3. Sharon's Surprise

ON DECEMBER 18, 2003, in an address to the fourth Herzliya Conference on Israeli National Security, Ariel Sharon stunned his own nation, the Palestinians, and much of the rest of the world by embracing the concept of unilateral disengagement in a way that would mean the dismemberment of an unspecified number of existing settlements. First he would seek talks with the Palestinians under the so-called Road Map formula articulated by the Bush administration the previous April 30. But if the Palestinians would not or could not join the process, "then Israel will initiate the unilateral security step of disengagement from the Palestinians."[1] Specifically, the plan would involve "the redeployment of IDF forces along new security lines and a change in the deployment of settlements, which will reduce as much as possible the number of Israelis located in the heart of the Palestinian population."[2]

To repeat: "This reduction of friction will require the extremely difficult step of changing the deployment of some of the settlements."[3] In an early February interview with the pro-pullout newspaper *Haaretz*, Sharon identified the twenty-one Gaza and four Samaria settlements targeted for dismemberment. These were intended as security measures, not an attempt to redefine

1. Address by PM Ariel Sharon at the Fourth Herzliya Conference, December 18, 2003.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

Israel's borders. To underline the defensive nature of the move, work on the fence would be accelerated.[4]

The attempt to interpret Sharon's action engaged journalists, diplomats, and members of the national security and political communities as had few other decisions in the nation's history. To a large extent, this was due to the importance of the decision itself, which was widely assessed as a 180-degree turn on an issue of fundamental importance to Israel's future. But without the irony of the move, much of the electricity in the debate would have been absent. After all, this was the Bulldozer at work, the former young commando who had led raids into Arab villages not always free of the taint of excess. Here was the Suez-crossing hero of the 1973 war. Here was a man who was taking a step nearly certain to split the Likud Party he helped form by aligning his miserable splinter party Shlomzion with the far larger Liberal Party and Menachem Begin's Herut. Here was a defense minister who had deceived his country into a maximalist Lebanon campaign that ended with a humiliating pullback and included mass murders committed by Sharon's Falangist allies at two Palestinian refugee camps for which an Israeli tribunal concluded he bore "indirect responsibility." Here was a cabinet minister who urged Israelis to construct a settlement on every hilltop and who as prime minister allowed fifty-two illegal settlement outposts to get started, barely lifting a finger to shut down more than a handful of them.

Simple enough, explained his admirers. In his old age—he was seventy-five in 2003—Sharon was searching for a legacy. If Greater Israel was not to be had, then an Israel with realistic borders, demographically cohesive and secure living side by side with a nonthreatening Palestinian state was the next-best alternative. In the end a treaty would be required following bilateral talks. But the time was not at hand and so Israel had to act alone.

4. "Disengagement Timeline," *Haaretz Special Magazine*, August 15, 2005.

A number of factors combined to convince Sharon that the time was ripe to act. The first was the quick collapse of the Abu Mazen prime ministerial gambit. President Bush brokered a June 4, 2003, meeting in Aqaba, Jordan involving himself, King Abdullah, Hosni Mubarak, Abu Mazen, and Sharon. The president hoped the chemistry between Sharon and Abu Mazen would be good. Whether or not it was, Sharon delivered very little of what Abu Mazen needed to enhance his political standing back home: prisoners released, checkpoints reduced, travel restrictions eased, curfews ended, the Israeli presence cut sharply. Simply put, with the Second Intifada still pulsing, Sharon had little to offer in any of these areas. And when Abu Mazen returned to Ramallah, he found Arafat working busily to eliminate any of the prime minister's control over security matters. Without Arafat's backing, his ability to control groups like Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), or Fatah's own al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades was nonexistent. By early September, Abu Mazen had resigned; his successor, Ahmed Qureia (Abu Ala), was not a man Sharon trusted.

Second was Sharon's hesitancy about immediately getting involved in Road Map negotiations despite his conditional endorsement of the approach. Presented by President Bush in the heady aftermath of the American military charge to Baghdad, the plan had three essential phases. The first places heavy burdens on the Palestinian side in terms of reforming their political structure and security apparatus and, most important, dismantling the infrastructure of terrorism. The Road Map describes that obligation in these words: "Palestinians declare an unequivocal end to violence and terrorism and undertake visible efforts on the ground to arrest, disrupt and restrain individuals and groups conducting and planning violent attacks on Israelis anywhere."[5]

5. BBC, "The Roadmap: Full Text," BBC News, 30 April, 2003, 17:11 GMT. Available online at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2989783.stm.

