

Preface

The day after the stunning Hamas victory of January 24, a number of calls from friends and colleagues expressed their condolences. Their voices were hushed, empathetic, suitable for a bereavement occasion, which I guess they thought it was. First Sharon and now this! Could your luck have been any worse? Do you still have a book left? Oh, I feel so badly for you.

Well, dry those tears, folks. The editorial casket is still empty. Woe be unto the author who writes a book that chases the headlines as opposed to merely taking them into account as one would any other new source of information. In those hollow months between submission and publication, the headlines will always catch and pass the narrative.

Not so with a book about a strategy, in this case unilateral separation. It was designed by strategic thinkers—both military and civilian—to address a situation where the status quo was unacceptable, where negotiated change was to be preferred, but where that prospect was rendered unobtainable by the absence of a negotiating partner on the other side. The proffered solution was to implement the desired changes unilaterally and to undertake defensive measures to prevent any corresponding degradation of security. In its first stage, this meant total Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, symbolic withdrawal from four West Bank settlements, and construction of a security fence to keep suicide bombers and other terrorists at bay.

The purpose of the move was essentially demographic. There

were too many Palestinians and too few Israelis living on land controlled by Israel. Gaza was an extreme example of this situation, with eight thousand Jews and 1.3 million Arabs living in close proximity. To preserve both the Jewish and democratic character of the Israeli state, a withdrawal was needed. Eventually, the logic goes, the combination of tearing down settlements far from the borders of pre-1967 Israel and building a security fence around the country's new perimeter would come to define the permanent borders of Israel.

This strategy was adopted by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon—originally a skeptic—vis-à-vis a Palestinian government totally controlled by the actions (or lack thereof) of the discredited Yasser Arafat and his Fatah political party. The withdrawal was executed after Arafat's death and his replacement by Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), an opponent of the Second Intifada. However, though he is, by all accounts, a good and decent man, he is also something of a ninety-seven-pound political weakling.

Fatah, meanwhile, with its Intifada treachery and out-of-control militias, was still a fair distance from being judged negotiation-eligible. Yet compared to Hamas—with its charter-based commitment to the eradication of Israel and slaughter of Jews—it was positively benign. Most Israelis, their American backers, and even their European associates were sorry to see Hamas win the January 2006 legislative council elections. The strategy of unilateral disengagement, however, is more applicable to a Hamas-led Palestinian government than it was to a Fatah government with whom Road Map negotiations would probably have begun within a matter of months. If one may venture a prediction, unilateral Israeli actions affecting both land and security will become the norm for dealing with the Palestinians in the wake of the January 2006 elections and continue so long as Hamas is both in power and committed to its present objectives.

My first brush with the strategy of unilateral disengagement

Preface

xv

came during the bleak summer of 2002 when suicide bombers were doing their bloody work in many of Israel's major cities. A left-of-center academic who was, when I first met him in the mid-1980s, a foe of Israeli West Bank settlements, argued that Israel could not leave it to terrorists to define the kind of state it is. It has no business imposing itself on five and one-half million Palestinians as you then get into the business of perennial suppression, bad news for a democracy. On the other hand, Israel has always been able to protect its borders against Egypt, Jordan, and Syria; Israeli defense was strong irrespective of the given enemy. Thus, one did not need to occupy their people to attain one's goals. Pull back, put up a fence, keep your military options open, and you will have both security and demography working for you.

I did not like the idea at first because it fell between negotiating a complete, internationally recognized and secure accord or—another effective remedy—bashing the stuffing out of the people who attack you. This would look like an Israeli retreat. Terrorists would be emboldened. Or, worse yet, opportunities to achieve a real negotiating breakthrough would be fatally undermined.

Yet I could not resist the opportunity to come back and see for myself how the withdrawal from Gaza was working, its searing effect upon the religious Zionists, its role in the self-rediscovery of the country's political center, the judgment of Palestinians of several political persuasions (including Hamas), and the views of many of Israel's rising political stars, including Deputy—now Acting—Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Minister of Justice—now Foreign Minister—Tsipi Livni. Where possible without compromising the flow of the narrative, as well as to do justice to the original intentions of this work, I let their comments run long enough for the reader to get a feel for the texture as well as the substance of their remarks

My approach, as you might guess, is half academic and half

journalistic. I begin chapter 1 with an account of the actual pull-out from Gaza and the frustrated efforts by Orthodox Jewish supporters from the West Bank settlements who tried to come to the settlers' aid. In chapter 2, I deal with the evolution of the idea of unilateral disengagement, a concept which actually grew from Israeli efforts to picture what a negotiated resolution of border differences might look like if negotiations were successful.

Sharon, the former "Bulldozer" of the settlement movement, was the indispensable party to the new policy and I devote chapter 3 to his metamorphosis. His illness, though tragic, nonetheless presented Israeli voters with the chance to reject or institutionalize the doctrine during a political campaign without Sharon's daunting presence. Truly this campaign was interpreted by all parties as a referendum on unilateral withdrawal from much of the West Bank. When he does develop a comprehensive plan, Olmert may not have to seek approval outside the Knesset.

Chapter 4 gives the beleaguered Palestinian moderates their moment in the sun. Then in chapters 5 and 6, I isolate Palestinian terrorism and Israeli settlement policies at some length as each represents the fundamental grievance of each side with the other and deserves independent examination. With Hamas now in the Palestinian saddle, both issues become even more important as both Israel and the U.S. say there can be no talks with Hamas until it renounces terrorism even as Hamas maintains it will not relent in its commitment to destroy Israel until Israel returns to the 1967 borders.

In chapter 7, I look at the exceptionally active and important period of politics and diplomacy that resulted from the Gaza pull-out, including the collapse of Abu Mazen's efforts to both placate and neutralize Hamas and Sharon's venture to translate Gaza into improved international standing and, finally, his push to form a new centrist party, Kadima (Forward). Kadima's victory, in a closer-than-anticipated vote, left open the question of whether the

Preface

xvii

Kadima Party, the policy of nationalism, or both can now stand alone without the protective hulk of Sharon in the picture. I then conclude with chapter 8, summarizing where disengagement has been, where it may go in the future under given conditions, and underscore the politically realist-minded assumptions that continue to drive the policy forward.

Like Sharon, I have come a long way on unilateral disengagement without becoming in any sense blind to its limitations. A wily terrorist does not belong at the negotiating table. Still, his absence need not define the nature of Israeli society or the boundaries of the Israeli state, and it is with this assumption in mind that I approach the material.