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Israel Post-Disengagement

By MK Colette Avital



With the Israel Defence Forces having completed a total pull-out from Gaza (and Northern Samaria) and the settlements totally evacuated and dismantled, the occupation of Gaza is, at last, over.

Carried out in the face of violent opposition at home, hailed abroad, the disengagement has plunged the country into a deep political crisis. Challenged by his own base, by the “rebels” in his own party, led by former Prime Minister Netanyahu, P.M. Sharon succeeded in winning the vote on a seemingly procedural matter: whether to hold an election for the party leadership next April, or to move it up to November this year.

Yet much more was at stake: Had Netanyahu succeeded, this would have been the first time for an incumbent Prime Minister to be ousted by his own party. It would have split the Likud, cut short its rule, resulting in early elections. Moreover, the Likud led by Netanyahu without Sharon would have been free to represent the lunatic right in Israel, become a fringe party and drive over the cliff. Good for Labor, one may think, but essentially bad for Israel and for any prospect of peace. In this case the Prime Minister would have been free to form his own party, attracting politicians from various parties including Labor. Good for the country – perhaps, but bad for Labor, no doubt.

While P.M.Sharon won this first round, the battle is by no means over. When the Knesset, Israel's Parliament reconvenes on October 31, the parliamentary season promises to be “hot”. Sharon's opponents within the ranks of the Likud may join the opposition in its attempts to topple the Government. Will the Government survive, based on Labor's support alone? Sharon will, no doubt, attempt to broaden his coalition.

Labor too, faces its own internal struggle for leadership. Come November 9th, four candidates: Deputy Prime Minister Shimon Peres, Infrastructure Minister Benjamin Ben – Eliezer, Science Minister Matan Vilnai and Head of the Histadrut (Israeli Trade Union Federation) Amir Peretz, will compete for the chairmanship of the Party in primaries among the 120.000 registered members. Should none of them obtain the needed majority, there will be a second round of elections within a fortnight.

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“We face this coming year with a determination to rebuild a more just society”

New Year Greetings from Party Chairman, Deputy Prime Minister Shimon Peres

The Jewish New Year is upon us, a time for reflection, for looking back with pride, and forward with hope. We have achieved much this past year. We took part in bringing back the state of Israel on a path of normalcy and security. We took a major step back from the brink of messianic madness. We helped prove that the majority of people in Israel desire to live peaceful lives that do not entail dominance over another people.

We face this coming year with hope that we will continue on this path towards making Israel a country secure within its borders. The path to peace is never an easy one. It is a path that has no glory for those who tread it. It is a path of compromise in which one is always suspected of having given up too much. There is no victory in peace. If you seek to win too much in peace, you may find yourself losing your partner.

The steps we have taken in this past year, also earned us the respect of the world, for the courage of the action, and for the flawless implementation. As a nation we also re-discovered pride in our soldiers and police men and women who carried out a difficult task with dignity.

Economically this was a year of mixed blessings. Our economy grew, enjoying the renewed confidence of investors who watched the government of Israel lead the country away from war, and one step closer towards peace. But the benefits of growth were not shared by all. The gaps between rich and poor grew. Worst of all, employment ceased to be a way out of poverty, with many working families continuing to suffer from the scourge of poverty. This is not the kind of society we want to have, and it is not the kind of society our founders dreamed of. We face this coming year with a determination to rebuild a more just society, in which work provides a path out of poverty, and in which those who cannot work, can participate in society as equals.

May this year be one in which we all find happiness with our families and loved ones, and in which we have more reasons to be proud of the State we have all worked so hard to build, protect and nurture.

Shana Tova,

Shimon Peres



Labor and Fatah meet in Stockholm

At the invitation of the Swedish Social Democratic Party, leaders of the Israel Labor Party and the Fatah met for high-level talks in Stockholm on September 27 – 28.

Hosted by Foreign Minister Laila Freivalds, Development Minister Carinne Jamtin and the International Secretary of SSDP Ann Linde, the delegations included on the Israeli side Minister Haim Ramon, MK Colette Avital (international secretary), Mayor of Givatayim Effi Stentzler and the Head of the Labor Federation in Haifa, Israel Savyon; on the Palestinian side Deputy Prime Minister Dr Nabil Shaath, Imad Shakkour, member of the Fatah Revolutionary Council and Hassan Hussein Mayor of Jericho.

The participants in the talks agreed that now is the time for a new effort of reconciliation and cooperation, built upon the so-far successful Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. All three parties made it clear that success in Gaza is necessary for any further progress, noting that a lot remains to be done in order to achieve sustainable development of Gaza.

