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ISSUES BRIEF

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## ISRAEL'S WITHDRAWAL FROM GAZA: A ROLE FOR AUSTRALIA?

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Despite its defeat in a Likud Party referendum on 2 May, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's proposal for a unilateral withdrawal from settlements and military positions in the Gaza Strip remains very much on the Israeli national agenda. For Sharon a withdrawal would help shorten Israel's security lines, block any alternate diplomatic initiatives being forced on Israel and win important policy changes in US positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Indeed despite Palestinian suspicions about the proposal, an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza could, if executed in an orderly and coordinated fashion, ultimately help reinvigorate a moribund peace process. There remain, however, a number of questions surrounding the plan, not least of which is whom Israel would coordinate any pull-out with, and who or what would fill any political and security vacuum left by Israel's withdrawal. Solving both sets of problems is likely to require some form of international intervention. If this occurs Australia would probably find itself on a short list of countries who would both be capable of contributing to such a sensitive and complex mission and whose membership of such a force would be acceptable to Israel, the Palestinians and the United States.*

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Despite obtaining formal US endorsement of his proposal, and some significant shifts in US policy to boot, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was unable to convince Likud Party members to back his plan for a unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in a party referendum on 2 May. Having failed to clear a hurdle of his own making – Sharon had hoped a win in the referendum would have convinced wavering Likud Party ministers and parliamentarians to back his plan – the Israel Prime Minister has decided to go around it. Sharon is likely to present a slightly modified version of the plan to his cabinet in coming weeks, if not days.

Prime Minister Sharon will face an even more difficult time getting the plan through his Cabinet. Sharon had always expected that the right wing parties in his coalition would leave the Government once he presented the withdrawal plan, but was confident he could replace them through a government of national unity with the Labor Party. Sharon's bigger problem is the attitude of fellow Likud Party Ministers, in particular leadership aspirant Benjamin Netanyahu. While Netanyahu had initially given lukewarm backing to the plan, in the aftermath of the referendum he has become more openly opposed, hoping to capitalise on Sharon's weakened position to eventually challenge for the party leadership. Sharon is also still facing indictment on two separate corruption charges which would scuttle any national unity government with the Labor party and probably force his resignation as leader.

Nonetheless, the prospect of a unilateral withdrawal from Gaza remains very much on the Israeli national agenda. The US still backs the plan and notwithstanding the referendum result expects Israel to carry it out. The Israeli public also strongly backs

the plan; in a poll conducted after the Likud Party referendum, 59 per cent of Israelis polled supported a withdrawal, including a majority who described themselves as Likud Party voters.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the recent upsurge in violence in Gaza, that has left a large number of Israeli soldiers and Palestinian civilians dead, has only reinforced in the minds of many the futility of Israel's presence there. For most Israelis the Gaza settlements neither enhance Israel's security nor reflect any deeper historical connection to biblical Israel. Having lost any faith in the Palestinian Authority's willingness to fight terror, Israelis are putting their trust in unilateral measures such as the separation fence and the shorter security lines provided by withdrawing completely from Gaza and possibly from isolated settlements in the West Bank as well. Even Netanyahu, were he to become leader of Likud, would not be able ignore the growing desire of Israelis to pull out.

**Out of Gaza**

The Gaza Strip is an area of some 360 square kilometres at the southern-most end of Israel's Mediterranean coastline. It was administered by Egypt until 1967, when it came under Israeli control. Around 1.4 million Palestinians live there. Israel withdrew from 75- 80 per cent of the Gaza Strip in 1994 as part of the Oslo process. The remaining 20- 25 per cent remains under Israeli control, comprising settlements housing 7-8000 Israeli settlers, together with access routes and military zones. The start of the Intifada has seen regular, though usually short-lived, forays by the Israeli Defence Force into Palestinian towns and refugee camps and further restrictions imposed on Palestinian movement between population centres in the Strip.

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<sup>1</sup> Yaar and Hermann (2004)

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Prime Minister Sharon has couched his proposal to withdraw from Gaza in the framework of a plan for "disengagement". In his so-called Herzeliya Speech in December 2003, Sharon said that if the Palestinians failed to implement their obligations to end violent attacks on Israel under the US-sponsored "Road Map for Peace" he would undertake a series of unilateral security steps that would see a "redeployment of IDF forces along new security lines and a change in the deployment of settlements, which will reduce as much as possible the number of Israelis located in the heart of the Palestinian population"<sup>2</sup>.

