oslo, Camp David and Taba before it, the Plan is rarely analyzed. It is enveloped in silence.

Whatever else it claims to be, the Gaza Disengagement Plan is, at heart, an instrument for Israel's continued annexation of West Bank land and the physical integration of that land into Israel. This is all but spelled out in the Plan itself, which states that "in 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 uncharacteristically 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 centres, cities, towns and villages, security areas and other places of special interest to Israel." To my knowledge this is the first time that the formal annexation of West Bank land has been explicitly and officially put forward. Everywhere except in the evacuated area in the northern West Bank, Israeli settlement can continue unimpeded. Whether under

Labour or Likud, Israel has always engaged in a zero-sum struggle for control of Palestinian land in the West Bank, and with the Gaza Disengagement Plan it clearly believes the struggle can finally be won. Far from paving the way for more concessions and withdrawals, unilateral disengagement can only consolidate Israeli control, bringing Palestinians greater repression, isolation and ghettoization. How, given all this, can the current plan be seen as a political departure, or an act of Israeli courage or magnanimity, as many have argued? Why should disengagement be regarded as an opening or opportunity, let alone a watershed?

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 towards the creation of 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 be penned into fragmented spaces, isolated behind and between walls and barriers. Despite this terrible reality, the word "occupation" has been removed from the political lexicon. Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the PA and an architect of Oslo, never used the word "occupation" in any of the agreements he helped draft. Yet it was the gap between the implication in the Oslo Accords that the occupation would end and the reality which emerged in its place that led to the second Palestinian uprising. At the Sharm el-Sheikh summit between Abbas, Sharon and Bush in February 2005, the word "occupation" was again not mentioned.

The final version of the Gaza Disengagement Plan makes no reference to it either, but the original April 18, 2004 version is explicit about what is clearly one of its main goals: on completion of the evacuation, the Plan states, "there will be no basis for claiming that the Gaza Strip is occupied territory." The omission of the clause from the revised plan of June 6, 2004 does not indicate 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.² It would appear that what this is really about is obtaining international acceptance (however tacit) of Israel's full control over

the West Bank—and eventually Jerusalem—while retaining control over the Strip in a different form.

It's possible that with the Gaza Plan 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 respect, 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 capitulation to Israel's terms coupled with an acknowledgment of the legitimacy of Israeli actions. This is what 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 now: almost total Palestinian surrender to Israeli diktats and the suffocating reality they have created, formalized in a plan that would recognize those diktats as justified. Tragically, the Palestinian leadership continues to view the Gaza Disengagement Plan as a first step in a political process towards the resumption of negotiations for final status talks, and refuses to accept that disengagement from Gaza *is* the final status and that the occupation will not end.

As for the international community—in particular, foreign donors—almost all its attention has been on “developing” the Gaza Strip, a focus painfully reminiscent of some of the mistakes of the Oslo period. The same three misguided assumptions are made: first, that the preexisting structures of occupation—Israeli control and Palestinian dependency—will be mitigated, perhaps even dismantled; second, that Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip will have the effect of shifting the priorities of both Israelis and Palestinians from issues of territory and security to the economic interests of entrepreneurs and nations, and third, that innovative ways of thinking about economic cooperation will lead to political stability and peaceful coexistence in the Middle East.

These assumptions proved completely unfounded in the wake of Oslo (when, at least initially, there was a modicum of bilateralism and cooperation); why would one hope for something better now, with a unilateral Disengagement Plan that makes no secret of being a diktat, at a time when the structures of occupation and control are far more deeply entrenched? Given all this and the Plan's aim “to reduce the number of Palestinian workers entering Israel to the point

that it ceases completely,” there is every reason to expect the Israeli authorities to use economic pressure not only to ensure control but to extract political concessions, much as they did during the Oslo period. Despite this—arguably because of it—international donors are again displaying their unwillingness to confront the occupation, preferring instead to mitigate the damage by helping the Palestinians deal with this unjust solution, whatever their private reservations. In so perverse an environment and in the absence of any challenge to 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. How, given this scenario, can Palestine ever become a productive society?

