

**DISENGAGEMENT AND AFTER:
WHERE NEXT FOR SHARON AND THE LIKUD?**

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DISENGAGEMENT AND AFTER:

WHERE NEXT FOR SHARON AND THE LIKUD?

I. OVERVIEW

On 20 February 2005, the Israeli cabinet voted overwhelmingly to approve the unilateral evacuation of settlements in Gaza and parts of the northern West Bank. Obstacles still remain -- the government may not survive the pending budget vote; violence in the occupied territories may scuttle the disengagement plan; Likud rebels may engineer delaying tactics and impose a referendum; and Prime Minister Sharon could be the victim of an assassination attempt. But the significance of the vote ought not be underestimated. If, as widely expected, it is implemented during the second half of 2005, it would represent the first time that Israel has evacuated settlements established in the occupied Palestinian territories. The unilateral nature of Sharon's initiative -- Israel is prepared to coordinate its implementation with the Palestinians, not to negotiate its parameters -- also signals a radical departure from the bilateral mode of Israeli-Palestinian interaction.

In just over a year since he announced his intention, Ariel Sharon has confounded friends and foes alike. Despite having lost a May 2004 referendum on the disengagement plan within his own Likud party, persistent and stiff opposition within the party leadership, and the fact that its supporters cannot agree on where disengagement should lead, he has overcome one hurdle after another.

Speculation as to Sharon's intentions is rampant. Some see a shrewd and so far successful attempt to unburden Israel of the Gaza Strip in order to consolidate its hold over East Jerusalem and much of the West Bank with Washington's blessing. Others perceive a fundamental strategic transformation on the Prime Minister's part that ultimately may lead to a viable two-state solution. Most interpretations fall somewhere in between, and a not insignificant number are convinced that Sharon has launched a process whose endpoint even he does not know and, no less importantly, may not be able to control. In the words of an Israeli observer, "Those who know Sharon too well are guilty today of not knowing

him at all. This is a case in which familiarity breeds ignorance".¹ That so much depends on something about which we apparently know so little is one of the striking paradoxes of the current reality.

This briefing, based on months of interviews with Likud members and insiders, attempts to map the Prime Minister's and his party's respective trajectories, explore possible reasons behind the shift to unilateral disengagement, and assess how far they eventually might go. Several important conclusions emerge:

- Although Sharon undoubtedly will continue to face resistance within his party, the ideological battle in the Likud over disengagement appears to be over. Even sceptics are bowing to the inevitability of what once would have been considered heretical, and many now accept its political wisdom, completing the evolution of a party once beholden to the dream of Greater Israel. The remaining Likud rebels seem to be waging a rear-guard fight, fuelled by a mix of ideological conviction and political ambition.
- For Sharon and his supporters, the unilateral aspect of the plan is at least as significant as its disengagement component, for it represents a fundamental departure from the logic of negotiations and reciprocity that governed Israeli-Palestinian relations from the outset of the peace process in 1991 and was most recently confirmed in the Roadmap. Although originally justified by the absence of a Palestinian partner and, in particular, by Yasser Arafat's leadership, unilateralism reflects a deeper trend which is likely to continue even with a new Palestinian leadership and despite the possibility of renewed partnership. As an Israeli journalist remarked, the logic of reciprocity has not so much been abandoned as altered; the quid pro quo is not with the Palestinians but with the U.S. administration, which has endorsed the concept of settlement blocs in the West Bank. Sharon is "the first to agree to evacuate settlements inside Eretz

¹ Crisis Group interview, Washington, December 2004.

Yisrael, the Biblical land of Israel. He is the first to hand over territories without a formal agreement; but he is also the first to get American backing for the establishment of facts over the Green Line".²

- The secret to Sharon's success has been his paradoxical ability to be both supremely decisive and supremely vague. Moving with determination, he has carefully avoided shedding light on his strategic objectives, allowing him to present his plan to the Likud and other sceptics as a means of defeating the Palestinian national movement and ensuring permanent Israeli incorporation of West Bank settlement blocs and to Labour as well as the international community as a means of jump-starting the moribund peace process.
- While Sharon's intentions may remain unspoken, interviews suggest his actions are based on a series of assumptions: first, that he cannot achieve through negotiations an agreement acceptable to him; secondly, that he could not maintain the status quo indefinitely because pressure would have built for far greater compromises along the lines of President Clinton's parameters or the Geneva Accords; and therefore, thirdly, that he has to dispense with what is dispensable in order to retain what is strategic. In that sense, he appears to have abandoned the idea of restricting a Palestinian state to the meagre 42 to 50 per cent of the West Bank that had long been assumed to be his goal and so to have gone beyond what many in the Likud are prepared to accept today. The disengagement plan (which includes the evacuation but also the building of the separation barrier taking in some 7 per cent of the West Bank) seeks to create a situation that in Sharon's view will take the sting out of the conflict's tail and thus make it manageable -- improving Palestinian daily lives, establishing a Palestinian state with provisional borders that encompasses perhaps 80 per cent or more of the West Bank; and protecting what he considers Israel's vital interests within the occupied territories.

As such, unilateral disengagement must be understood as an attempt to stabilise the Palestinian situation while creating powerful political insurance against international efforts to end the conflict on the basis of the current broad international consensus -- a consensus whose terms are unacceptable to Sharon. Combined with other local and regional developments, it may well prove a recipe for short-term stability, no mean feat after four years of tragic bloodshed. But that is probably all it can achieve. Once disengagement from

Gaza and the northern West Bank has been completed, it will be impossible to ignore the fundamental strategic divide that separates Sharon's preference for a long-term interim arrangement from Palestinian President Abu Mazen's goal of a comprehensive agreement, and foolhardy not to do anything about it.

The challenge for the international community is to be fully supportive of Israel's path-breaking evacuation while remaining mindful of what comes both with and after it. Endorsing the withdrawal should not mean endorsing either construction of the separation barrier beyond the 1967 lines, consolidation of West Bank settlements in the absence of a negotiated agreement, or developments in East Jerusalem that preclude the establishment of a viable Palestinian state. President Bush's recent statement emphasising the need for a viable, sovereign state, and in particular his assertion that "a state of scattered territories will not work",³ are welcome words that, one hopes, will be accompanied by U.S. diplomatic action.

² Nahum Barnea in *Yediot Aharonot*, 21 February 2005.

³ Remarks by President Bush, Belgium, 21 February 2005.

II. THE LIKUD'S LONG JOURNEY

A. BACKGROUND

Although hard-line critics accuse Sharon of having discarded the Likud's ideals, in reality the party's journey toward a more pragmatic view has been in the making for several decades.

From the outset, the Likud was defined by its focus on Jewish national security and preservation of the Land of Israel, coupled with rejection of Palestinian national claims. Its predecessor, the pre-independence Revisionist Zionist Movement (founded in 1925), sharply opposed the dominant, more pragmatic approach of the mainstream Zionist establishment led by David Ben-Gurion (leader of Mapai) and Chaim Weizmann. Headed by Vladimir Jabotinsky, the Revisionists dismissed efforts to seek an agreement with Arabs. Rather, Jabotinsky called for a more aggressive policy towards the Arabs and the British Mandatory Power. Instead of seeking Arab consent and compromise, he argued that Jews should establish an "iron wall" against Arab national aspirations until the emergence of an accommodationist Arab leadership in the region that realised the Jewish presence could not be challenged and no longer harboured the goal of destroying the Jewish state-in-the-making. Jabotinsky rejected Ben-Gurion's support for the partition of the Mandate territory into two separate entities linked by a federal structure and asserted claims to the East Bank (i.e., Trans-Jordan).⁴ After Israel's independence, Revisionists found a political home in the Herut Party (*Tnuat HaHerut*) -- literally, the Freedom Movement -- led by the charismatic Menachem Begin. In 1965, the party merged with the Liberal Party and formed the Gahal bloc which, in 1967, briefly joined a national unity government.

The Revisionists' aspirations regarding the establishment of a "Greater Israel" (originally encompassing all of Mandatory Palestine and Trans-Jordan) appeared one step closer to fulfilment when, in the course of the 1967 war, Israel captured the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The Likud, created in 1973 at the instigation of Ariel Sharon, who had just left the Israel Defence Forces, drew together an array of anti-Labour parties⁵ and maintained the Revisionists' nationalism and attachment to territory.

Breaking with decades of Labour monopoly on government since the establishment of Israel in 1948, the Likud came to power in 1977. Its first tangible step back from a maximalist territorial agenda occurred in the wake of the Israeli-Egyptian peace accord, in which Prime Minister Menachem Begin agreed to the evacuation of settlements in the Sinai -- an evacuation carried out by then Agriculture Minister Sharon. Under Yitzhak Shamir's leadership, the Likud government also participated -- after much prodding by Washington -- in the 1991 Madrid Summit and subsequent talks with Arab counterparts. From opposition ranks, a number of Likud legislators supported Israel's peace agreement with Jordan in October 1994, thereby abandoning their ambition of transforming Jordan into the Palestinian state.