Some have questioned whether Sharon's Gaza withdrawal proposal is a part of a coherent plan. Critics pointed to growing public disquiet with the Government's inability to halt Palestinian terror attacks, and the corruption investigation into Sharon, as reasons for the Prime Minister to grasp at straws. Indeed, the role of public pressure should not be underestimated as a factor in Sharon's thinking on this issue; but neither should the extent to which the disengagement plan represents a coherent vision.

On top of the military advantages of a withdrawal, the plan would deliver political and diplomatic gains for Israel. As Sharon himself made plain in an address to the Knesset on 15 March, he wants to avoid a situation where "dozens of diplomatic initiatives, which will spring up all around the world" are drawn into the political vacuum left by a Road Map that is dead in the water.<sup>3</sup> For Sharon, disengagement is an alternative consistent with his own vision for a long-term interim settlement. In his view it will, together with the West Bank separation fence, make it easier for the IDF to protect Israel

from Palestinian terror attacks and over the longer term help address the demographic threat posed by a growing Palestinian population.

As a part of the withdrawal Prime Minister Sharon has also obtained significant changes in US policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, namely, US declarations that in any permanent settlement Palestinian refugees should be settled in a Palestinian State and that it is unrealistic to expect a full and complete withdrawal by Israel to the 1949 armistice line in the West Bank. The US declarations were qualified and in some respects, ambiguous and contradictory; they also reflect, to some degree, what most had expected to be the likely outcome of permanent status negotiations. Nonetheless, they are important points of principle and potentially change the starting point and parameters of any future negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. And Sharon knows that were he to abandon the withdrawal plan he would lose those commitments as well as the other advantages that a withdrawal would bring.

The Palestinians have remained highly suspicious of the plan, seeing it as an effort to substitute a long term interim solution for efforts to find a permanent end to the conflict. At the same time the Palestinians would undoubtedly welcome a total withdrawal from Gaza. Indeed provided an Israeli withdrawal was total, and mechanisms were found to ensure Palestinian movement and economic rehabilitation, could provide new momentum to a moribund peace process.

**More questions**

Even if Prime Minister Sharon can push his withdrawal plan through, there are still a great many unanswered questions that need to be resolved. The most critical are with whom Israel would co-ordinate

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<sup>2</sup> Sharon (2003)

<sup>3</sup> Alon (2004)

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a withdrawal from Gaza; and who or what would fill any political or security vacuum left by Israel after it pulled out.

From the outset, Prime Minister Sharon has emphasised the unilateral nature of the withdrawal. The plan is predicated on what Sharon argues has been the Palestinian Authority's failure to meet its obligation under the US-sponsored Road Map; indeed what he argues is the lack of a viable negotiating partner on the Palestinian side. Despite considerable international pressure to do so, Sharon is likely to remain reluctant to co-ordinate any withdrawal with the PA given, at the very least, that it would signal a willingness to ignore the PA's continuing failure to meet its obligation to fight terror under the Road Map.

The problem is that it is by no means clear that a completely unilateral withdrawal is feasible. Israel will still need to hand over control of abandoned settlement areas to someone and will be very keen that they are not immediately overrun by Palestinian militants. There are also question marks over who would supervise Gaza's border with Egypt. Under the current version of the plan, Israel will retain control over the so-called Philadelphi line, a narrow strip of territory in Gaza that runs along the border with Egypt. The line is critical to Israeli efforts to impede arms smuggling into Gaza. But retaining control over it means it will continue to be a flashpoint for Israeli-Palestinian violence. Indeed this area near the border was the focus of the recent upsurge in violence.

But even if Israel were able to carry out the withdrawal on its own there is still the question of whom or what would fill the political and security vacuum left by its withdrawal. In some respects little would change. Outside the settlement and military zones, the PA is still nominally in control of

most of the Gaza Strip, but its authority is badly eroded. Indeed in the southern sectors of the strip around Khan Younis and Rafah it is practically non-existent. Once Israel withdraws, Hamas and other militant groups, who will claim credit for Israel's departure, will be in stronger position to assert their authority. While the strong inclination of both the PA and Hamas will be to avoid a direct confrontation, the potential for friction will be great.