With the international community eager to be rid of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the Palestinians’ continued dispossession is regarded as the price of peace, not as a reason for conflict. So defined, Palestinian legitimacy, at least for some members of the international community, no longer derives from the justice and morality of its cause but from Palestinian willingness to agree to terms largely if not entirely imposed by Israel. Thus, with the Gaza Disengagement Plan, the Palestinian quest for minimal justice in the form of a state in 22 per cent of their homeland, once dismissed as utopian, is now derided as short-sighted and selfish. The asymmetries between occupier and occupied are not only sanctioned, but their institutionalization is seen as progress. Like its predecessors, the Disengagement Plan is hailed as an act of courage, as yet another example of Israel’s desire for peace, of its willingness to make concessions and sacrifices without demanding equivalent concessions of the Palestinians, who are the real aggressors, repeatedly refusing Israeli generosity.

What the disengagement initiative makes explicit, in a way that Oslo did not, is the fact 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 U.S. 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 heavily involved with the Middle East peace process, during his 25 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.”³

Finally, Israeli unilateralism is evident in another, more subtle way, which has 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. The Palestinian compromise of 1988—when they conceded 78 per cent of the country, where they had once constituted two-thirds of the population and owned all but 7 per cent 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 are supposed to begin negotiations at whatever point Israel (backed by the U.S.) says they should, a point that alters in line with the diminished realities Israel has imposed on them. The result of Israel’s ever shrinking “offers” is that compromise becomes increasingly difficult, if not impossible, and Palestinian violence more likely. 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 per cent of historical Palestine. The disengagement from Gaza (while encircling it and absorbing the West Bank) is the most extreme illustration to date of Israel’s power to determine and reduce what there is left to talk about.

The weeks since the last Israeli soldier pulled out of the Gaza Strip have been marred by violence. There are almost daily battles between the PA and Hamas, Fateh and Hamas, and Gaza’s many clans, militias and security forces. Not since the terrible one-year period just before the signing of the Oslo agreements in 1993, when internal controls had weakened dramatically, have Gazans known such frightening insecurity.

Although the disengagement did not cause a breakdown of the Palestinian community or the disintegration of Palestinian politics, it has certainly made the situation worse, given Israel’s decision to reshape the occupation without ending it—that is, to maintain external control of Gaza while ceding internal control, thereby creating a vacuum that is now being filled by competing internal forces. As Darryl Li of Harvard writes, “the ‘dilemma’ . . . is how to maximise control over the territory of the Gaza Strip while minimising responsibility in the eyes of the

world for the welfare of its inhabitants. The upshot is a situation in which Israel exercises less direct control than before, while preventing anyone else from fully taking over.”⁴

There are two imperatives in the short term: resolving the problems between the PA and Hamas, and securing official control over warring political factions and security services. Both seem unlikely in the face of Israel’s continued consolidation of power in the West Bank (and the PA’s inability to stop it) through settlement expansion, the wall, continued land confiscations and the de-Arabization of Jerusalem—and, I might add, by the fact that 39 per cent of the members of Israel’s Labour Party want Sharon to head their party while 46 per cent favor joining a new Knesset list headed by him.

The PA, its power and credibility greatly undermined by Israel’s destruction of its infrastructure and security apparatus since 2000 as well as by its own mismanagement, corruption, and failure to articulate a vision of state or society-building, is unable and unwilling to assume real responsibility for its own population, let alone to engage political factions—who seek to preserve their own power by further weakening the PA and the rule of law—or articulate a political program with which to challenge Israel and the U.S.

Israel and the United States worry that the Islamists will take over. But the real threat lies deeper, with the waning of resolve, the disabling of families and communities, and the disintegration of morale. Can the Gaza Disengagement Plan, with its promise of restricted and externally controlled autonomy, redress any of this? For Palestinians, the taking of their land has always been the primary issue distinguishing Israel’s occupation from earlier ones. By taking so much more away from Palestinians than any other agreement since the occupation began, the Disengagement Plan will prove disastrous for everyone, including Israel.