By contrast, Israel's chief obligations in phase one are fairly modest: dismantle illegal outposts, quit expanding settlements, and withdraw to the pre-Intifada lines of September 28, 2000. If strictly enforced, the period could be critical as it puts the principal Israeli concern—security—ahead of everything else. Sharon would later regard the Road Map as an asset. At first, however, he had little confidence that the "Quartet" of parties involved with the initiative—the United States, the United Nations, the European Union, and Russia—would, with the exception of the United States, demand very much from the Palestinians and so Israel's incentive to actively assist the Palestinians in their obligations was minimal.

Sharon liked the optional phase two better as it suggests the establishment of a Palestinian state, possibly with provisional borders, while such final status issues as permanent borders, refugees, Jerusalem, and security are negotiated. These things could take a while, a very long while, to resolve despite the Road Map's ambitious three-year implementation scheme. A senior western diplomat confessed: "I don't know what, if anything, Sharon's intention is regarding a Palestinian state. His approach is a very long-term slowly evolving arrangement that ends in a shape nobody sees now."[6] What Sharon saw as the strength of phase two, the Palestinians regarded as a possible means of trapping them permanently inside provisional borders; they have from the outset urged all parties to leapfrog over phase two.

In dozens of unofficial conversations with westerners and potentially sympathetic Israelis, the Palestinians were from the start pleading forbearance. Whether cooped up in the Moqata or set free to mobilize support for the Israeli initiative, Yasser Arafat could not immediately bring the terrorists to heel. Yet neither could anyone else. The major terrorist movement—Hamas—and splinter factions such as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, could only

6. Interview with senior western diplomat, July 22, 2005.

be co-opted by the prospect of statehood. A move to physically disarm them could provoke civil war. Phase two, with the option of provisional borders would encourage mischief. Israel would go about its typical business of creating facts on the ground during the provisional period, leaving the Palestinians at a severe disadvantage in the final status talks. Why not move directly to the phase three period and settle the dispute once and for all?

To security-conscious Israelis, this was a totally unacceptable plan. They could easily envision the United Nations, the European Union, and the Russians lining up behind the Palestinians on one issue after another, with the United States winding up as an honest broker trying to nudge the Israelis along. That was to be avoided at all costs.

The Road Map was not the only formula bothering Sharon. In October 2003, a group of leftist Israeli reserve officers, members of the Knesset, and peace advocates, working with a somewhat less illustrious Palestinian contingent, released a "Virtual Peace Accord," signed in Geneva following lengthy negotiations. Leading the Israeli side was former justice minister and Taba negotiator Yossi Beilin, a man whose empathy for the Palestinian predicament had reached the point where the very mention of his name invited quips and ridicule among more defense-minded Israelis. "Yossi Beilin is a very, very sophisticated political manipulator," snapped Dan Schueftan during one discussion on the Geneva Virtual Accord. "I wish we had somebody like him on the Israeli side."[7]

On the Palestinian side, former PA minister of culture and information, Yasser Abed Rabbo, led the Palestinian team. The juxtaposition of a justice minister versus a press spokesman was not lost on Israelis, many of whom felt the Israeli team was seeking to make policy while the Palestinians sought propaganda

7. Dan Schueftan, transcript of interview with author, Tel Aviv, August 1, 2005.

points. The deal itself, meanwhile, did not explicitly permit Israel to annex its major settlement blocs, instead permitting both sides to swap land on a 1:1 basis, each beginning with the 1967 borders. By contrast, the Clinton Parameters implicitly gave Israel the settlement blocs while leaving the Palestinians with 94–96 percent of their prewar holdings plus a 3 percent "land swap." The Palestinians also increased their hold on a divided Jerusalem under Virtual Geneva. Most critically, under a vague and confusing refugee formula, the Palestinians could well have argued that the Israelis obligated themselves to repatriate as many refugees as the average of individual Arab countries—including Palestine itself—had committed themselves to accept. Admittedly, there were other, more limited interpretations of Israeli responsibility for refugees, but the document lends itself to expansive interpretation. A senior western diplomat offered this sketch of Geneva: "According to Geneva, Israel loses a lot of settlements, gets a lot of Palestinians, and Jerusalem is divided."[8]