Local PA/Fatah figures like former Security Chief Muhammed Dahlan are attempting to forge an agreement on the joint administration of Gaza with Hamas. The recent assassinations of Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmad Yassin and his replacement as leader Abdel Aziz Rantissi may weaken Hamas sufficiently to strengthen Dahlan's position in the Strip. Nonetheless the outcome of these negotiations and political maneuvering is by no means clear. There is also the possibility of infighting between rival factions inside the PA/Fatah, for example Dahlan and Gaza Police Chief Ghazi Jibali. It is entirely possible, therefore, that once Israel withdraws, Gaza would continue its current slide toward greater lawlessness, perpetuating security problems for both the Palestinians and for Israel. And a failed or failing mini-state in Gaza is in no-one's interest.

**Peacekeepers revisited?**

The effort to resolve these problems makes some form of third party intervention to facilitate any withdrawal from Gaza increasingly likely. This could come in the form of Egyptian assistance to the PA to help restore law and order in Gaza and a small international force to help coordinate an Israeli withdrawal.

The idea of introducing an international force into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not, of course, new. Proponents of a peacekeeping force argue that it is

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the only way to reduce direct contact and friction between the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) and the Palestinian population. It has been a recurring Palestinian demand since the Intifada began in 2001. Indeed, immediately after Prime Minister Sharon's announcement of his intention to withdraw from Gaza, the PA urged the introduction of a peacekeeping force, a call endorsed by a number of European representatives, including then French Foreign Minister, Dominic de Villepin.<sup>4</sup> Others have since advocated either a peacekeeping force or some international role in Gaza's administration.<sup>5</sup>

But Israel, under both Labor and Likud Governments, has traditionally opposed the idea. Israel has viewed Palestinian support for a peacekeeping force as an effort to internationalise the conflict; in effect to use the international community, where the Palestinians have strong support, to define the borders of a future Palestinian State without having to negotiate with Israel. Israeli opposition also reflects the asymmetrical nature of the conflict. The IDF as a conventional military force is easily monitored. Terrorists, able to blend into the broader Palestinian population, are harder, if not impossible, to police. Israel fears that a peacekeeping force would do little to prevent Palestinian terror attacks, while limiting the IDF's ability to respond. Israel's assumption is that even a peacekeeping force with a robust mandate would be unwilling or unable to engage in serious counter-terrorism operations to ensure Israel's security.<sup>6</sup>

Publicly the US has so far backed Israel's rejection of any role for international peacekeepers and given the US' unhappy experience with peacekeeping in Lebanon in the 1980s, and its current difficulties in

Iraq, there is likely to be some on-going resistance. Nonetheless, the Bush Administration's decision to incorporate a very small number of US monitors in the Israeli-Palestinian "Road Map" indicates that Washington is not completely closed to the idea either.

Indeed any proposal for a peacekeeping force in Gaza will immediately draw comparisons with Iraq. But the two situations are different. For one the introduction of such a force into Gaza would require Israeli and Palestinian agreement. And the PA is likely to support the introduction of a force, especially insofar as it helped it to reassert its authority in Gaza. Precisely for this reason Palestinian militants might oppose such an intervention, though how violently is difficult to judge. Ultimately though, if peacekeepers contributed quickly and meaningfully to the rebuilding of law and order in Gaza, and provided a measure of reassurance to Palestinians that once Israel had withdrawn it would stay out, it is likely to be welcomed. And notwithstanding Arab misgivings about the US role in Iraq, the PA probably recognises that unless it is US-led, Israel will never agree to it.

Indeed the main resistance to the idea will probably continue to come from the Israeli side. But even this could be changing. According to press reports, Israeli officials are actively considering the idea of a small international military force to help deal with some of the challenges a withdrawal poses.<sup>7</sup> The problem of the Gaza-Egypt border, outlined above, is a case in point. To solve the problem of the Philadelphi line, Israel had initially asked Egypt to deploy troops along the line, itself an interesting indication of Israel's preparedness to look at an

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<sup>4</sup> AgenceFrancePresse (17 February 2004)

<sup>5</sup> See for example Meidan-Shaani (29 January 2004)

<sup>6</sup> Alon and Sachs (2002)

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<sup>7</sup> Kaspit (2004)

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international solution.<sup>8</sup> Egypt apparently refused, saying it would prefer to bolster troops along its side of the border.<sup>9</sup> One alternative would be to place an international force along the line.

Similarly an international force could help solve the problem of what will happen to the physical infrastructure of the settlements once Israel withdraws. According to one press report, Prime Minister Sharon had considered handing over abandoned settlements to an international organisation rather than razing them.<sup>10</sup> But an international organisation would have little ability to prevent the abandoned settlements being overrun by militant groups keen to claim a prize for their "victory". Handing the settlements over to a peacekeeping force would therefore be a preferable alternative.