Having returned to power after Benjamin Netanyahu narrowly edged out Shimon Peres in the 1996 elections, the Likud was faced with its most significant dilemma: whether or not to pursue the Oslo process, which clearly contemplated further territorial withdrawals from the occupied territories and that it had virtually characterised as treasonous while in opposition. Although Netanyahu hardened Israel's negotiating stance, raising the banner of "reciprocity" to slow down any territorial concessions by invoking inadequate Palestinian security performance, he quickly acknowledged Israel's continued commitment to Oslo and to the land-for-peace equation that underpinned it. In 1997, the Hebron Accord saw a Likud-led government cede parts of that revered city to Palestinian control. A year later, at the Wye River Summit, Netanyahu agreed to Israel's withdrawal from a further 13 per cent of the West Bank. While Netanyahu stalled during the remaining months of his tenure, bringing the Oslo process to a virtual halt, the Likud clearly had no coherent alternative strategy and -- if only because of the heavy international cost -- could not bring itself to formally renounce it.

Ariel Sharon's election in 2001, after the collapse of the Camp David Summit and the eruption of the Palestinian uprising, was not just a crushing political defeat of Israel's Left. It was, more importantly, a repudiation of the conflict resolution approach that had guided the Left since Oslo. Ariel Sharon was thus at the helm of a re-energised Likud, bolstered by the public belief that the primary goal was to protect Israel from Palestinian violence. Whether or not the Israeli leadership still formally was committed to the Oslo process was, in this sense, beside the point: because it took the position that no negotiations would resume until violence ended, the government (initially a coalition that included Labour) was spared the need to further define its political stance.

⁴ Colin Shindler, *The Land Beyond Promise. Israel, the Likud and the Zionist Dream* (London, 2002), pp. 12-14.

⁵ These included the Gahal bloc, which, in 1965, allied Menachem Begin's Herut party, successor to the Revisionist Movement and the Liberal Party (which Sharon later joined);

the Free Centre Party (which earlier had splintered from Herut); the National List and the Labour Group of Greater Israel.

By endorsing the Quartet's Roadmap in early 2002, the Likud-led government agreed to a platform that included a freeze on settlements, the creation of a Palestinian state, and a final status agreement, thus going further than any of its Labour predecessors. Still, because this endorsement was coupled with a slew of reservations and conditions that restricted its obligations and premised these on Palestinian performance on security and reform that few Israeli officials believed to be in the immediate offing, and the plan did not spell out a vision of the endgame, it was not clear how far the Likud was prepared to go or what strategic course it had embarked on.

Sharon's subsequent initiative to disengage unilaterally from Gaza and the northern West Bank was a far more significant step.

B. THE DISENGAGEMENT PLAN AND THE LIKUD

In December 2003, speaking at a conference in Herzliya, Prime Minister Sharon announced his intention to implement a unilateral disengagement plan, entailing Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and from four northern West Bank settlements:

We are interested in conducting direct negotiations, but do not intend to hold Israeli society hostage in the hands of the Palestinians....We would like you [the Palestinians] to govern yourselves in your own country....a democratic Palestinian state with territorial contiguity in Judea and Samaria and economic viability, which would conduct normal relations of tranquillity, security and peace with Israel....The "Disengagement Plan" will include the redeployment of the IDF [Israel Defence 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....I would like to emphasise: the "Disengagement Plan" is a security measure and not a political one.⁶

This unilateral disengagement announcement was all the more unexpected as he had campaigned against a similar plan promoted by his Labour opponent, Amiram Mitzna, during the 2003 elections.⁷ Even Israelis who profess to

know him well admit not knowing precisely either why he has endorsed it or how far he intends to go afterwards, giving rise to often wildly contradictory speculation. Where some are convinced Sharon intends to freeze the process once this withdrawal has occurred, others are persuaded he will go much further -- and defenders of both views claim to have heard them from the Prime Minister's lips.⁸ What appears beyond doubt, despite initial scepticism, is that Sharon is determined to carry this through, overriding strong objections from his party as well as explicit threats from members of the settler community. In calling for the first evacuation of an Israeli settlement in the occupied Palestinian territories, he already has profoundly changed political dynamics within the Likud and the country at large. Going further, an analyst of Israeli-Palestinian affairs concludes: today, "Sharon is the only revolutionary figure in the Middle East".⁹

As described, the Likud already had moved from the inflexible positions of its origins. The depth of this evolution should not be underestimated. It is all the more significant coming from Ariel Sharon, who until recently enjoyed impeccable right-wing credentials, cannot be suspected of paying insufficient attention to Israeli security concerns, as late as eighteen months ago equated the fate of the Gaza settlement of Netzarim with that of Tel Aviv and who, in all his previous incarnations -- as Minister of Infrastructure, Agriculture, Defence, Industry and Trade, Housing and Construction, National Infrastructure and Foreign Affairs -- was at the forefront of the settlement enterprise. Indeed, Sharon commonly is referred to as the "father of the settlements". As one of his opponents lamented, "only Sharon could change Likud's mentality. He is the strongest leader. He is seen as the great warrior and patriot. He alone can give legitimacy to new ideas".¹⁰ A prominent hard-line Likud member put it this way:

in July 2005, though there are repeated reports that the schedule could be accelerated. According to decisions taken by the government, the evacuation will be carried out in four installments, each preceded by a meeting of the Cabinet, which will "discuss the then existing circumstances and will decide whether or not the circumstances are such that they will affect the evacuation". In the first phase three isolated Gaza settlements (Kfar Darom, Morag and Netzarim) will be evacuated; in the second, the four north West Bank communities (Ganim, Kadim, Sanur and Homesh); in the third, the Gush Katif settlements in Gaza; and in the fourth, the settlements in the north of the Gaza Strip (Eli Sinai, Dugit and Nisanit).

⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Tel Aviv, December 2004.

⁹ Hussein Agha in *Le Monde*, 8 January 2005.

¹⁰ Crisis Group interview with Likud member of the Knesset and anti-disengagement plan leader Michael Ratzon, Tel Aviv, 1 July, 2004.

⁶ Text of Ariel Sharon's speech taken from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Speeches+by+Israeli+leaders/2003/Address+by+PM+Ariel+Sharon+at+the+Fourth+Herzliya.htm>.

⁷ Under the plan, 22 Gaza settlements and four West Bank settlements are to be evacuated over three months, beginning

This is something I just cannot explain. It goes against everything Sharon has taught us over the years. He is a father of the settlement movement, and now he talks of dismantling over twenty of them. He always railed against giving to the Palestinians without getting anything in return -- and now he gives them more than they ever got, for free.¹¹

With the 20 February 2005 cabinet vote, Sharon has secured the support of his government and most of his party's leaders -- even though one of its most pre-eminent members, Benjamin Netanyahu, voted against. While opposition remains strong within the Likud, especially among its highest ranks, polls indicate that some 60 per cent of Likud voters support an immediate Gaza pullout,¹² a shift from the past that in no small measure can be attributed to Sharon's leadership. During the January 2003 elections, the Labour party was trounced on a unilateral disengagement platform, and, as recently as May 2004, when the plan was submitted to a party referendum, it was rejected by 60 per cent of registered members. Ignoring the party leadership's opposition, Sharon moved forward, bringing along a majority of Likud's voters. Conceding that "a large part of the Likud feels that the party was stolen by Sharon", Karmel Sharma (head of the Ramat Gan branch of the party) noted "there are people like me who have changed. I was raised on the notion of Eretz Israel in the youth movement; it was a part of my household talk. But people like me trust his judgment. We connected with a plan that goes against everything we were raised to believe in because we believe in him".¹³

Gideon Saar, the Chairman of the Likud Knesset faction, explained: "For several years now we have been operating against our own stated ideology and we have had to do so by circumstances and considerations of pragmatism".¹⁴ Step by step, Sharon has put an end to that deliberate ambiguity, endorsing the concept of Palestinian statehood, acknowledging that the occupation cannot endure, and taking steps to withdraw from occupied territory. In the words of Victor Sharabany, a Likud Central Committee member and Sharon supporter, the Prime Minister is "using a new language and taking a course of his own".¹⁵

Even harder-line Likudniks grudgingly acknowledge the ideological shift that has occurred over the past few years. A supporter of former Prime Minister Netanyahu concedes:

The Israeli public has awakened from its big dreams. The left dreamt of a new Middle East and a romantic kind of peace, the right of *Eretz Yisrael Hashlema* [Greater Israel]. The left woke up from its dream after the breakdown of the peace process and the violence.... The right realises that the isolated settlements will not be ours. Some 70 per cent of the public is in the centre. They are the ones who will draw up the map of the future Palestinian state.¹⁶

¹¹ Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, December 2004.