Sharon's concern about Geneva was compounded when Secretary of State Colin Powell invited leading members of the negotiating teams to Washington to receive his benediction, an event Powell managed without embracing the specific terms of the deal. Nonetheless, to Jerusalem the inference was clear: move unilaterally and you retain substantial control over events; play the waiting game and you may wind up with the United States pressing you to accept the Road Map process and the Virtual Geneva terms. Sharon, the consummate tactician, would not let that happen. As his senior advisor, Dov Weissglass, would later brag, withdrawing from Gaza was one way to put the Road Map "in formaldehyde."[9]

Demographics undoubtedly played the decisive role in the

8. Interview with senior western diplomat, July 22, 2005.
9. Ari Shavit, "The Big Freeze," *Haaretz Magazine*, October 8, 2004.

prime minister's evolution on unilateralism. A military planner participating in several meetings with Sharon during the 2002–2004 period recalls him as being exceptionally attentive whenever the subject of population projections arose. Another factor was the cost of protecting the settlements. Sharon was becoming convinced that except for military activity related to protecting Gaza settlers, Israelis were giving up very little by pulling out. As Avi Dichter noted, "We have had the fence there since '95. In the last five years we haven't had one suicide bomber who succeeded in crossing the fence."[10] Now and then the Israelis would launch a targeted assassination inside Gaza. The IDF would also come to the rescue of settlements under attack, or retaliate when they had been too late for the rescue. In the main, though, the place was left for Palestinians to run even before the pullout.

Perhaps the most authoritative account of the government's metamorphosis on the issue is offered by Ehud Olmert, the gravel-voiced Cuban cigar-puffing bundle of energy who previously served ten years as mayor of Jerusalem, beginning with an upset victory over the iconic Teddy Kollek and continuing with two successful bids for reelection. He finally resigned, responding to Sharon's invitation to join his government, the Knesset having passed a law forbidding sitting mayors from serving in that body.[11] Once in national government, Olmert became Sharon's most loyal ally, his political alter ego. By the time withdrawal began, he was serving as Sharon's deputy prime minister as well as his finance minister (the post Binyamin Netanyahu vacated over disagreement with the pullout), his minister of industry,

10. Avi Dicther, notes of interview with author, Tel Aviv, August 1, 2005. Now a senior member of the Kadima Knesset delegation, Dichter's views on such matters as future West Bank withdrawals and security arrangements are influential if not decisive.

11. Ehud Olmert, transcript of interview with author, Jerusalem, August 19, 2005.

trade and labor, and the head of the Israel Lands administration. When Sharon suffered an incapacitating stroke on January 4, 2006, Olmert became acting prime minister. Later, he was nominated to head the Kadima (Forward) Party founded by Sharon just weeks before his stroke, winning enough seats to form the new government.

Like Sharon, Olmert traveled a long and tortuous path to Gush Katif. The son of a prominent Herut Party family, Olmert grew up in the right-wing Betar youth movement. Too young to have been among the founders of the state and with only a modest war record, Olmert differed from each of the country's former prime ministers, instead joining the likes of Dan Meridor and Beni Begin as "Princes," or, in the case of Tsipi Livni, a princess of the Likud. He was still far to the right when, as a young Kenesset member in 1978, he watched with disgust as Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin concluded their historic "land for peace" accord. Olmert voted against the treaty, saying Israel should hold onto all the land it had conquered in the 1967 war. Only after it became clear to him that Zionism would never draw enough Jews into the Greater Israel area to match Palestinian numbers on the West Bank and Gaza did his position evolve to one of unilateral disengagement. After his appointment to replace Netanyahu, Olmert acknowledged his early error, saying "I voted against Menachem Begin, 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 the Sinai."[12]

Olmert's claims his conversion was pragmatic. Unable to win an open-ended demographic battle with the Palestinians, the Israeli state had to fashion its own solution to maintain its Jewish nature. He saw no benefit to talks with the Palestinian leadership,

