



2005: ISRAEL'S DISENGAGEMENT FROM GAZA

From moment of hope
to a living nightmare

2005: Israel's disengagement from Gaza – from moment of hope to a living nightmare



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When Israel withdrew from Gaza in August 2005, there was a sense of finality, of a closed chapter. Some 8,000 settlers were evacuated from the territory, all 21 settlements demolished, and even the remains of 48 Israelis buried in Gush Katif – a bloc of 17 Israeli settlements in the southern Gaza Strip – cemetery were disinterred and moved to Israel.

For those of us who were there to witness this historic moment in relations between the Israelis and Palestinians, which took place 38 years after Gaza had been occupied by Israel, the trajectory seemed very clear: one of further disengagement, in the West Bank as well, that would create the conditions conducive to a two-state solution. After all, this act of disengagement also included the removal of four settlements in the West Bank.

Out of personal and research-related curiosity, I decided to spend a few weeks that summer in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, as it was clear that this was a monumental event, the implications of which would reverberate for years to come.

In Israel, the issue deeply polarized the political system and wider society in an almost unprecedented way.

Getting into the Gaza Strip during the evacuation process itself, and witnessing it first-hand, was for me also a case of learning how it was possible for Israeli soldiers to remove Jewish settlers without bloodshed, in the hope that this would signal a genuine effort to rekindle negotiations over a two-state solution that would include the evacuation of an estimated 75,000 settlers from the West Bank.

It is worth noting that in 2004 “only” 250,000 Jewish settlers lived in the West Bank, compared with the 450,000 who are there now, not including settlements in occupied East Jerusalem.

The day before the disengagement officially began was the holy day of Tisha B’Av, the ninth day of the Jewish month of Av. According to tradition, this is a day of mourning, commemorating the many tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people, among them the destruction in antiquity of the two temples in Jerusalem.

On that day in 2005, on the advice of a journalist friend, I joined a bus tour arranged by settlers from Gush Katif so that I could test the mood among settlers



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there who had shunned pleas by the government to leave without resistance.

The mood varied between defiance, deep sadness and also a recognition of their fate, that they had lost the long battle between the “oranges” (the settlers and their supporters, who wore orange shirts) and the “blues” (Israelis who wore blue and supported the withdrawal).

On the day of this visit I had a chance meeting with one of the leaders of the settlers from the West Bank, who had come to support those in Gaza. He told me in no uncertain terms that this time “we, the moderates, lost the day but in the West Bank it will be very different.”

I asked him if he meant armed resistance or even a civil war. All I got in reply was a stern look as he walked away.

But the most revealing experience of that day of mourning took place in the cemetery of Neve Dkhalim, the biggest Jewish settlement in Gaza, where leading figures from the settler movement gathered, including prominent rabbis. Not only did they pray, they formed a chain of men with their arms on each other’s shoulders, literally wailing, bursting into floods of tears and pledging to return one day.

We know now how much they meant this,

Israelis mourn beside the graves of their relatives before the exhumation of bodies as part of Israel’s disengagement plan at the Gush Katif cemetery near the southern Gaza Strip settlement of Neve Dekalim in August 2005. REUTERS

and they have stuck to this pledge for the 20 years since then. They felt both a strong sense of betrayal by their country, and also a belief that it was unfinished business.

The next day I was back on a bus, this time with a corps of local and international journalists traveling to a massive media center built specially for the occasion on the Israeli side of the border with Gaza. Here, about 2,000 media representatives received accreditation to follow and report on the disengagement process in one of the settlements.

No less importantly, we were also each given, for our own safety and security, a red cap bearing the word “Press.” This was a time when the protection of journalists who were simply doing their job was still viewed as sacrosanct by the Israeli government. Late at night, we arrived at a small settlement called Shirat Hayam.

The magnitude of what transpired 20 years ago can be understood not only through examination of the chain of events that led to the first evacuation of Jewish settlements in Palestinian territory, but also who was behind it and how was it done.

Looking back two decades later, as irrational and improbable is the talk now about rebuilding Jewish settlements in



Gaza, it must be taken seriously because it is exactly what the settlement movement “promised,” even then, and because the seeds of this incautious idea were sown in the unilateral nature of the withdrawal and the years of harsh blockade that followed.

Instead of serving as a first step toward peace, the actions of Israel ensured the Gaza Strip remained occupied by other means, and they facilitated the takeover by Hamas.