¹² *Haaretz*-Dialog poll, published 19 November 2004.

¹³ Crisis Group interview with Karmel Sharma, Tel Aviv, 30 November 2004.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Gideon Saar, Tel Aviv, 13 September.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, 21 June 2004

¹⁶ Crisis Group interview with Gil Samsanov, head of the Likud's Ramat Aviv branch, Tel Aviv, 15 August 2004.

III. MAKING SENSE OF THE PLAN

A. WHY THE DISENGAGEMENT?

Sharon's plans have given rise to endless speculation concerning his motives. Among interpretations that have been advanced are an attempt to freeze the process; deflect international pressure; respond to what many Israelis view as a demographic threat posed by the proportion of Palestinians in Israel and the occupied territories; or set the stage for the long-term interim agreement he has evoked. The confusion has been exacerbated by Sharon's own hawkish past, contradictory statements of his supporters, and the duality of his audiences: members of the international community he has sought to convince that this was the first in a series of moves, and members of his Right-wing constituency he has tried to persuade that this was the last of them.

One of the more widely believed interpretations (certainly among Palestinians, but also among many Israelis and others) is that Sharon is hoping to use a withdrawal from Gaza and the northern West Bank as a firewall against any pressure to do more, in particular to move toward a final status settlement based on the Clinton parameters, the negotiations at Taba in January 2001, or the Geneva Initiative advanced by private Israelis and Palestinians in 2003. This analysis received a significant boost when Dov Weissglas, one of Sharon's top advisers and a key disengagement proponent, stated:

The disengagement is actually formaldehyde. It supplies the amount of formaldehyde that's necessary so that there will not be a political process with the Palestinians....The disengagement plan makes it possible for Israel to park conveniently in an interim situation that distances us as far as possible from political pressure.¹⁷

Nuancing this assessment -- from which the Prime Minister quickly distanced himself, asserting he remained committed to the Roadmap albeit with the reservations attached by the Israeli government -- several insiders told Crisis Group that the disengagement plan was intended to serve as a springboard for future withdrawals that would lead to the creation of a viable Palestinian state. Indeed, some went so far as to predict that Sharon had in mind a territorial withdrawal from over 80 per cent of the West Bank -- short of what any Palestinian leader will demand in a final deal, but far beyond the idea of a 50 per cent state often attributed to

him.¹⁸ They point to the current routing of the separation barrier, which would incorporate some 7 per cent of the West Bank -- down from 15 per cent in earlier incarnations -- as evidence that Sharon has lowered his sights in bold ways. (The 7 per cent figure is slightly misleading, however. If the Ariel settlement bloc is included in what Sharon intends to annex in a final deal -- as almost certainly is the case -- the figure would rise to roughly 9.5 per cent).

A Labour Party leader who has had extended conversations with Sharon reached the same conclusion: "Sharon knows he cannot get away with a Palestinian state over half the West Bank. He has moved in radical ways. He may not be where I am, but he is far closer than most suspect".¹⁹ Reaching such percentages would require Israel foregoing control over the Jordan Valley, a step Sharon had ruled out in the past. However, with the fall of Iraq's Baathist regime, the Jordan Valley's strategic importance has been significantly reduced; Israel's decision not to build a separation fence in the east, between the West Bank and the Jordan River, may be one indication of Sharon's views on this matter. Indeed, some Sharon supporters indicated to Crisis Group that concessions on the Jordan Valley will be far easier for the party to swallow than is typically believed.²⁰

One official suggested to Crisis Group that Sharon was pursuing a Fabian approach to territorial downsizing:

We are painting colours on the map of the future Palestinian state. The post-disengagement situation is a kind of temporary parking place before we go back to the Roadmap. We see the Roadmap as an asset for Israel because it explicitly states that dealing with ending terror is a precondition for renewed negotiations, so we will never give it up. Sharon decided to leave not only Gaza but also the northern West Bank because we did not want this to be seen as the Gaza first and Gaza last plan.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, December 2005.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, December 2005.

²⁰ Crisis Group interview with Kermel Sharma, head of the Ramat Gan branch of the Likud, 30 November 2004. An Israeli official explained: "The real challenge is the demographic one. The Jordan Valley will provide the Palestinians space to expand and develop. That does not mean it will be easy for Sharon to give it up -- he and his generation fought there. It will take time for the public to swallow, but it can be done". Crisis Group interview, November 2004, Tel Aviv. Confirming this assessment, an anti-disengagement advocate went so far as to say: "When [Defence Minister] Shaul Mofaz convinces me that we no longer need the Jordan River Valley, I will be willing to consider giving it up". Crisis Group interview with Tomer Ashwal, Central Committee Member, Rosh Ayin, 7 June 2004.

¹⁷ "The big freeze", interview with Dov Weissglas, *Haaretz*, 18 October 2004.

It is easier to start this way and then we can address the rest of the West Bank.²¹

In an interview with the *Jerusalem Post*, Sharon's deputy, Ehud Olmert suggested that "Israel's interest requires a disengagement on a wider scale than what will happen as part of the current disengagement plan".²² Though Sharon denied the claim,²³ Olmert also announced his support for unilateral disengagement before Sharon publicly endorsed it. Indeed, a number of analysts believe that from Sharon's perspective, a more substantial withdrawal sometime in the future makes eminent sense, assuming domestic conditions permit. "A mini Palestinian state over half the West Bank would be immediately rejected by the international community, and would produce an untenable situation for Israel. The much smarter move is a withdrawal from 80 per cent or more. It may not be perfect -- but imagine the U.S., European and even Arab pressures Abu Mazen will be under to accept it!"²⁴ An Israeli analyst concurs: "Sharon is actively lowering expectations, seeking to convince all parties -- not least the international community and the Palestinians -- that he will agree to far less than what was on the table at Camp David and Taba, assuming that this will serve him when he surprises with concessions that are only slightly below that. His 'generosity' could be a vital component of his plan".²⁵

Whether Sharon actually believes he can indefinitely freeze the process or, alternatively, intends for it to move far beyond its current stage is, of course, a question that will be critical for the future, but one that -- for fear of angering the Israeli Right, the international community, or both -- he is highly unlikely to shed light on anytime soon. His strength lies in the ambiguity of his goals. But regardless, it is clear, as a U.S. analyst put it, that the disengagement has provided him with:

...a formidable firewall against any international pressure to do what he does not want to do. After withdrawing from Gaza, doing more than any of his predecessors, facing traumatic resistance from members of the settler community, risking the loss of his party and premiership, and all in exchange for nothing, which U.S. President is going to thank

him by pressing him to move toward a difficult final status deal?²⁶

A Likud Knesset member summed up the supposed bargain: "The principle is: let us cash in on our shares now. Sharon is trying to sell his Gaza shares in exchange for understandings with Bush about what will happen in other places".²⁷

In the Prime Minister's words, he had to "find a different way" because of the heavy pressure that otherwise would have been brought upon Israel to accept other solutions.²⁸ In this sense, the disengagement can be seen as an attempt to "fill the diplomatic vacuum"²⁹ by preemptively coming up with an initiative of his own that will be welcomed by the international community. Significantly, in the 14 April 2004 letter from Bush to Sharon, which welcomed the disengagement plan, the President stressed that "the United States remains committed to my vision and to its implementation as described in the Roadmap. *The United States will do its utmost to prevent any attempt by anyone to impose any other plan*".³⁰ "It was Geneva that forced his hand. It put tremendous pressure on him to do something".³¹ Sharon admits: "I saw that the pressures will be hard pressures on Israel. And I felt that even the United States will not be able, I would say, not to impose a plan on Israel if Israel is not making even the slightest step forward".³² The calendar also plays in his favour: with elections due by mid-2006 at the latest, Sharon can buy himself another few months during which pressure to make another serious move will be at a minimum.

Under this analysis, Sharon is expending a debased currency and one that none of the proposed agreements over the past decade envisaged as becoming part of Israel -- Gaza -- to hold on to what he values most -- strategic areas of the West Bank -- just as Menachem Begin was prepared to sacrifice the Sinai in the hope of preserving the Palestinian territories. In making this case

²¹ Crisis Group interview with government official, Tel Aviv, November 2004.

²² The *Jerusalem Post*, 30 December 2004.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Crisis Group interview with U.S. analyst, Washington, February 2005. He added that for that reason the Palestinians should fear an 80 per cent withdrawal far more than a 50 per cent one.

²⁵ Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, February 2005.

²⁶ Crisis Group interview, Washington, February 2005.

²⁷ Crisis Group interview with member of Knesset Michael Eitan, Tel Aviv, 10 September 2004.