It is also worth noting that some of Israel's traditional objections to peacekeeping forces would not apply in Gaza. The border is already set, so there would be no question of the PA trying to use an international force to impose one. From a security perspective the existing security fence around Gaza and tight restrictions on the entry of Gazans into Israel have already dramatically reduced the terror threat to Israel. By withdrawing settlements and soldiers from Gaza Israel would further reduce the number of targets available to Gaza-based militants. It is less likely, therefore, that a peacekeeping force would find itself caught between Israeli ground troops fighting Palestinian militants.

But even if Israel did not agree to the insertion of a peacekeeping force as a part of the withdrawal

process it could well be forced to agree once the withdrawal is under way or in its aftermath. For example, Israel's withdrawal will not solve Gaza's economic and humanitarian problems. Employment in Israel had been a significant source of income for Gaza before the Intifada, as had the export of Gazan products into Israel. For security reasons, the movement of people and goods into Israel is likely to remain restricted, at least in the short term. One option would be for an international force to operate Gaza airport, closed since the Intifada began, operate the border crossing into Egypt, open the seaport and police the Gaza fishing fleet. Improving the flow of goods and people (to Egypt, Jordan and other Arab countries), would boost the Gazan economy and provide a useful pressure valve for the local population.

On their own these measures are unlikely to totally alleviate Gaza's economic and humanitarian problems. The international community will continue to be needed to provide significant amounts of assistance. But in the worst case scenario, where internecine conflict leads to a total collapse of law and order, delivering that assistance could become extremely difficult. In these circumstances there would be international pressure to allow a peacekeeping force or some other form of international intervention, if only to allow international humanitarian organisations to operate.

Even if the worst case scenario of a total break down in Gaza did not eventuate, there is a question of whether donors will remain willing to provide large scale assistance to the PA given ongoing allegations of corruption and mismanagement, much less to any joint PA/Hamas administration. Indeed even before Prime Minister Sharon had put forward his idea for a Gaza withdrawal some observers had been arguing that the international community had to deepen its involvement in the Palestinian areas.

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<sup>8</sup> Schiff (3 March 2004)

<sup>9</sup> Stern (12 March 2004)

<sup>10</sup> Kaspit (12 March 2004)

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Former US Ambassador to Israel Martin Indyk has, for example, advocated the concept of a "Trusteeship for Palestine", under which the international community would take responsibility for Gaza and the West Bank and oversee a program of political and economic reform parallel to negotiations designed to resolve final status issues.<sup>11</sup> A key element of Indyk's proposal would be an international security force, which together with a reconstituted Palestinian security service, would carry out counter-terrorism operations and restore law and order. An Israeli withdrawal from Gaza could provide an opportunity for such proposals to be put to the test.

### On a short list?

A key factor in any decision by Israel, the Palestinians and the US to agree to a peacekeeping force would be its nature and composition. As a result of its largely negative experience of UN-led operations, notably UNIFIL in Lebanon, Israel would not accept a blue-helmet operation. Notwithstanding the difficult US experience in Iraq a US-led multinational force would therefore be the starting point, for both Israel and the Palestinians. The Palestinians would probably seek at least UN endorsement of any force even if it wasn't UN-led. Washington would want contributing forces to be experienced, professional and well-versed in operating with US forces.

For a number of reasons, whether Australia sought to be involved or not, it is likely that it would be high up on a fairly short list of preferred contributors. In addition to a role for Egypt in helping to re-build the Palestinian security services, there are only a few other countries such as the

United Kingdom, Canada and perhaps a small number of European countries likely to be viewed as preferred contributors.

First and foremost, Australia would be politically acceptable to all three parties. From Israel's perspective, Australia would be perceived to bring little political baggage or bias, as opposed, for example, to a number of European countries. The PA might be less enthusiastic given Australia's role in the war in Iraq. But its likely enthusiasm for a peacekeeping force, combined with Australia's support for Palestinian self-determination and role as a donor country, probably wouldn't see them object.