12. Ibid.

his view of it conditioned by the bloody aftermaths of shootings and suicide bombings he had inspected as mayor of Jerusalem, by Arafat punctuating his protestations of peace with a call for a million *shadids* (martyrs) to march on Jerusalem. "Yasser Arafat," said Olmert, speaking the name in a hollow tone. "It's time that civilized people stop being misled by this treacherous murderer and terrorist who has become the role model for terrorist acts across the world in his repeated brutal attacks on innocent people." Still, he sounded less pragmatic and more defeatist when he told a peace group in the summer of 2005 that, "we are tired of fighting, we are tired of being courageous, we are tired of winning, we are tired of defeating our enemies."[13]

During the course of a shirt-sleeved Friday morning session in his cabinet office, Olmert said he never wanted Jews to rule Palestinians. As a young legislator, he was influenced by Moshe Dayan's call for Palestinian autonomy in the Occupied Territories, allowing the Palestinians themselves to define the contours of what would evolve, Dayan believed, into an independent Palestinian state. Israel had committed itself to Palestinian autonomy in the Camp David Accord with Egypt's Anwar Sadat, but Prime Minister Menachem Begin was far more intent on fortifying future Israeli claims to "Judea" and "Samaria" by building settlements there than he was to implementing the agreement. Accordingly, Begin put Joseph Burg, a National Religious Party foe of autonomy, in charge of that program. Dayan continued to urge pulling back unilaterally, leaving the Palestinians to govern themselves, a formula he felt would produce a natural definition of the border. Frustrated, he finally resigned from the government, leaving Olmert to ponder how to take better advantage of some future opportunity should one be presented.[14]

13. Yossi Klein Halevi, "Past Perfect: How Sharon's Successor Could Succeed," *New Republic*, January 23, 2006.

14. Interview with Olmert.

Olmert maintained that hints of Sharon's emerging views surfaced during the 2001 election campaign when he spoke of the need for "painful sacrifices." According to Olmert, "this is a code. Painful means that it would include pulling out from territories which are more sensitive in the collective memory of the Jewish people." A bit of a stretch? Perhaps, but Olmert had more evidence to offer, "And then he said, already going back to the beginning of 2000, that he will recognize a Palestinian state living alongside the state of Israel. Where would the Palestinian state be? So the most inevitable conclusion would be that, yes, even if Sharon didn't spell it out in so many words, he meant dismantling settlements."[15]

For the first part of his administration, Sharon would retreat when queried about any unilateral Israeli move to defuse the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation; it would be November 2003 before the policy seemed to be evolving, now in a public, now in a private fashion. At the time, the Intifada was still inflicting pain and misery on Israel and Sharon's standing in the polls had slipped to the mid-thirties. In mid-November, Sharon and Weisglass traveled to Rome to meet with Italian president Silvio Berlusconi. As *Haaretz* would later report, it was there, on the night of November 17, that the two Israelis gathered with Elliott Abrams, the top Middle East man on the Bush National Security Council. Notably, Abrams had apparently come to the meeting prepared to discuss an initiative proposed by Syria's president Bashar Asad, in which Sharon had little interest. Instead the two told Abrams that Sharon might shortly be announcing plans to unilaterally evacuate Israeli settlements in Gaza. At the time Sharon was contemplating a partial Gaza withdrawal.

The news was not well received by the Americans, who had hoped to get the Road Map process jump-started and preferred

15. Ibid.

bi-lateral to unilateral arrangements.[16] Eventually the positions of both parties would evolve. The United States would come to accept a unilateral Israeli pullback from Gaza and insist on a modest symbolic withdrawal from the West Bank. Sharon and Olmert, meanwhile, would have preferred an even more ambitious West Bank move. And when he did quit Gaza, Sharon also gave up control over the Philadelphia Corridor separating Egypt from Gaza, a favorite route—both above and below ground—for terrorists and weapons smugglers.