²⁸ "My Algeria is here", interview in the *Jerusalem Post*, 9 September 2004.

²⁹ Crisis Group interview with member of Knesset Michael Eitan, Tel Aviv, 10 September 2004.

³⁰ Emphasis added.

³¹ Crisis Group interview with Itzik Sudri, former Shas party spokesperson Givat Shmuel, 25 November 2004. Many other observers and politicians emphasised the role played by the Geneva Accords, which at the time filled the diplomatic vacuum and rekindled a measure of hope among Israelis and Palestinians that a final status agreement could be achieved.

³² Cited in James Bennet, "Sharon's Wars", *The New York Times Magazine*, 15 August 2004.

to disengagement sceptics, the Prime Minister places considerable weight on the letter he received from President Bush on 14 April 2004, in which the President reassured him that.

In light of new realities on the ground, including already existing major Israeli population centres, 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.

In seeking to win over unconvinced Likud members, Sharon has presented this as U.S. endorsement of Israel's right to annex major West Bank settlement blocs. In April 2004, Sharon bluntly explained that in return for his disengagement plan, Israel would consolidate its hold on more important West Bank settlements:

Ma'aleh Adumim will grow stronger, Ariel, the Etzion bloc, Giv'at Zeev will remain in Israeli hands and will continue to develop. Hebron and Kiryat Arba will be strong. Only an Israeli plan will keep us from being dragged into dangerous initiatives like the Geneva and Saudi initiatives.³³

As one of Sharon's supporters noted, while the battle for Gaza is lost, in the West Bank "time is still on our side, we can still make gains and strengthen our hold".³⁴ Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, seen as one of the more dovish Likud members and as one of the initiators of the Gaza plan, gave confirmation: "Our plan will stabilise a line [border] that ensures that 90 per cent of the Arab population will not live under Israeli rule. This will allow for a time out of 40, 50, 60 years. This will enable us to shape a reality in which there will not be a change in relation to the territories that remain in our hands".³⁵ A leading Israeli columnist elaborates, "If the state were a game of chess, you could say that Sharon sacrificed a rook to protect the queen. The Sharon government made a trade-off...evacuating the settlements

of Gaza and northern Samaria [West Bank] in exchange for the world accepting the de facto annexation of 7 percent of the West Bank".³⁶

The advantages of disengagement were all the greater given rising Israeli concern about demographic issues. According to most demographers, within a decade Palestinians will constitute a majority in the territory between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean, raising fears that at that point they will increase calls for a bi-national state.³⁷ The "demographic threat", not long ago denounced by the Right -- and by Sharon in particular -- as a Left-wing fabrication to justify territorial compromise, has increasingly been internalised by the Likud and is seen as an important argument in favour of disengagement.³⁸ A Sharon adviser described it as "the number one issue".³⁹ Dan Meridor, a former Likud Justice Minister, explained the impact of demographics on the party's politics:

An essential condition to our control of all the territories was that we ensure a Jewish majority....But demographic trends mean that we will either be a Jewish state or a democracy. We can no longer be both. The question that each Likudnik has to deal with is what is our ultimate goal?...The two dreams -- nationalism and democracy -- cannot be dreamt together....People hate to make a decision and cut, but the time has come to cut.⁴⁰

³³ Aluf Benn and Natan Guttman, "Bush says disengagement plan must be part of Roadmap; Sharon heads for U.S.", *Haaretz*, 13 April 2004. The "Saudi initiative" refers to the Arab League Beirut Summit declaration of March 2002, which promised full normalisation with Israel in exchange for a withdrawal to the 1967 borders.

³⁴ Crisis Group interview with Karmel Sharma, Tel Aviv, 30 November 2004.

³⁵ Gilad Katz, "It's me or Beilin", *Makor Rishon*, 14 May 2004.

³⁶ Nahum Barnea in *Yediot Aharonot*, 21 February 2005.

³⁷ According to opinion polls, over 70 per cent of the Jewish Israeli public fears the emergence of a bi-national state if Israel fails to end its control of the occupied territories. *Haaretz*, 7 December 2003. Not all Likud officials accept the demographic argument; some note that had the Zionist movement taken heed of demography concerns prior to independence, the Jewish state would never have gotten off the ground. Scepticism is nurtured by the fact that Prime Minister Sharon dismissed demographic warnings as recently as December 2003, claiming that Jewish immigration would make up for any Arab population growth. See *Ynet*, 8 December 2003. According to these sceptics, Sharon seized upon the demographic argument to bolster his disengagement plan. See *Haaretz*, 20 July 2004.

³⁸ Crisis Group interview with Dan Meridor, Tel Aviv, 17 December 2003, and Arnon Sofer, Tel Aviv, 17 December 2003.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview with government official, Tel Aviv, November 2004.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview with Dan Meridor, Tel Aviv, 8 June 2004. Likud Knesset member Yuval Steinitz echoed this view: "We must understand that the main pressure on us is not terror but the demographic threat. Imagine a situation in which the Palestinians demand a bi-national state...Once Gaza is out of the equation they cannot claim one state without Gaza. This is why I am in favour of the plan". *Maariv*, 12 November 2004.

A Palestinian official deeply sceptical of the disengagement plan saw it precisely in these terms: "It is all about demography. By withdrawing from Gaza, Israel is getting rid of one third of the Palestinians in the occupied territories by giving up only one per cent of the land. That is an irresistible bargain".⁴¹

If disengagement made sense as a defensive move against international pressure and demographic trends, it also resonated well with Israel's public mood, including among Likud supporters. Sentiment in favour of a Palestinian state and the evacuation of a majority of the settlements has been rapidly growing; the Gaza settlements in particular -- home to roughly 8,000 settlers requiring the protection of an estimated 5,000 soldiers -- are seen by a large majority of Israelis as an unnecessary burden. "Likud backers have accepted that there will be a Palestinian state and territorial withdrawals. A decade ago if you would have said this in the party, they would have stoned you....Sharon reads the polls, and he knows what the public wants".⁴² Public views have become all the more relevant to the Likud given its position as the predominant party, which doubled its Knesset seats from 19 to 38 in the 2003 general elections. "The party understands the need to be pragmatic -- it goes with trying to be a ruling party".⁴³ As the Likud faction whip, Gideon Saar, notes, "Likud legislators and ministers are also people who live in Israel, and they feel the public mood. The Likud has a third of the Knesset seats and represents 50 per cent of the Jewish public. We are now a catch-all party and, as such, must reflect a wide range of views".⁴⁴ In less subtle language, a Sharon supporter remarks: "Ideology has no use if it means we have to run head-first into a brick wall. Today, people have two cars and cell phones. Ideology costs money and affects one's quality of life. These are the views of the public -- and we cannot ignore them".⁴⁵

In the diplomatic and political void of the past few years, only Prime Minister Sharon appears to know where he is heading, building on several pillars: the unprecedented disengagement from Gaza and the Northern West Bank; thickening settlements in the blocs adjacent to the 1967 lines; construction in and around East Jerusalem; and completion of the separation barrier

in the West Bank. While facing strong opposition from within his own ranks as Likud rivals measure his chances of political survival, he has shown remarkable perseverance and enjoys considerable popularity as well as unrivalled dominance over the domestic scene.

B. WHY UNILATERALLY?

While much of the focus on Sharon's plan has been on the disengagement -- the unprecedented evacuation of established settlements in occupied Palestinian territory -- its unilateral aspect may in fact be the most consequential and the one that offers the strongest clues to its underlying purpose. Sharon's decision ostensibly was justified as a reaction to Arafat's rule, the stated logic being that if the Palestinians are not prepared to take steps to clamp down on violent groups, if they do not have a leadership trusted by Israel -- i.e., if Israel does not have the partner for peace it desires -- Israel cannot afford to wait and must do what it can to maximise security and separate demographically from the Palestinian population.

In reality, while Sharon's initiative is of recent vintage, its unilateral aspect is rooted in three interconnected core beliefs which explain why it is likely to survive Arafat's passing and Abu Mazen's advent. The first, as seen, is his desire to assert control over the diplomatic process, taking the initiative to preclude it being taken by others.⁴⁶ By acting unilaterally, he believes, he was able to extract commitments from the U.S. on the shape of a final settlement that would have been far harder to obtain in the context of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The second is his long-standing and deep-seated distrust of negotiated agreements with Arabs in general and Palestinians in particular. The third, and most crucial, is his belief that there is no prospect of ending the conflict with the Palestinians any time soon, regardless of who is at their head. Certainly, he cannot imagine ending it on terms he could accept; as for the terms contemplated by Clinton, in Geneva, or indeed by much of the international community, he is not prepared to accept them (in particular with regard to East Jerusalem and the scope of Israel's withdrawal from the West Bank), and he appears convinced they would become a recipe for further instability.