The decision by the prime minister at the time, Ariel Sharon, to withdraw unilaterally from Gaza was taken some time in the second half of 2003. Those were the days of the Second Intifada, when outbreaks of violence by Hamas and Islamic Jihad had escalated and were met by harsh retaliatory measures taken by Israel’s security forces, not only against terrorism and militancy but also against the entire Palestinian population.

For most people other than the settler movement and their supporters, the logic behind the withdrawal from Gaza was obvious; it was more a question of why it had not happened sooner, and what was even the rationale for building settlements that held no strategic value. On the contrary, they required the Israeli army to allocate immense resources to protect them, given that they were built next to a hostile population of more than 1.3 million Palestinians.

Sharon, a former general, saw Gaza mainly through the eyes of a military man: as a

Above: Former Israeli right-wing PM Ariel Sharon (C) is flanked by security guards as he leaves the Al-Aqsa mosque compound in Jerusalem’s Old City during a highly-contested visit in September 2000, which paved the way for the Second Intifada. Next: Next to a poster reading, “[Israeli PM Benjamin] Netanyahu is good for murderers,” Israeli extreme right-winger Itamar Ben Gvir (L) argues with Palestinians outside Tel Mond Prison in Israel. AFP

security burden, not an asset. What would prove to be the fatal flaw in his plan was the unilateral nature of the withdrawal. Over time it enhanced the reputation of Hamas, which claimed that its armed resistance had forced the Israeli army and settlers to leave. At the same time, it considerably weakened the Palestinian Authority and the Fatah movement, which were ultimately forced out of Gaza by Hamas.

Israel contributed to this process by completely sidelining and humiliating the PA and the Palestine Liberation Organization as the legitimate representatives of the Palestinian people.

In Sharon’s mind, a unilateral departure from Gaza was a win-win prospect (though in time the decision would prove to be a costly mistake). To begin with, it would demarcate a defensible border between Israel and Gaza, seemingly ending the occupation of the territory, and therefore it would ease some of the pressure on Israel from the international community to make progress toward a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

It would also relieve the security burden of policing a hostile environment, which was expensive in terms of casualties, the economic costs and the erosion of the military’s preparedness to undertake other missions. It was reported, for example, that 350 soldiers guarded 65 families in one settlement alone.

Moreover, since 1967 Israel had been





nursing a major concern that it would lose its Jewish majority between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. A departure from Gaza instantly relieved this concern, at least in the short and medium terms.

Lastly, there was a personal aspect to the decision. Sharon did not trust Yasser Arafat, the leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization (the feeling was mutual), and so did everything he could to avoid even having to deal with him, let alone conceding any territory to him.

Their bitter rivalry was decades old. It had peaked during the 1982 Lebanon War, which ended with Arafat and 6,500 Fatah fighters leaving Beirut for other countries in the region, and Arafat establishing the PLO's headquarters in Tunisia.

For Sharon, that war had ended in disgrace, under the cloud of his involvement in massacres at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. This forced him out of the Ministry of Defense and he spent years in the political wilderness.

When the idea of disengagement from Gaza was hatched, Arafat was under an Israeli military siege in the Mukataa, his headquarters in Ramallah. By the time it

Top: Israeli soldiers arrive to evict hardline settlers who refused to leave voluntarily from the southern Gaza Strip settlement of Neve Dekalim in August 2005. Above: Israeli soldiers escort crying teenage Jewish girls from their home as settlers are evacuated from the illegal Kerem Atzmona outpost. Next: The late Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat acknowledges applause from members of parliament following his address to a joint sitting of both houses of Parliament in Cape Town. AFP

was implemented he had died. In the time between his death, in November 2004, and the implementation of the plan, in August 2005, Israeli authorities refused to open talks with his successor, Mahmoud Abbas, rendering him irrelevant.

For the PA and the PLO, the unilateral nature of the withdrawal went beyond humiliating and undermining them, it also ensured a lack of any commitment from them to help the plan succeed.

They were completely excluded from any discussions about the proposal for disengagement. This was despite the fact that the PA's Negotiations Support Unit, led by Saeb Erekat, had a year earlier drafted a plan for Israeli withdrawal from both the West Bank and Gaza, but as part of a comprehensive peace deal rather than a piecemeal effort.

While there was a degree of coordination between the PA and Israel in an attempt to ensure a smooth withdrawal process, it was dominated by distrust that led to the settlements being razed to the ground rather than handed over to the PA.