Returning to Israel, Sharon raised the prospect of unilateral action in a talk to the Prime Minister's Business Conference in Tel Aviv, later jibing Olmert, "Ehud, I didn't see that you jumped off your seat when I said unilateral actions." Olmert replied, "I listened very carefully."[17] Carefully enough so that a few weeks later, when Sharon asked him to pinch hit at the annual memorial tribute to David Ben Gurion, "I decided on the spot that I am going to give it a push. And on the grave I made a very, very strong statement about giving up the dream of Greater Israel, which, coming from the vice prime minister and senior Likud spokesman, and so on and so forth, was a very dramatic statement." Shimon Peres hugged him, saying, "This is very dramatic" and Ehud Barak told him the moment was "a historic turning point." Determined to seize the moment and bring his boss along, Olmert followed with an interview in *Yediot Achronnot*, the nation's largest daily, urging a unilateral Israeli pullout from much of Gaza and the West Bank.[18]

His comments provoked a front-page headline story. As Olmert later recounted: "Sharon called me on that day, and he said, 'Are you still in Jerusalem?' And I said, 'Yes.' And he said, 'Is

16. Aluf Benn, "Metamorphosis of Ariel Sharon," *Haaretz Special Magazine*, August 15, 2005.

17. Interview with Olmert.

18. Ibid.

Jerusalem still in our hands after your interview?' And we were laughing and he said, 'I think it's about time that we take a serious step.'"[19]

As the decision to withdraw was being discussed, Olmert combined a caveat for Sharon's course of action with a proposal to go well beyond anything then under consideration:

> I told him, "You have to get ready for a dramatic political change, because the Likud will not survive this." And I said, "Let's start from the beginning on a much bigger, much greater scale operation than just Gaza, because the political devastation will be the same anyway, and you don't want to go in stages—go through this pain every two years—so let's do at the beginning something much bigger that will give us rest for ten or fifteen years."[20]

Sharon thereby agreed to a parallel pullback on the West Bank that included several settlements beyond the four—Ganim, Kadim, Sa-Nur, and Homesh, with their combined ninety-five families—eventually evacuated. Yet then the Americans said, "Don't push too much." The question thereby becomes: who on the administration's team was reticent about going further?

"All of them," Olmert recalled:

> Hadley, Elliot, Condi—mostly Condi, but all of them. I think that the reason is that the American administration wanted that the first phase of disengagement will be a trigger for eventual serious negotiations with the Palestinians and therefore, they didn't want it to be such that, you know, from Israel's point of view would justify parking for many years. So they wanted it to be something, but they wanted it not to be too big from Israel's point of view saying, "Now we have done our share, we want to rest for a few years."[21]

Clearly, as Olmert's narrative suggests, the U.S. administration

19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.

wanted enough West Bank settlements evacuated to establish a precedent, but not so many as to compromise the big Gaza initiative or to provide Israel with an excuse to do nothing else on the West Bank for an extended period.

Olmert described the eventual withdrawal as more significant than even the peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan that led to the normalization of diplomatic relations with those two states. That is, "for the first time in the history of the Zionist movement, the Jewish people decided to turn the tide and to make a U-turn, if you will, in the most sensitive point in the Zionist ethos, which is settlements."[22] The chance is presently at hand, in other words, to secure a dramatic redefinition of the Israeli enterprise concomitantly with a change in the political status quo.

Sharon faced some tricky political business following disclosure of his pullout plans. Senior political advisers urged him to seek a national referendum on the pullout, but Sharon demurred, allowing his right-wing erstwhile allies to seize the moment. Thirteen members of his own party, led by the consistent if not charismatic Uzi Landau, withdrew their support for his government alongside a smattering of right-wing Knesset members. He immediately set about replacing the departed votes by inviting Labor and its nineteen Knesset votes into the coalition, but it was not until the autumn of 2004 that he won formal approval from his party, Likud, to make the deal. Earlier his own central committee rebelled, voting first to reject the planned withdrawals and later to demand a referendum on the question. The former action followed perhaps the most successful political move by the Yesha Council of its entire campaign, thousands of council members going door to door to rally Central Committee members to the task.

Not all of the opposition to the pullout was emotional and religious. A number of respected military strategists also stepped forward to challenge the security ramifications of Sharon's move.