Dan Meridor, the former Likud Minister, told Crisis Group that Sharon "does not believe in agreements. He would not honour one, so why should he believe that anyone else will? He does not believe in a *sulha* [reconciliation], so why sign an agreement and give up

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Washington, December 2004.

⁴² Crisis Group interview with Karmel Sharma, Tel Aviv, 27 June 2004.

⁴³ Crisis Group interview with Ofir Akunis, former Likud Knesset faction spokesperson (1999-2001) and adviser to Benjamin Netanyahu, Tel Aviv, 10 June 2004.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, Gideon Saar, Tel Aviv, 13 September.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview with Karmel Sharma, Tel Aviv, 27 June 2004.

⁴⁶ The plan "compels the world to deal with our idea, with the scenario we wrote", Weissglas in *Haaretz*, 8 October 2004.

land for peace?"⁴⁷ Not believing in agreements does not translate into holding on to all the occupied territory; rather, it translates into a highly dubious view of negotiations in which each side makes reciprocal commitments and justifies its actions on the basis of the willingness of the other party to meet its own obligations. In this respect, Sharon has history on his side: bilateral agreements between Israelis and Palestinians have not yielded their anticipated payoffs; in virtually all cases, beginning with Oslo, both sides have felt duped: Palestinians did not deliver security, and Israel did not deliver the end of the occupation.

In the case of Israel's withdrawal from Gaza, negotiations would be far more likely to complicate than to facilitate matters. Indeed, both sides would probably achieve less than in a unilateral setting. The Palestinian Authority (PA) would bring up demands (such as the route of the separation barrier, a freeze on settlement construction or future territorial withdrawals from the West Bank) the Prime Minister would not accept. Likewise, the PA would be asked to make commitments (to disarm Hamas and Islamic Jihad, for instance) it probably could not live up to. Moreover, opposition would be easily mobilised: dissenters would take issue with the substance of the deal, claim that the other side was not implementing it, or both.⁴⁸ In a unilateral framework, by contrast, Sharon cannot be accused of relying on Palestinian cooperation, and Abu Mazen will not have to justify concessions to his constituency or opposition by what Israel has done. As proponents of unilateralism see it, with some justification, there is little that can be achieved in negotiations that cannot be obtained without them.⁴⁹ A well informed government official explained the need to circumvent negotiations as follows:

We are set to have implemented the unilateral disengagement by September/October 2005. This does not leave enough time for the Palestinians to complete the various security and legal reforms that are required under the Roadmap. For example, they can never collect weapons by then. Israel

cannot wait for years, and it will take the Palestinians years to do what they need to do.⁵⁰

Under this scenario, and although Sharon and Abbas will periodically meet, steps will not result from joint agreements but from unilateral initiative. The pattern, according to an Israeli official, already has been set:

There are not going to be ceremonies and declarations. It is a process that is quiet and informal. It started a while ago. We let Arafat go to Paris. We coordinated his funeral. We want a dynamic, not declarations. We want to see small positive things happening on each side, with each phase building on each other, until we get to a situation where it is possible to do the bigger and more difficult things.⁵¹

In Sharon's case, opposition to and mistrust toward negotiations appears to be further bolstered by conviction that a genuine end of the conflict is not within reach and that the plans currently in circulation -- whether the Clinton parameters or the Geneva Accords -- are unacceptable from Israel's standpoint and would not lead to a stable and secure peace. In the words of Weissglas, "Arik [Sharon] never believed in permanent [peace] settlements: he didn't believe in the one fell-swoop approach. Sharon doesn't believe that after a conflict of 104 years, it's possible to come up with a piece of paper that will end the matter".⁵² An Israeli analyst summed it up as follows:

Let us assume that Sharon and Abu Mazen were to meet and negotiate. What exactly would they be bargaining over? The size of a state with interim borders that the Palestinians do not want, or the shape of a final deal in which Sharon does not believe? Things are much easier as they are happening now: Sharon can say he is withdrawing unilaterally for Israel's good, and Abu Mazen can say he is restoring law and order for the Palestinians' benefit. In that way, both implicitly are

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview with Dan Meridor, Tel Aviv, 8 June 2004.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview with Israeli analyst, Jerusalem, December 2004.

⁴⁹ According to a *Haaretz* reporter, Sharon reportedly told one of his Likud detractors that what matters for him is the understanding reached with President Bush over Israeli settlement blocs, not any potential understanding with the Palestinians. "We have an agreement with the Americans. I prefer agreements with the Americans than with the Arabs". *Haaretz*, 18 February 2005.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview with government official, Tel Aviv, November 2004.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interview with senior security official, 24 November 2004.

⁵² "The big freeze", *Haaretz*, 8 October 2004. In another revealing comment, Weissglas noted that Sharon "believes that the Arab world views Israel as an imposition, and won't come to terms with its existence". *Haaretz*, 21 July 2004. Sharon himself has stated that "the Arabs are not ready yet . . . to recognise the birthright of the Jewish people to have an independent Jewish state in the homeland of the Jewish people". Bennet, "Sharon's Wars", op. cit.

coordinating their steps, without either having to justify what he is doing by reference to the other.⁵³

In the Prime Minister's view, this is a struggle between two nationalist movements that is likely to continue for several generations; at best, they can reach a peaceful *modus vivendi* that is more likely achieved through a series of coordinated unilateral moves that both can acquiesce in though not sign on to.

In this sense, Sharon appears to see the goal as making the conflict manageable -- diluting the strength of Palestinian national sentiment, improving the Palestinians' living conditions, establishing a state with provisional borders -- all the while ensuring protection of Israel's vital security and territorial interests and awaiting resolution of the more existential issues.⁵⁴ Unilateralism is key to such an achievement, for it allows Israel to avoid the Palestinians' preferred outcome without forcing the Palestinians to formally accept anything less. The end result would be to transform the conflict into a less emotional border dispute without some of the most difficult underlying issues being resolved.

Sharon "is building a barrier against West Bank Palestinians that is the single biggest change in the land since the Six Day War. And he is trying to tear down some of the Israeli settlements he built in Gaza and the West Bank -- something no Israeli Prime Minister has ever done. He is not doing this because he sees a path to imminent peace. . . .He is trying to gird Israel for a conflict . . . whose end he cannot foresee".⁵⁵ Guided by the principle that "politics is an affair of constant fine-tuning, a careful weighing of Israeli public opinion, economic realities, and the interests of the U.S.",⁵⁶ Sharon appears to have shown remarkable tactical flexibility in pursuit of his overarching objectives.⁵⁷

In the words of a veteran Likud member, Sharon "wants to improve Israel's situation. He wants an arrangement that will buy Israel time. It could have been through the Roadmap, it could have been through a long-term interim agreement. Now it will be through a unilateral move, and he understands that he has more control in a unilateral move. In a deal you need to give more. In a unilateral move you can decide the parameters. He wants to buy time and reduce pressure on Israel".⁵⁸

⁵³ Crisis Group interview with Israeli analyst, Washington, February 2005.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview with former U.S. official, Washington, February 2005. Referring to some of the solutions contemplated in 2000, a Likud Knesset member who is close to Netanyahu candidly acknowledged: "We can call it a Palestinian state, but we should not delude ourselves into thinking this will be a stable solution. Palestinians will be forced not to have an army and their airspace will be under our control; sooner or later, they will challenge these restrictions. And why shouldn't they: these are not the attributes of a sovereign state!" Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, December 2005.

⁵⁵ Bennet, "Sharon's Wars", op. cit.

⁵⁶ Hussein Agha and Robert Malley, "Three Men in a Boat", *The New York Review of Books*, 14 August 2003.

⁵⁷ One of the more remarkable instances of this flexibility was his sudden conversion to the notion of a separation fence, which he at first strongly resisted. Once it became clear he could no longer resist public pressure, Sharon adopted the

idea, moulding it to fit his political agenda. Dore Gold, a former policy adviser to Netanyahu, argued that the fence "could become a catalyst for the eventual achievement of a political separation that will not be based on the 1967 lines". *The Jerusalem Post*, 15 December 2003.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview with Dan Meridor, Tel Aviv, 8 June 2004.