The parties discussed security concerns, the problem of access and passages to and from Gaza, as well as economic and political development. On the vital question of passage via Rafah, the parties noted the agreement to allow for third party involvement, and the readiness from both Israeli and Palestinian sides to find a solution in a reasonable time.

There was complete agreement that a total cessation of all kinds of violence is necessary to make the road to peace possible. This should lead to a resumption of the peace process and the implementation of the Road Map. The Israel Labor Party called upon the Palestinian Authority to renew efforts to dismantle terrorist organizations, and make the necessary efforts so as to reach the status of one authority – one gun. Fatah emphasized the need to create viable political life through elections, reforms and dialogue, to establish one authority with overall security.

The Swedish hosts stressed their readiness to help with various projects the development of Gaza.

The three parties agreed that settlement activity should stop and that illegal outposts should be dismantled.

It was agreed that meetings and talks between the Israel Labor Party and the Fatah would continue, and that the parties would endeavor to encourage contacts at various levels, especially among their youth wings.



Roadmap Revisited

By Ephraim Sneh MK

Twice in the last 18 years, violent conflict has broken out between Israel and the Palestinians: in December 1987 and September 2000. In both cases, the violence was the result of stagnation in the peace process. Both cases were preceded by an unprecedented Israeli effort to change the situation, in which Israel made significant steps toward the Palestinians.

In 1987, Israel was determined to 'improve living conditions' in the territories. We built health clinics and schools in the West Bank, we installed the most up-to-date equipment and computers, and for the first time, we allowed the opening of a Palestinian Bank and several new industrial ventures. There was just one thing missing: there was no progress toward solving the dispute. We tried to create an enlightened occupation, but we gave no hope that it could come to an end. We were given full American backing, and Secretary of State George Schultz was fully informed of all the details of Israeli activity.

In 2000, the Camp David summit was held. That is where Israeli leaders met their Palestinian counterparts and for the first time the most sensitive issues were discussed. Here, too, the U.S. President was involved, unlike in any other international dispute at the time. After the summit failed, however, no effort was made on our part to revive the negotiations. Instead, we started to plan a unilateral move in the West Bank, a plan that was never going to garner international support, and certainly not the support of the Palestinians.



Ephraim Sneh MK on a tour of illegal settlements in the West Bank

Now, too, in August 2005, we find ourselves at the height of another unprecedented situation. For the first time, Israel has withdrawn from land, and the settlements on that land have been evacuated. The United States and the international community, too, support this, and now, too, violence could break out at any time. If the disengagement does not have a sequel, if it turns out to be a move that was designed to tighten Israel's grip on the West Bank and to offer the Palestinians seven enclaves in the guise of 'a state with provisional borders,' a third Intifada seems inevitable. If the Palestinians are not offered the hope of the end of the occupation, and the Israelis are not offered the hope of the end of bloodshed, desperation will lead to another outbreak of violence.

In order to prevent war breaking out again, three simultaneous efforts should be made. Firstly, we should renew, as soon as possible, talks aimed at reaching an agreement, with the aim of realizing the vision of two states solution within a reasonable period of time. Secondly, the Palestinian security forces should be bolstered so that they can impose order on the streets and effectively prevent terrorism. Thirdly, development of the Palestinian economy according to Wolfensohn's plan.

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The road map, which is meant to lay down the guidelines to achieving peace between Israel and the Palestinians, must be updated and adapted to suit the changing reality.

The democratic election of a new Palestinian President, the reform of the Palestinian security forces, the decrease in terror activity by Palestinian terror organizations and the completion of the disengagement should be seen as the implementation of the first phase of the Road Map.

The second phase must be shortened, but must still include all that was not implemented during the first phase: primarily the uprooting of terrorist capabilities and the removal of illegal outposts. The concept of a Palestinian State with 'provisional borders' should be skipped entirely. The concept may have been needed in the days of Yasser Arafat, but now it could be used as a subterfuge for foot-dragging and delays, a sort of "long-term parking" that could delay the peace process for years. There is nothing as permanent in our region as the 'temporary'. A state with provisional borders is mentioned in the text of the road map as an option - and it is time to abandon that option.

The third phase of the road map is negotiations toward a final status agreement. This should start immediately after the elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council and the 17th Knesset. The original wording of the Road Map states that this phase should end sometime in 2005. That will not happen. A reasonable period of time should be allocated to this end - at least three years are needed - given the complicated problems that are on the agenda. Ending the conflict by the end of this decade and creating economic prosperity, is a vision that can be realized. By setting it as a goal, we would stave off the perils of a new war.