22. Ibid.

None were more effective than Yaakov Amidror, a hard-line retired major general. Writing in the December 2004 issue of the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies' *Strategic Assessment*, Amidror called the move, "a strategic error of historical magnitude." In the first place, the withdrawal would feed the Palestinian myth that terrorism defeated Israel. The result would be that Qassam rockets would target Ashkelon, Sderot, and other Negev towns in an expanded series of attacks and the influence of terrorist organizations would grow. "Thus, Israel is about to establish a state in Gaza, a state in which Hamas will have freedom of action and be joined by the umbilical cord to Hizbollah." The contagion could thereupon spread to the West Bank where Israel had been waging a successful anti-terrorist campaign to that point. Amidror also expressed concern that the IDF and Shin Bet would lose assets on the ground that would become less vulnerable to Israeli control. "At the heart of terrorist infrastructures are the leaders, the commanders in the field, the operatives, the laboratories, and they can be attacked."[23]

But maybe not after the withdrawal. Maybe then the threat from the West Bank will point directly at the heart of Israel's major cities. "The Palestinian strategy will be clear: the creation of a threat against Israel's home front, while waging a terrorist and guerrilla war under the protection of their umbrella that prevents Israel from retaliation."[24] From what was perhaps the world's most successful anti-terrorism campaign, Israel was reaching out to embrace unnecessary defeat.

Opposition to the withdrawal, however, suffered from five factors that increasingly made Sharon look more and more like a winner. The first was an inability by opponents to make a fundamental decision on what they were all about. Were they reli-

23. Yaakov Amidror, "The Unilateral Withdrawal: A Security Error of Historical Magnitude," *Strategic Assessment* 7, no. 3 (December 2004).

24. Ibid.

gious or secular? Should their opposition be active or passive? Were they battling for victory here and now, or building a constituency for big battles to come later on the West Bank?

Paradoxically, the answer might well have been all of the above. At times the foes of withdrawal slashed tires and blocked busy roads and streets. Then they wore orange and handed out ribbons. Some rabbis urged soldiers to ignore their commanders and refuse to evict settlers while others simply urged commanders to consider the moral qualms of their troops when assigning tasks. Two rabbis issued a *pulsa denura*, pleading with God's angels to strike Sharon dead, a black plea that recalled a similar injunction with Yitzhak Rabin as the target.[25] One can only imagine their mystical joy upon receiving word of Sharon's brain hemorrhage.

At the end, most settlers and their allies accepted their fate with little more than passive resistance. Simply put, the militant settlers may not have had an option given the vast capabilities of the IDF and other security forces. The evacuation of the Maoz Yam hotel at Gush Katif had been accomplished in less time than it would take to watch one quarter of a basketball game. And the showdown at Kfar Maimon appeared more a surrender by an outmaneuvered "army" than a voluntary abandonment of plans to swarm into Gaza.

A second factor was the steady political support Sharon's plan enjoyed throughout the entire period. The Israeli press was overwhelmingly on his side. Nearly all polls showed support for the pullout hovering around 57 percent throughout the entire period.[26] Some on the orange side described a shift during the campaign where more Israeli Arabs came to favor the pullout while

25. In Jewish mysticism, a curse upon a sinner.

26. See, for example, Agence France Presse—English, "Most Israelis Support Gaza Withdrawal: Poll," *Agence France Presse*, July 18, 2005; UPI Correspondents, "Israelis' Support for Pullback Increases," *UPI*, July 1, 2005; and UPI Correspondents, "Smaller Majority Still Favors Pullouts," *UPI*, June 10, 2005.

Table 1. List of Israeli Fatalities Attributable to Terrorism

Year	*Fatalities*
2001	235
2002	451
2003	210
2004	120
2005 (through 31 July)	60

Source: Interview with Avi Dichter, Tel Aviv, August 1, 2005.

more Israeli Jews opposed it. This mirrored Palestinian sentiment on the West Bank and Gaza where even the initially skeptical came to view the pullout as a net gain, regardless of Sharon's motives.[27] Still, it appears that a majority of Israeli Jews, both on the street and in the Knesset, favored the withdrawal. A few months later, this would be reflected in the early rush of support for Kadima, the party Sharon established after leaving the Likud in November 2005.

The third factor was an improving security situation, particularly on the West Bank. In turn, this fueled a sense of optimism about the wall and the general security regime that would follow the pullout. The critical vote in the Knesset came on June 6, 2004 in the midst of this upswing; such favorable security trends were evident both before that vote and before a later implementation resolution. Table 1 displays the list of Israeli fatalities attributable to terrorism compiled by former Shin Bet director Avi Dichter; the vast majority of Israeli fatalities came from suicide bombers.[28]

Dichter claimed that when Operation Defensive Shield, launched in June 2002, permitted him to set up shop in the West Bank, terrorist leaders were spending 90 percent of their time

27. Data provided by the Palestine Center for Policy and Survey Research at www.pcpsr.org/survey/index.html, accessed January 9, 2006.