IV. DISENGAGEMENT AND ITS DISCONTENTS

A. WHO ARE THE LIKUD OPPONENTS?

The most powerful voices against the disengagement plan have come, unsurprisingly, from the settler community; how they react to the Gaza evacuation may well shape the future of West Bank settlements.⁵⁹ But opposition has also come from within Likud itself. Candidates affiliated with the "rebel" camp -- the popular term describing those standing against the plan -- secured the support of roughly 40 per cent of Likud Central Committee members in the November 2004 elections for senior party positions; even more significantly, a majority of party members voted the plan down in the May 2004 internal referendum. The opposition is based on a complicated blend of security concerns, ideology, historical attachment to Likud's roots and tactical opportunism. Many sharply oppose Sharon at Central Committee gatherings, all the while conceding that he ultimately will prevail and often even supporting him in private. Two one-time Likud critics of the plan, Foreign Minister Shalom and Education Minister Livnat, voted for it on 20 February after much publicised angst, leaving Treasury Minister Netanyahu alone among party heavyweights to oppose it. Anti-disengagement Likud legislators regularly harass Sharon and seek to put obstacles on his path, yet rarely put forward an alternative plan.

The Likud-based opposition is particularly significant within the party's Central Committee. Far more conservative and closer to traditional Likud positions than the public that now votes for it -- many members belong to the Revisionist tradition and see themselves as guardians of the old Likud -- the Central Committee is an extremely powerful institution. Its members determine the ranking of Likud candidates for Knesset seats in Israel's single-constituency proportional representation system. Antagonising the Central Committee, in other words, can amount to political suicide. Yet even within the Committee, there are signs of a slow and painful change. Justice Minister Tzipi Livni, a key moderate Likud MK, remarks: "Only the minority says not to evacuate a single settlement....But when I meet with Central Committee members who are known as opponents and tell them that ultimately the land will be

partitioned, they accept this. They just tell me: 'You should know that you are breaking our hearts'".⁶⁰

Among the rank-and-file, long-standing emotional attachment to the settlers and to the settlements themselves have complicated Sharon's task. Indeed, the sentiment is palpable even among Sharon supporters who recognize the inevitability of withdrawal. "I love the 8,000 people who are there [in the settlements to be disbanded], they are the true Zionists and I look up to them. People have strong feelings towards the territories. We have to wean them off of them".⁶¹ The emotional character of these ties was very much on display during the anti-disengagement campaign that preceded the March 2004 Likud referendum. Disengagement opponents visited almost 100,000 households and appealed to voters on a personal and sentimental level. The "No" campaign "shipped in those who were wounded in war, people who had lost limbs and family members. Shocking pictures were shown. They applied massive religious and psychological pressure to vote no".⁶² For Roni Milo, a former Likud minister, the tactics amounted to "emotional blackmail".⁶³

The rebel coalition is led by Uzi Landau, generally considered a principled, articulate and intellectually gifted Knesset member. A disparate group united by little more than hostility to the plan, it is composed of three factions:

- The *vatikim* are Likud old-timers, many of whom belonged to the pre-state Revisionist military underground. They adhere to the traditional Likud dogma of Greater Israel, opposing territorial withdrawals and Palestinian statehood. In the words of the leader of the *vatikim* formation, "I do not believe the Palestinians and will never trust them. They are gangs of murderers. There will never be peace with them. We will always have to live by the sword. Even if we give them Jerusalem, they will not let up. They want to destroy us".⁶⁴ "A large part of the Likud feels that the party was stolen by Ariel Sharon. This is the case in particular for old timers who believe in Eretz Israel. They are incapable of giving it up".⁶⁵ For the

⁵⁹ A future Crisis Group briefing will discuss settler politics and possible reactions to the Gaza withdrawal.

⁶⁰ Interviewed in Yossi Verter, "Tangled up in a safety net", *Haaretz*, 26 November 2004.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interview with Levy Shitreet, member of the Likud Central Committee and Sharon supporter, Petah Tiqvah, 24 June 2004.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Crisis Group interview with Ronnie Milo, Tel Aviv, 7 July 2004.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview with Eli Shitreet, Tel Aviv, 1 December 2004.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview with Karmel Sharma, Tel Aviv, 27 June 2004.

vatikim, Sharon is an interloper and indeed, given his own roots as a *Mapainik* -- the Mapai was Labour's forerunner -- always was. "It is all in his personal history. He worked with Rabin. We have never believed him".⁶⁶

While Landau acknowledges that the withdrawal is likely to go through,⁶⁷ some of the *vatikin* clung to the hope that the trio of recalcitrant Likud ministers -- Netanyahu, Shalom and Livnat -- would stand up to the Prime Minister, though they have been sorely disappointed: "These ministers who supported Sharon are a disgrace, they have no spine, no ideological spine....They could have ended all of this, but instead they chose jobs over principles".⁶⁸

- *Manhigut Yehudit* (Jewish Leadership), which was founded in the 1990s, is a cohesive and boisterous bloc working explicitly for the establishment of a theocratic state -- "a state for all its Jews". It serves as a pressure group pushing a maximalist agenda within the Likud, seeking to recruit people who often do not vote for the party at election time. Led by Moshe Feiglin -- who said of the disengagement plan that "no-one can overcome God's will to keep us in Gaza"⁶⁹ -- it is adamantly opposed to the Oslo Accords and to the turnover of any land to "the enemy". Viewing Zionism as a secular ideology that inherently accepts territorial compromise, *Manhigut Yehudit* sees little difference between Sharon and most of his Likud opponents. "Even Uzi Landau would behave the same way as Sharon has if he were to become Prime Minister. Netanyahu already showed us what he did as Prime Minister. We are the only alternative. They, the existing Likud leadership, have already accepted a Palestinian

state, and the differences are tactical -- how much to give up and how".⁷⁰

In the eyes of many Likud members, it is a dangerous, fundamentalist group that is alien to the party and has been attempting what amounts to a hostile take-over.⁷¹ According to most estimates, the group has signed up roughly 10,000 of a total 193,000 Likud members. This has allowed it to secure the support of 130 of the 3,000 members of the Central Committee. Though this represents less than 5 per cent of the Central Committee as a whole, passion, mobilisation and strong organisation give influence that far exceeds its numbers, particularly in the course of Central Committee votes with low turnouts (on average some 600 to 800 members turn up at Central Committee gatherings) such as the consultation on the disengagement plan. In the party referendum on that plan, a low overall turnout gave groups like *Manhigut* and others who opposed disengagement a disproportionate role.

- The third group is less an organised faction than representative of the sentiment of traditionalist, conservative Likud members -- a large number of them Sephardi Jews from development towns and poorer neighbourhoods -- who accept that a Palestinian state will be established, share Sharon's desire to limit its scope, but are uncomfortable with his approach. Of the three, this group is the most significant for Sharon both because of its numerical weight and because it remains open to persuasion. A Sharon supporter laments that many among them simply do not get the "puenta" -- the point -- of the plan.⁷² In their view, far from precluding a Geneva-like final accord, a unilateral disengagement as currently contemplated risks leading to it. The call for Sharon to crush terror before turning over any land resonates with a constituency that mistrusts Arabs. The fact that Sharon's plan does not require any genuine Palestinian quid pro quo is of particular concern, for it is seen as constituting a reward for terror and, therefore, encouraging future attacks. Moreover, it warns that Israel could easily lose control of the process once it has begun, the Gaza withdrawal serving as precedent for many more. This fear is exacerbated by Sharon's reluctance or inability to describe his goal with any

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview with Eli Kornfeld, member of the Likud Central Committee and leader of *Darkecha Darkainu* (Your Way is Our Way) grouping, Tel Aviv, 22 June 2004.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview with then Minister Uzi Landau, Tel Aviv, 14 September 2004.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview with Eli Shitreet, Tel Aviv, 1 December 2004. This was said before Netanyahu's vote in the Cabinet. Even that, however, is unlikely to mollify the rebels. As Landau said in the aftermath of the vote, "the Likud ministers who voted against the plan are behaving hypocritically. On the one hand they oppose the plan, and on the other hand they support a government that leans on the votes of the left and the Arabs" to get the plan passed in the Knesset. *Haaretz*, 21 February 2005.

⁶⁹ Reported by Israel's Channel One news on 15 November 2004 and on the website of the right-wing Arutz Sheva news organisation, <http://israelnationalnews.com/news.php3?id=72099>.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview with Michael Fuah, activist in *Manhigut Yehudit* (Jewish Leadership), Tel Aviv, 17 June 2004.

⁷¹ During his leadership, Menachem Begin ensured that these messianic elements stayed out of the party. Crisis Group interview with Dan Meridor, Tel Aviv, 8 June 2004.