Some argued that these demolitions were carried out because the Palestinian leadership did not want them to be



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purchased, even by a third party, as this might constitute recognition of Israeli ownership. Others suggested that the houses, mainly one or two stories and built on relatively large plots of land, did not provide an adequate solution to the shortage of housing in Gaza, one of the most densely populated places in the world.

But there was another reason, which is more relevant now than ever: It was a symbolic act representing a sense of finality because those who left could never return to houses that no longer existed.

What was less comprehensible, however, was the failure to protect more than 3,000 greenhouses in the settlements, even though they had been bought from the settlers by American Jewish donors in a deal brokered by the former World Bank president, James Wolfensohn, who put up \$500,000 of his own money.

A month after Israel vacated the Gaza Strip, the greenhouses were looted and destroyed by local Palestinians, depriving the population of a much-needed source of employment, as well as income for efforts to rebuild Gaza after 38 years of occupation.

When the group of journalists I was with arrived late that night at Shirat Hayam on the Gazan beach, we were “welcomed” at the entrance by a group of settlers who blocked our path and asked us to leave immediately. They had a very low opinion of media objectivity, domestic or international, when it came to their cause.

Nonetheless, we managed to negotiate our way into this makeshift settlement of no more than 15 families, which had been approved by the government less than four years earlier following a terrorist attack on a children’s bus in neighboring Kfar Darom. We waited there for the Israeli soldiers to arrive and begin the evacuation process.

To our surprise, there were also dozens of teenagers present who had been brought in as “reinforcements” from settlements in the West Bank and from within the Green Line in Israel. When I asked some of them whether they thought they could prevent the soldiers from evacuating the settlement, they replied in the affirmative.

They were surprisingly serious and optimistic, telling us that their rabbis had told them the soldiers would be stopped by a divine miracle, whereby hands would appear out of the ground and drag the troops down. It was amusing and shocking in equal measure.

Within less than a week all of the settlers had been removed, amid resistance that seemed sporadic and mainly consisted of smashing bus windows and setting tires on fire. The soldiers, despite the constant abuse hurled at them by the settlers, behaved

professionally and used minimal force as, one by one, they put people on buses headed for the Green Line and into Israel.

We followed the last settlers out of Gaza and returned to Tel Aviv. In a matter of days we were on the move again to witness the evacuation of Homesh, one of the four settlements being emptied in the West Bank. In May, 20 years later, the current Israeli government approved the rebuilding of Homesh.

The plan in Gaza was hardly intended to give residents the freedom to develop the land. And with the election of Hamas in 2006, Israel changed the nature of its occupation from the former permanent presence inside the territory to a blockade by land, sea and air.

Soon after the disengagement, Sharon suffered a severe stroke from which he never recovered and was replaced by his deputy, Ehud Olmert, who had other ideas in mind for reaching a two-state solution.

The final act in the tragedy of the disengagement’s failure came on Oct. 7, 2023, in the form of the attack on Israel by Hamas.

Neither this, nor the unprecedented violence that followed, can be excused in any way, shape or form. But it emphasized why the decision to leave Gaza, taken unilaterally and without engaging with or empowering those who wanted peace with Israel along the lines of a two-state solution, was an act of folly that exacted an unbearable price over the past two decades.



GAZA DISENGAGEMENT: THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND BEHIND THE PLAN

Research & Studies Unit

It is over 20 years since Israel's prime minister at the time, Ariel Sharon, ordered the eviction of all Israeli settlers from settlements in Gaza, which Israel had occupied since the end of the Six-Day War in 1967.

The "disengagement," as Sharon termed it, took place between Aug. 15 and Sept. 12, 2005. The motivations for the withdrawal, which represented a 180-degree political about-face by him, were both pragmatic and ideological.

Since September 2000, Israel had been in the grip of the Second Intifada. The uprising was fueled in part by frustration over the failure of the Camp David Summit earlier in the year. But the more immediate trigger was a deliberately provocative visit to Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in Jerusalem that month by none other than Sharon, leader of the Likud party, accompanied by a thousand Israeli police officers and members of his party.

Sharon became prime minister of Israel in March 2001. After he was reelected in January 2003, he began planning the "disengagement" from Gaza. It was, he said, a step designed to advance the "Roadmap for Peace," which had been drawn up in April 2003 by the Quartet (the US, EU, UN and Russia) but had stalled as a result, as he put it, of Palestinian intransigence.