28. Interview with Dichter.

planning attacks and 10 percent providing for their own security. Palestinian security forces, established in large measure to combat terrorism, were openly fighting alongside the terrorists. Leaders like Marwan Barghouti organized terrorist forces from the remnants of the quasi-official PA militia, Tanzim.

Per his own estimate, Dichter's efforts—using targeted killings against those known to have been involved in planning or executing deadly attacks, developing a network of reliable informers, vastly improving intelligence, skillfully interrogating arrested terrorism suspects, restricting the ease of Palestinian movements with checkpoints and patrols, dismantling Palestinian militias and security forces, and taking advantage of the security fence to track and prevent violations of the Israeli border—reversed the way terrorist leaders budgeted their time. Personal security now came first, with the planning and execution of attacks relegated to the back burner out of sheer necessity.[29]

One can debate many things about Israeli counterterrorism techniques, but unlike the United States in Iraq, Sri Lanka against the Tamil Tigers, and Colombia against FARC, the Israeli approach worked. Israel "won" by changing the background conditions of the operating environment. Moreover it worked without the murderous excess with which Saddam addressed his Shiites or Asad his Hama foes. And with the decline in terror-related deaths and injuries came renewed confidence in the Sharon approach, confidence that translated seamlessly to support for his unilateral disengagement.

Fourth, the one man who might have mobilized national opposition to the Sharon plan, Finance Minister and former prime minister Binyamin (Bibi) Netanyahu, never really got into the fray until it was too late to be seen as anything other than a political opportunist. Indeed, by the time evacuation day arrived, Netan-

29. Ibid.

yahu could well have been mistaken for a well-known Democrat who explained his vote against funding for Iraq with the words, "I voted against it. But before that I voted for it."

In fairness, Netanyahu had been doing important work at the Ministry of Finance and had been doing it well. A self-declared "Reaganite-Thatcherite," he was a champion of privatization, selling off big banks, the telephone company Bezek, and the national airline, El Al. He had also cut the welfare rolls, which, along with defense spending cuts, had trimmed the deficit as a percent of GDP from 6.5 to 4.3 in just two years. Small wonder he had been heralded in *Fortune* magazine as a modern public sector economic manager who had helped his country's economy rebound from the Intifada-induced slump to the sort of high-tech heaven that had put Tel Aviv in the same class as South Beach or Santa Monica. Netanyahu's economic program was important enough to him that on at least one occasion he had traded Sharon's backing for his support for the pullout.[30]

Yet on the very eve of the final cabinet vote authorizing commencement of the evacuation, Netanyahu broke ranks, giving an interview to the *Jerusalem Post* in which he came out totally against the withdrawal while insisting he would remain in the cabinet in order to complete his important work.[31] Netanyahu's grounds were succinct. For one thing, he did not like unilateral concessions in principle, particularly after a long anti-terrorist campaign. "This withdrawal is taking place under terrorist pressure," he complained, from which the leaders of Hamas and Islamic Jihad would conclude that terrorism pays.[32] Already an extra NIS 300 million (4.362 was the NIS/dollar exchange rate on January 15, 2006) had been allocated to shore up defenses in the

30. Nelson D. Schwartz, "Prosperity without Peace," *Fortune*, June 13, 2005.

31. Caroline B. Glick, "Why Is Bibi Still in the Government?" *Jerusalem Post*, August 5, 2005.

32. Ibid.

Negev, due to a "realistic possibility" that the security situation there would soon get worse.

Additionally, Netanyahu said that yielding control of the Philadelphia Corridor running along the border between Gaza and Egypt would open the area to weapons smuggling. This observation notably ignored the fact that Israelis had themselves not found a way to stop smuggling through a series of tunnels going under or around the Rafah checkpoint. If *he* were in charge, apparently this would not be an issue. The Palestinians would also use ports for weapons smuggling, Netanyahu warned. "Now there will be a Karine A, a Karine B, Karine C and Gaza will be transformed into a base for Islamic terrorism adjacent to the coast of the State of Israel," he claimed.[33]

Netanyahu's views on Abu Mazen did not seem to differ materially from those of Sharon. It was good to see the Palestinian leader renounce terrorism, but frustrating to see his squeamishness about tackling Hamas and the other terrorist groups, and frustrating to hear him continue to insist on the right of return. "He isn't as terrible as Arafat because he does not actively support terrorism, but he doesn't fulfill the other criteria," said Netanyahu, words that could just as easily have come from the mouth of Sharon.[34] But where Sharon opted to take unilateral steps, Netanyahu—ever the hard-liner—would have devoted his energies to perpetuating the status quo.