⁷² Crisis Group interview with Levy Shitreet, Petah Tikva, 24 June 2004.

clarity and by the often contradictory arguments he and his advisers have put forward to different audiences: to the Likud, as a scheme to outsmart the Palestinians and by-pass the Roadmap;⁷³ to European and Labour party interlocutors, as a scheme to unravel the occupation and jump-start the Roadmap. "I am not sure what his endgame is. It is an enigma. Sharon should put his cards on the table".⁷⁴ For many in the party, whether moderate or hard-line, the abrupt policy shifts of the past year have led to an "identity crisis".⁷⁵ In the words of a Likud legislator, "the jump that Sharon has made has been too far and too fast".⁷⁶

While the substance of the plan has elicited genuine criticism within the party, some of the opposition also is tactical, in the sense both of stemming from Sharon's tactical blunders and of reflecting tactical considerations by his chief Likud critics. On the one hand, Sharon's lack of consultation, apparent arrogance, and attempt to bulldoze the plan through party institutions clearly irked party activists, legislators and key ministers alike.⁷⁷ On the other hand, some opponents acted more out of fear of Central Committee retribution than out of conviction; many first-time backbenchers saw an opportunity to ingratiate themselves with Committee members, thereby ensuring higher slots on the Likud slate for the forthcoming elections.

Equally tactical appears to be the position of the three most prominent Likud ministers who distanced themselves from the plan, alternatively calling for it to be negotiated with the Palestinians or submitted to a public referendum -- in both cases seeking to manifest their opposition, keep faith with the party's more conservative

elements and delay the plan's implementation without appearing out of step with the general public or the U.S. This balancing act has been most in evidence in the case of Netanyahu -- the only one of the three to have voted "no" on 20 February -- in large part because he sees himself as the next Prime Minister -- an objective for which he needs to be seen by the Right as its standard bearer and by the wider public and the international community as a sober leader capable of decisive action. "He faces a real dilemma: on the one hand he does not want to lose the Right; on the other hand, he understands he risks losing the public".⁷⁸ His standing on disengagement can be a launching pad for his campaign to become Prime Minister, or the end of it.

B. WHAT DO THE REBELS STAND FOR?

A principal weakness of the anti-disengagement advocates is the absence of a credible alternative, which explains why many have focused on tactical differences (calling for a negotiated as opposed to a unilateral withdrawal), procedural arguments (calling for a popular referendum), or unintended consequences (arguing that a unilateral withdrawal will encourage violence). Today, a vast majority of the Israeli public believes in the necessity of territorial withdrawals, settlement evacuation, and the creation of a Palestinian state, and since the disengagement plan advances all three objectives, arguing against it is an arduous task.

To the extent alternative views of how to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are being floated, none so far enjoys significant political support. That said, the fact that they are discussed, even at the margins, is symptomatic of continued discomfort within the Likud with the idea of a two-state solution as generally understood by the international community. Some of the more radical solutions -- such as population transfers -- for the most part remain unspoken thoughts, because they are widely viewed as politically illegitimate or impractical. But others are worth mentioning:

Cantonisation: Under this scheme, which enjoys only very limited support, the land between the Jordan River and the sea would be divided into a number of cantons, most of them populated by a Jewish-majority (in one particular version, there would be eight Jewish cantons and two Palestinian ones, Gaza and the West Bank). This gerrymandering of a de-facto single state would limit Palestinian representation while guaranteeing a Jewish majority in the Knesset. For *vatikim* members of the Likud, cantonisation can provide "full autonomy for the

⁷³ Responding to criticism from Minister Sharansky, Sharon responded: "There will be no automatic start on our part of the Roadmap. We will only go on to the Roadmap when the PA does all it has committed to do, like stopping the incitement, dismantling the terror organisations, conducting reforms and ceasing the violence" -- a curious interpretation since these are precisely the Palestinian commitments under the Roadmap that are supposed to occur at the same time as Israel fulfills its own. *Haaretz*, 21 February 2005.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview with member of the Knesset Yuli Edelstein, Tel Aviv, 30 June 2004.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview with Tomer Ashwal, Likud Central Committee member and activist, Rosh Ayin, 18 January 2004.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interview with MK Yuli Edelstein, Knesset member, Tel Aviv, 30 June 2004.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview with Ehud Danoch, former adviser to Minister Sylvan Shalom, Tel Aviv, 10 June 2004; Crisis Group interview with Ofir Akunis, former Likud Knesset faction spokesperson (1999-2001) and adviser to Benjamin Netanyahu, Tel Aviv, 10 June 2004; Ronen Moshe, advisor to Uzi Landau, Tel Aviv, 17 June 2004; Yuli Edelstein, Tel Aviv, 30 June 2004.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview with Atilla Shumpali, correspondent for the Y-net online news site, Tel Aviv, 6 September 2004.

Palestinians. They can do what they want, and we will not run their lives. But they cannot have a state and independence. They cannot have an army".⁷⁹ A Likud Knesset member told Crisis Group: "what Sharon has in mind is not something any self-respecting Palestinian would call a state, because it would not have basic attributes of sovereignty, such as the right to have an army. Better we be honest than create false expectation that, by leading Palestinians to challenge these limitations in the future, will be a recipe for instability".⁸⁰

□ *Regional Options:* Some who believe that there cannot or should not be two states between the Jordan River and the sea prefer to look beyond that space, particularly to Jordan. What is known as the Jordan option -- under which Palestinians, while enjoying certain individual residency rights in Israel, would exercise voting rights in Jordan -- retains some support, as many Likudniks view the eventual federation of Palestine and Jordan as inevitable.⁸¹ More elaborate regional solutions also have been discussed, chiefly by Giora Eiland, head of Israel's National Security Council. His argument for such a radical paradigm shift is premised on the notion that achieving a stable solution requires thinking beyond the historical area of Mandatory Palestine because Israel will not relinquish enough territory from the West Bank to satisfy the Palestinians, and the Palestinians lack sufficient land in Gaza to satisfy their demographic needs. In his view, territorial exchanges between Israel and Egypt (enlarging Gaza and providing a land link between Egypt and Jordan) on the one hand, and Palestine and Israel (West Bank territory in exchange for land in the Negev) on the other, would allow Israel to hold on to some vital areas of the West Bank, broaden Gaza's dimensions, and help Egypt economically. Although Eiland is said to be speaking only for himself, the idea has gained some traction within Israel's security establishment

and the Likud⁸² -- while being dismissed outright by the Egyptians.⁸³

□ *Demographic borders:* At present, this appears to be the most popular alternative to the Geneva-style two-state settlement among the Likud rank-and-file. Under this proposal, Israel would withdraw from certain parts of the West Bank (isolated settlements in particular) and Gaza and alter its borders to exclude Israeli Arab communities living in close proximity to the Green Line. This approach takes unilateralism to its extreme, accepting the notion of land swaps in order to guarantee a Jewish majority. Likud insiders acknowledge that the idea is discussed with increased frequency -- albeit with some trepidation -- in party circles, including by leading members such as Netanyahu. As one Likudnik put it, "people like it and talk about it, but many say that we cannot discuss it because it sounds racist".⁸⁴ Justifying his interest, a Netanyahu supporter explained, "if we take the demographic argument to its logical conclusion, there is no reason to stop redrawing the border at the 1967 Green Line".⁸⁵

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview with Eli Shitreet, Tel Aviv, 1 December 2004.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, October 2004. Deputy Premier Olmert flatly dismissed the idea: "The canton program will create a situation that the world will not be prepared to live with, and rightly so, because it will not allow for territorial contiguity and does not give the Palestinians the minimal basis to enjoy independent life under self rule and sovereignty. The plan effectively turns them into something, pardon me for the infuriating comparison, similar to the old South Africa, the world will not live with this". Katz, "It's me or Beilin", op. cit.

⁸¹ Crisis Group interview with Eitan Dor-Shev, strategist for "no" effort in Likud referendum. Jerusalem, 24 November 2004.

⁸² Crisis Group interview with Ronen Moshe, Tel Aviv, 17 June 2004.

⁸³ "The Israelis can dream as much as they want. This will never happen", Crisis Group interview with Egyptian official, February 2005.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview with Karmel Sharma, Tel Aviv, 27 June 2004.

⁸⁵ *Jerusalem Post*, 16 December 2003. Again, Olmert voiced strong opposition. Asked about the idea of moving the Israeli Arab town of Taybeh to the Palestinian state, he warned: "Taybeh is an integral part of the state of Israel within borders recognised by the entire world. The moment we challenge the legitimacy of these borders we will be the losers. And that I do not want". *Makor Rishon*, 14 May 2004.

V. CONCLUSION: DISENGAGEMENT AND THEN WHAT?

Only a few months separate the government's decision from actual implementation, with numerous potential obstacles along the way -- settler resistance, renewed Israeli-Palestinian violence in Gaza, the budget vote and, of course, the always present threats to the Prime Minister's life. But, for now, the political battle in the country at large and, importantly, within the Likud, appears to have been won.

This is no minor achievement and one that, given Likud's ideological origins and Sharon's own trajectory, would have been hard to predict only a few years back. It owes much to Sharon's sheer perseverance and to a fundamental evolution in Israeli feelings vis-à-vis the settlement enterprise, which is seen today far more as a detriment than an asset for the nation's security. It owes much, too, to changing realities on the ground, including the Palestinian uprising, and to the absence at this time of any credible alternative to the notion of territorial withdrawal, including settlement evacuation.