Ephraim Sneh is Chairman of Labor faction in the Knesset

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Israel Post-Disengagement, by Colette Avital

It is therefore only after November 9th (at best) that the leadership and the members of Labor will have to consider and decide what our next steps should be. Our positions are clear: we support a continuation of the political process, a renewed, meaningful dialogue with our Palestinian partners, the immediate dismantlement of the illegal outposts, and further "redeployments", and an all-out effort to ensure that Gaza is economically prosperous and politically stable. We demand from the Government a total change in its social and economic policies and see the struggle against growing poverty and inequality as our first priority. To this end Shimon Peres has presented a comprehensive plan to the Government.

Our members will have to decide whether our partnership in Sharon's Government should continue or whether we should pull out. Such decisions will largely depend upon Sharon's own intentions and acts: will he be willing and able to pursue the political process (he has now twice postponed his scheduled meetings with President Mahmoud Abbas), will he be willing to change his economic course and join forces to fight against poverty?

At the beginning of this new Jewish Year 5766, the challenges facing us are great. A political standstill, the lack of hope, could lead us to renewed violence. The opportunities after disengagement exist, and if we seize the moment, we can make a big stride towards peace.

Colette Avital MK is International Secretary

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Scenes from the Disengagement

By Guy Spigelman

I spent two week in reserve duty as a spokesperson for the Israeli Defense forces. In this capacity I witnessed and participated first hand in the withdrawal from Gaza and the North of the West Bank. On the whole I came away feeling more confident in the strength of Israel's society and its institutions than I have for a long time.

Here are some moments that I will never forget.

Bus loads of confused people

On the first day of the forced evacuation I was standing at the Kissufim crossing, the border point between the Gaza strip and Israel. Early in the day – thousands and thousands of troops and police entered 6 settlements to begin the forced evacuation. By about 2.00 pm buses started to leave in the other direction. They were filled with evacuees.



The young protesters who infiltrated the settlements just before the disengagement were singing, yelling and waving signs. The long time residents of Gaza were simply stunned. They just couldn't believe that after all the protests, all the prayers and all the promises by a few Rabbis – this moment had actually arrived. Bus load after bus load of Jews riding to an uncertain future. It was a difficult image to absorb – I had to remind myself that many of the buses were headed for Jerusalem.

The tears of the Amitai family

Most people will remember the evacuation of Kfar Darom for the fierce battle to get off the roof of the Synagogue over 100 extremists. I will remember tears of the Amitai family. Miriam Amitai was murdered in a bus bombing in November 2000, leaving behind her husband Laser and four children.

After the disgraceful scenes of the Synagogue evacuation, I saw Laser and his kids leave the building in tears. This will be the last time they will say Kadish (the prayer of mourning) for Miriam in this Synagogue. It is tragic. Because of a few extremists, the Amitai family and so many others like them, did not get the chance to part respectfully from the place that contains their most joyful and most painful memories.

Ice cream for the troops

Kfar Darom was difficult for the troops. The heat, the insults (I was accused of being a Nazi), the Synagogue battle. After it was all over a truck pulled up and started distributing ice cream to the forces. What a relief. It is just a small symbol of how well planned the entire operation was. Every last detail was taken into account.

The message of the Spokesperson's Unit during the withdrawal was that the army would carry out the operation "professionally, with sensitivity and determination." It was repeated over and over. And this was really the case.

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The army and police conducted themselves superbly: Negotiating where possible, utilizing psychologists, acting with complete restraint, allowing evacuees time to conduct ceremonies or whatever else was required to ease the pain. We had been trained and prepared for every possible scenario and in the end this is what ensured the smooth implementation of the withdrawal.

The withdrawal is over. Ironically, or perhaps not, in terms of a large scale military operation – it was probably the finest hour for the defense forces since the six day war.

Destruction by the sea

It was nice house by Israeli standards. Two stories, well kept gardens, a large entertaining area and views over palm trees to the Mediterranean Sea. In just 8 minutes it was destroyed. Witnessing house after house being demolished in the settlement of Pe'at Sadeh – like something out of Godzilla - was shocking and signaled, more than anything the finality of withdrawal.

A stronger Israel

The withdrawal is over. Ironically, or perhaps not, in terms of a large scale military operation – it was probably the defense forces' finest hour since the six day war.

There was no national trauma, no major violence, Israel's democracy prevailed and so has its chance for unity.

Walking in the streets of Israel a few days after the disengagement I felt a kind of optimism in the air that I haven't felt since the early nineties.

Now it is up to us, in Labor, to capitalize on this move and push towards a final settlement so that we can concentrate on the important things – building a prosperous future for all Israelis.

Guy Spigelman is Editor of Revival and Chairman of I-tech, the hitech forum of the Israeli Labor Party