To no one's surprise, Netanyahu was out of the cabinet by the time it next met. He and Sharon had some big matters to settle but the dispute would have to wait until after the withdrawal, when Sharon would leave the Likud and Netanyahu would become its candidate for the March 2006 election. This defining struggle between two political heavyweights ended even before it began with Sharon's stroke of January 4.

33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.

Fifth and finally, Sharon's move earned him exactly the support he sought from the Bush administration, providing him with an opening within the spirit, if not the framework, of the Road Map. The highest immediate priority became making sure the withdrawal went smoothly and with little or no violence from the Palestinian side, including Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the al-Aqsa Martyr's Brigade. The parties also paid some attention to "day after" issues: disposing of the homes and greenhouses and fixtures to be left behind; determining how the checkpoint regime between Egypt and Gaza would work; providing for access between Gaza and the West Bank; deciding how many Gaza residents would be permitted to work in Israel; settling issues relating to the joint custom regime. Trying to resurrect the actual Road Map could wait, affording Sharon needed political breathing space.

Sharon also sought and received support from President Bush on critical final status issues. In an exchange of letters in April of 2004, Mr. Bush offered some long-desired statements on how the United States would interpret UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 as regards Israeli settlement blocs outside the Green Line:

> In light of new realities on the ground, including already existing major Israeli population 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.[35]

Sharon would soon embarrass his benefactor by claiming that

35. David Makovsky, *Engagement through Disengagement* (Washington: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2005), Appendix 8, "Exchange of Letters between Prime Minister Sharon and President Bush, April 2004," 116–120.

the president's words meant that the United States accepted the three large settlement blocs—Ariel, Gush Etzion, and Ma'aleh Adumim—as part of Israel. Red-faced U.S. diplomats tried to explain that the letter carried no weight as a formal statement of U.S. policy and that the president was not seeking to resolve specific issues.

At a joint White House press conference on April 14, 2004, the president interpreted the security wall in a way that made it acceptable within the framework of the Road Map: "The barrier being erected by Israel as part of that security effort should, as your government has stated, be a security rather than a political barrier. It should be temporary rather than permanent, and therefore not prejudice any final status issues, including final borders."[36]

Sharon could not have asked for more supportive words as they put the United States squarely on Israel's side of an advisory case on the security barrier being heard at the Hague's International Court of Justice. In that most unfriendly venue, Israel would later be found to have erected the wall as a political rather than a national security barrier since there was no Palestinian state and thus no need for a national security measure to protect against its incursions. This was, of course, the essence of judicial cynicism. If there was no threat from the Palestinians, where were all those Qassam rockets and plastic suicide bombs coming from? And who was killing all those civilians? Had the court's reasoning been applied to the September 11 attacks, no retaliatory action by the United States would have been justified because the nineteen terrorists represented no particular nation.

Finally, at that April press conference, Sharon obtained from Mr. Bush the most direct presidential statement ever dealing with the issue of the Palestinian right of return:

36. David Makovsky, supra, Appendix 9, "Excerpts from Joint Bush-Sharon Press Conference, White House, April 14, 2004," pp. 123–125.

> It seems clear that an agreed, just, fair and realistic framework for a solution to the Palestinian refugee issue as part of any final status agreement will need to be found through the establishment of a Palestinian state and the settling of Palestinian refugees there rather than Israel.

No Israeli leader ever enjoyed such a level of support from an American president. In a dazzling display of friendship, the president had accepted the wall and put a favorable spin on its purpose, read Yasser Arafat out of the negotiation game, embraced the idea of settlements outside the Green Line remaining in Israeli hands, and took a stand on the right of return that could have been (and may have been) drafted by the prime minister's office. Sharon would soon win three critical votes in the disengagement process, the first approving the unilateral disengagement plan; the second, authorization by his Likud Party for a coalition agreement with Labor; and the third, permitting the withdrawal to begin. He was riding high.