Secondly, from Washington's perspective, apart from political acceptability, Australian forces would bring a high degree of military professionalism and interoperability with those of the US. Indeed there is a significant cadre of officers within the Australian Defence Forces (ADF) who have served in Israel, the Palestinian areas and in neighbouring countries. Australians have regularly served in the command elements of both the Multinational Force of Observers in the Sinai, as well as with UNTSO in Israel. Two Australian officers also served in succession as chief military adviser to the UN Special Co-ordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, serving as his liaison with both the Israeli Defence Force and the Palestinian security services. Australian officers have established a strong reputation in the region for their professionalism.

Thirdly, Australia has either led or played a significant role in a number of successful international interventions including in East Timor, Bougainville, Cambodia and more recently in the Solomons and this experience would be seen as a major asset. The ADF has become highly proficient in these types of operations, perhaps moreso than many other modern armed forces. Down to junior

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<sup>11</sup> Indyk (2003)

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ranks Australian soldiers tend to be flexible, show initiative and are often more culturally attuned than many of their counterparts in other forces. This, combined with the relatively small footprint of ADF operations, would also help reassure the civilian population in Gaza that the IDF was not simply being replaced by a foreign-led occupation.

### Conclusion: Implications for Australia

Successive Australian Governments have expressed a readiness to support efforts to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Accompanying this has been a generally sound assumption that Australia has limited influence, and therefore a limited role. Indeed Australia should not be seeking to join the long queue of countries in the international community with their own ideas –not all of them well-judged - for solving this conflict. Ultimately it will only be solved by the Israelis and the Palestinians themselves. As both Israel and the Palestinians themselves acknowledge, the only third party with significant influence will remain the US.

This is not to say that the rest of the international community has no role to play. EU support is vital with respect to Palestinian development, and potentially, political and economic reform. In a similar way the Australian Government will need to remain awake to the fact that with respect to peacekeeping, and possibly in some other capacities, we are better positioned to play a part than many other countries, and for that reason are likely to be sought out to play a role.

Of course a great deal of political and diplomatic work needs to be done before any Israeli withdrawal is undertaken, or indeed a peacekeeping force is introduced. It might well be a year before any withdrawal begins. But Australian policy makers and military planners need to start thinking about

these issues sooner rather than later, including with respect to:

- **The ability to deploy an already stretched ADF:** Australian forces are currently deployed in Iraq, East Timor and the Solomon Islands among other more routine commitments. The commitments in East Timor and the Solomons (at least the military component) are, however, winding down. Of course, much will depend on the nature of forces required. Special Forces would, for example, be required for the more ambitious models for an international intervention, such as Ambassador Indyk's "Trusteeship" proposal.<sup>12</sup>
- **The mandate of any force:** Striking the right balance between a force able to protect itself and contribute meaningfully to efforts to end the violence, while not becoming caught in any Israeli-Palestinian crossfire, would be critical. A mandate which required peacekeepers to intercede between the IDF and Palestinian militants would probably be unworkable and potentially dangerous. But a force with a robust ability to protect itself, to patrol and reinforce a well-defined line of disengagement; to operate border areas and the air and sea ports; and to support and perhaps train PA security forces would be both more viable and make a meaningful contribution to efforts to end the violence.
- **The operating environment:** An incomplete Israeli withdrawal from Gaza would increase the risk of any peacekeeping force getting caught in the crossfire between the IDF and Palestinian militants. Similarly, an uncertain internal political situation in Gaza would leave a force

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<sup>12</sup> Indyk (2003)



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vulnerable to intra-Palestinian violence, or indeed, of being directly targeted by militants. In this respect it would be vital for an intervention force to be seen by most Gazans as heralding, at the very least, rapid improvements in their security and economic situation.

It is sometimes argued that the Middle East is distant from Australia's area of immediate strategic concern. Yet since 1948 there probably has never been a year when the ADF wasn't deployed in the Middle East in some capacity; whether as a part of various peacekeeping missions, or coalition military operations such as the Gulf War in 1991, and most recently in the coalition campaign to remove Saddam Hussein. It is arguable that this has more to do with our alliance relationship with the United States than anything else. But it is also because the ADF is highly professional and proficient that its involvement has been and will continue to be sought.

This is not say that Australia has no reasons of its own for wanting to contribute. The benefits of any effort to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict hardly need rehearsing. The region is of global strategic importance in an era where security is perhaps less divisible or definable by geography than ever. Prime Minister Sharon's withdrawal plan has the potential to provide new momentum to a moribund peace process. But this will ultimately depend greatly on the way it is implemented. And in this regard the international community, including possibly Australia, could have a significant and positive role to play in ensuring that the proposal does indeed deliver new hope to efforts to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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