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Unilateral Folly

At first glance Prime Minister Olmert's convergence plan makes perfect sense. After years of failed negotiations have not resulted in any cessation of violence, the time is ripe for Israel to separate her political prospects from the Palestinian Authority and its territories and take her future into her own hands. Oslo was a failure, Camp David produced no tangible gains and as the recent war with Hizbullah proved, the withdrawal from Lebanon has not made Israel – or Lebanon – any safer. With Hamas currently at the helm of the elected Palestinian government, the goal of achieving peace looks as distant as ever.

Today there are approximately 10,200,000 people residing between the Jordan and the Mediterranean. Of them, an estimated 4.7 million or 49 percent are Arab. With Arab birthrates between two and three times that of the region's Jewish population, the demographic issue is one that cannot be ignored. How long can Israel maintain control of the territories while still maintaining a vibrant Jewish majority, let alone a Democracy? Proponents of unilateralism argue that if action is not taken soon, the surging Arab population will inevitably overtake the Jewish state. Separating the Israeli and Palestinian populations effectively rebuts those in favor of one nation-one vote plan. Creating one state from the Jordan to the Mediterranean would mean the end of a Jewish Israel. Why then is the pullout not supported unanimously?

For one, there will always be the segment of Jewish society that views the historic Land of Israel as a gift from G-d. Relinquishing any part of this land is tantamount to sin and is therefore inconceivable. Those who adhere to such ideology make up a small percentage of Israelis but many on the ideological right who adamantly oppose withdrawal come from this subset. Additionally, the Zionist-Orthodox community in America, always generously supportive of Israel, takes a similar stance. But apart from the expected noise from the national-religious camp, there seems to be much wider disapproval of any further unilateral pull-outs and convergence.

The idea that past elections were a vote by the majority of Israelis in favor of the convergence is wrong. *Kadima*, the newly formed party which ran on the platform of unilateral withdrawal won only 28 of 120 possible Knesset seats. With one of the

lowest voter turnouts in history at about 63 percent, this means that less than 16 percent of eligible Israeli cared to vote for the Kadima party. While it is true that parties on the left fared better than their rightist counterparts, the election was by no means a clear referendum on convergence. The strength of 'constituency-parties' like *Shas* and the Pensioners Party, which cater to a single cause or group, only reinforces this concept. Still, this does not explain why there is no clear-cut support for the convergence plan.

The former head of the CIA, James Woolsey stated recently in an editorial piece in the Wall St. Journal:

"The approach Israel is preparing to take in the West Bank was tried in Gaza and has failed utterly. The Israeli withdrawal of last year has produced the worst set of results imaginable: a heavy presence by al Qaeda, Hezbollah and even some Iranian Revolutionary Guard units; street fighting between Hamas and Fatah, and now Hamas assassination attempts against Fatah's intelligence chief and Jordan's ambassador; rocket and mortar attacks against nearby towns inside Israel; and a perceived vindication for Hamas, which took credit for the withdrawal. This latter almost certainly contributed substantially to Hamas's victory in the Palestinian elections."

When Ariel Sharon explained the rationale behind the (at the time) proposed disengagement from Gaza, he maintained a certain ambiguity about future pullouts. Sharon and Olmert are not the same, and neither are Gaza and the West Bank. The disengagement involved the removal and relocation of around 8,000 Israeli citizens while the proposed convergence would uproot more than ten times that amount. It is estimated that Olmert's plan would run a tab of 16 billion shekels compared with a 2.5 billion bill from the previous disengagement. Where is this money going to come from? The most logical answer is the U.S., but this is by no means guaranteed. Money that was slated to help defray the cost of the Gaza withdrawal was subsequently rescinded following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. The growing cost of the war in Iraq, the looming insolvency of entitlements such as Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid and the expanding U.S. debt leave some doubt on how willing the U.S. is to provide the funds needed to cover such a massive endeavor.

But the issue of money matters little if convergence cannot make Israel secure. As was the case with the pullout from Lebanon, terrorists can now effectively claim that their barbarous tactics have led to Israel's further withdrawal from territory. With Hamas now controlling 73 of the 132 seats in the Palestinian Parliament, the claim that withdrawal lends support to the terrorists becomes more viable. As tensions between Fatah and Hamas continue to flare, we are left to wonder who fill the vacuum left following a withdrawal from the West Bank. Can Israel afford to be flanked to the East and West by Hamas-controlled entity?! With the borders no longer Israel-controlled, a potential influx of Al-Qaeda and other global Jihadists,

longing to wage their holy war against the “little Satan”, must be considered. Yuval Diskin, the head of *Shin Bet* announced recently at the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that 11 tons of TNT, three million bullets, 19,600 rifles, 1,600 pistols, 65 RPG launchers, 430 RPGs and some 10 shoulder rockets have been smuggled into the Gaza Strip since the 2005 pullout, more than the total amount smuggled since the 1967 Six Day War. Take those numbers and adjust them for a territory with a border nearly four-times the length of Gaza's and the logic behind convergence becomes even murkier.

There is no doubt that defining secure borders will, in time, work to Israel's advantage. In fact, the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs' (a Jerusalem based think-tank led by former Ambassador Dore Gold) *Defensible Borders Project* outlines in detail what areas Israel must retain in order to adequately defend herself from future hostile activity. Additionally, ensuring that Israel maintains a Jewish majority is of the utmost importance and must be taken into account by policymakers. But these things take time. Will abandoning territory, not to mention evicting nearly 200,000 Jews from their homes, under the current circumstances inhibit Israel's ability to effectively fight terrorism? Will an Israeli pullout reduce the likelihood of another confrontation with Hizbullah and continued rocket attacks from Gaza in to Israel? These scenarios are not far-fetched and must be examined carefully. While the convergence plan makes sense in a theoretical world in which those bent on Israel's destruction can be placated with territorial concessions and the demographic threat facing the Jewish State is its most pressing problem, it seems illogical in today's grim world of Islamic Jihad – courtesy Hamas, Hizbullah, and Al Qaeda.

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