Extrapolating from Sharon's words and actions, as well as from numerous interviews with some of his advisers, a post-disengagement picture begins to emerge. Under a scenario which includes the withdrawal taking place relatively peacefully, Palestinians will be in control of Gaza and roughly 50 per cent of the West Bank, their humanitarian and security situations vastly improved, "transportational contiguity" maximised through underpasses, bridges and the like, West Bank ties to Jordan and Gaza ties to Egypt deepened and solidified, and Israel headed for elections. This would provide, in the view of Israeli officials, a necessary respite from further moves.⁸⁶

We do not need to give this situation a name -- it does not have to be legitimated in a deal. But we will have, de facto, a Palestinian state with provisional borders. We will even respect their sovereignty and refrain from carrying out raids in the territory they control. We cannot use names or make deals because it is clear to us that the Palestinians will not formally accept this, not least because they fear that the U.S. and Israel will

conspire to turn this situation into a permanent one. But we can have a situation where the Palestinian leadership implicitly accepts the reality on the ground and uses the time to rebuild its society and institutions and prepare for the future.⁸⁷

What comes after the disengagement, which is scheduled to begin on 20 July 2005 and be completed within six months (the settlement evacuation itself being slated to last six weeks), is far more difficult to project. The Likud has shifted, but not to the point of accepting the parameters put forward by President Clinton in December 2000, let alone the Geneva Accords or the consensus of much of the international community that Israel must withdraw from all occupied territories, save for mutually agreed and reciprocal adjustments. As discussed earlier, there are indications -- most prominently in the trajectory of the separation barrier⁸⁸ -- that Prime Minister Sharon understands the need for a much more extensive West Bank withdrawal, even while remaining sceptical regarding the prospects for an end-of-conflict deal.⁸⁹ Within the Likud leadership, likewise, there appears to be growing resignation to the notion of relinquishing most of the West Bank. Indeed, as discussed, the Likud is contemplating relinquishing the once sacrosanct Jordan Valley. Even some parts of East Jerusalem are now implicitly on the table: driven by demographic concerns, some party members have begun to question Israel's hold over Arab neighbourhoods.⁹⁰ "You can divide Jerusalem if necessary -- but you must prepare your people for this, you need to prepare your party for these things".⁹¹ An anti-disengagement activist bitterly noted, "the debate within the Likud today is

⁸⁶ Asked about the possibility of another Israeli disengagement, a senior Israeli security official told Crisis Group that "the political timetable does not allow this. The elections are set to follow after the implementation of the unilateral disengagement plan...It will not be until after November 2006 that further significant political measures might be taken". Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, January 2005.

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interview with senior security official, January 2005.

⁸⁸ The route approved by the Cabinet on 20 February 2005 leaves between 7 to 8.5 per cent of the West Bank between the fence and the Green Line. This is considerably less than the 15 to 16 per cent in the original route. *Haaretz*, 18 February 2005.

⁸⁹ In Bennet's phrase, Sharon's plan "would accept the possibility of some limited form of Palestinian state but also the improbability of any peace with the Palestinians", Bennet, "Sharon's Wars", op. cit.

⁹⁰ The most significant of these is Deputy Prime Minister Olmert, who when mayor of Jerusalem was known for his hardline position. Discussing whether East Jerusalem Palestinians would be able to vote in the recent Palestinian Authority elections, he said: "Whatever is supposed to remain part of the state of Israel cannot be part of the voting process. If there is a neighbourhood that is not going to be under Israeli sovereignty in the future, there should be no reason why its residents should not vote". Quoted in *Haaretz*, 15 November 2004.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interview with Ehud Danoch, former adviser to Minister Sylvan Shalom, Tel Aviv, 10 June 2004.

between surgeons, not ideologues. It is a debate about what should and should not be cut off. Some people say we'll have to lose an arm; others argue we only need to cut off a few fingers".⁹²

But neither Sharon nor the bulk of the Likud seem to believe that the gap between Israelis and Palestinians over Jerusalem, the Holy Sites, borders and the attributes of Palestinian sovereignty can be overcome anytime soon. "The easiest place for the Likud to start was clearly Gaza. There is no argument over Gaza; it is not considered holy. The West Bank -- that is a different opera".⁹³ As one security official put it, "the territorial and security arrangements deals discussed at Camp David and Taba were probably an illusion even then; they are certainly an illusion now".⁹⁴

Opposition to a Clinton or Geneva-like agreement is based on security, political and ideological grounds. Referring to a withdrawal from 95 to 97 per cent of the West Bank, a senior security official told Crisis Group, "there is no way that Israel -- not Sharon, not any Prime Minister -- can evacuate the roughly 100,000 settlers that are required by a Geneva-type deal".⁹⁵ Likewise, any discussion of relinquishing Israeli sovereignty over Jerusalem's Temple Mount and Holy Basin, as had been proposed by President Clinton, is off limits within the Likud. An insider notes, "I would say that we can divide the city of Jerusalem; we do not need many of the neighbourhoods that are on the inside. But the Old City is a bridge too far. Here we differ from Clinton and Barak".⁹⁶

What all this points to is the great uncertainty that lies in the wake of disengagement. For now, it may be a convenient one. Lack of clarity about the day after should help Sharon push through the disengagement plan, conceal the depth of the gap separating Sharon's from Abu Mazen's longer term visions, and spare the U.S. administration a difficult debate it would much rather avoid. Indeed, there is every reason today to focus on current challenges, from engineering a successful, peaceful withdrawal, to strengthening the new Palestinian leadership, to rebuilding Palestinian economic, political and institutional structures.

In this respect, Israel's disengagement represents a remarkable point of convergence for immediate Israeli and Palestinian interests. It also reflects a remarkable evolution within what is now Israel's dominant party, the Likud. But the benefits disengagement will yield are likely to come to an end, and sooner than many expect. Indeed, to the extent the disengagement plan is a package encompassing more than the withdrawal, its significant benefits already must be seen in light of some of its drawbacks: the building of the separation barrier on West Bank territory, construction in and around East Jerusalem, and the development of road networks, all of which endanger the popular standing of the new Palestinian leadership and, more importantly, imperil the prospects of a viable Palestinian state. There are other costs, too, as the understandable desire to see Sharon succeed in his effort may lead many -- in Israel and abroad -- to turn a blind eye to ongoing settlement activity in violation of the roadmap.

As for the future, once Israel has implemented its disengagement, Palestinians will be clamouring for a return to final status talks, and Israelis will be balking. Should negotiations commence, Palestinians will call for a Taba-like outcome while Israelis will, under present circumstances, insist on a long term interim arrangement -- and, should talks break down, perhaps implement it unilaterally. Common Israeli/Palestinian interest in the immediate disengagement ought not to conceal longer-term disagreement on next steps. Thought must be given now to how the process will continue once disengagement has occurred, lest the parties find themselves at yet another strategic impasse, on the brink of yet another strategic confrontation.

In short, it will not do to postpone consideration of what comes with and after disengagement until after disengagement occurs. This is by no means a simple task, involving as it does a delicate balancing act. It entails forcefully pressing the Israeli government on settlements and other activities that threaten the prospects of a viable Palestinian state without undermining Sharon's political ability to carry out the withdrawal. And it entails sufficiently reassuring the Palestinians about the shape of a final deal without unduly frightening the Israelis who have reluctantly backed Sharon's plan on the basis of his own projections about the future.

This suggests two important considerations as the process moves forward and as the international community demonstrates its tangible support for an Israeli withdrawal. First, the United States and others should forcefully remind the parties that they will neither recognise nor accept unilateral measures that prejudice final status issues and may in fact preclude their resolution. Secondly, they should put down markers as to the contours of a fair and final deal. In this, President

⁹² Crisis Group interview with Eitan Dor-Shev, Jerusalem, 24 November 2004.

⁹³ Crisis Group interview with Ronnie Milo, Tel Aviv, 7 July 2004.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interview with former Israeli security official involved in the conception of the unilateral disengagement plan, Washington, February 2005.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview with senior Israeli security official, January 2005.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview with government official, Tel Aviv, November 2004.

Bush's statement on 21 February 2005 -- calling for a freeze on settlement activity, evoking "a new Palestinian state [that] is truly viable, with contiguous territory on the West Bank", and warning against "a state of scattered territories" -- was relatively surprising, and very welcome. Words will need to be followed by action, of course. But they are, at the very least, a good start.

Amman/Brussels, 1 March 2005

APPENDIX A

MAP OF ISRAEL



APPENDIX B

MAP OF WEST BANK



APPENDIX C

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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and printed copy to officials in foreign ministries and international organisations and made available simultaneously on the website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

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