In May 2003, under pressure from the Bush administration in Washington, Sharon publicly accepted the idea of "two states for two peoples," seemingly reversing a lifetime of opposition to the very concept of Palestinian statehood.

This, then, was the backdrop to Israel's withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, which provoked anger among the far-right settler movement. Itamar Ben Gvir, at the time a settler activist, accused Sharon of being a traitor.

Ben Gvir is now Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's national security minister. He has called repeatedly for the removal of Palestinians from Gaza and the rebuilding of Jewish settlements in the territory.

In 2005, Netanyahu, at the time Sharon's finance minister and rival for the leadership of Likud, resigned over the withdrawal from Gaza.

It took just one week, in the summer of 2005, to undo an Israeli presence in Gaza that had persisted for 38 years. On Aug.



Above: Sharon (C), his deputy Shimon Peres (2nd bottom), Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (top) and Trade Minister Ehud Olmert (L) attend a Knesset session in January 2005. Next: In a crowd, a little girl raises her finger to join other women chanting anti-Israel slogans during a rally organized by Hamas in Gaza City to commemorate the late Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. The 2005 disengagement from the Strip would lay the groundwork for the group's takeover. AFP

15, the Israeli army issued a 48-hour final evacuation notice to the 8,000 settlers in Gaza. The majority left voluntarily, taking up the government's offer of financial compensation and resettlement at one of a number of locations in Israel.

Between Aug. 18 and 22, the army moved in to remove the rest by force, amid scenes that many in Israel found distressing.

After the settlers were gone, homes, schools and military installations in the settlements in Gaza were bulldozed by the Israeli army. After much debate, and rabbinical advice, the Israeli government decided to leave synagogues standing, despite a plea from the Palestinian Authority for them to be demolished to prevent anticipated desecration. Inevitably, perhaps, when the Israelis were gone these buildings, too, were destroyed.

But for many, the most traumatic part of the process of disengagement was the abandonment of Jewish cemeteries in Gaza. The remains of Jews who had died in the territory since 1968, including 230 soldiers and 327 settlers killed between 2000 and 2005, were disinterred for reburial in Israel.

After the last soldier left Gaza on Sept. 12, 2005, all that remained of the Israeli presence, other than the soon-to-be destroyed synagogues, was 1,000 acres of high-tech greenhouses left behind by the settlers. Many Palestinians had worked on these Israeli farms, growing flowers, fruit







and vegetables that earned the settlers millions of dollars a year in exports. It was hoped the greenhouses would generate useful income for Palestinians but, despite the efforts of Palestinian officials and police, many of them were vandalized and looted.

Some survived and were taken over by Palestinian farmers but any hopes of profitable exports were dashed when Israel tightened its control of border crossings.

The disengagement in 2005 was not limited to Gaza: four small settlements in the northern West Bank, home to about 800 settlers, were also abandoned. In May 2025, Netanyahu's government announced it had given the go-ahead for 22 new settlements in the West Bank, including a "historic return" to two of the sites vacated 20 years ago.

The decision to withdraw settlers from Gaza in 2005 came as a surprise to many inside and outside Israel, not least because before becoming prime minister in 2001, Sharon, a former general, was known as "the father of the settlement movement."

When he joined Prime Minister Menachem Begin's right-wing Likud government in 1977 it was as minister of agriculture, a role that gave him great authority in his secondary role as chairperson of the Ministerial Committee on Settlements. He proved to be a good friend of the ultranationalist, messianic Gush Emunim settler movement.

"In this role he put Likud policy and his own beliefs into practice," his son, Gilad Sharon, recalled in his 2011 biography of his father.

"He founded many dozens of settlements in Judea, Samaria (the Israel terms for the southern and northern West Bank), the Gaza Strip, Galilee, the Golan Heights, the Negev, and in the Arava."

Later, as minister of construction and housing from 1990 to 1992, Sharon was the

Previous: A Vought Mirage flies over an Israeli army tank in the Sinai, on the Israeli-Egyptian border, in 1967 — a few days before the start of the Six-Day War. Tel Aviv would go on to seize the Gaza Strip, which it occupied for the following 38 years. ABOVE: Religious Jewish settlers gather for afternoon prayers in a synagogue in the Neve Dekalim settlement, part of the Gush Katif bloc in the Gaza Strip. AFP/Getty Images

driving force behind the building of many more settlements in the Occupied Territories.

He was elected prime minister in February 2001, just five months after his provocative, vote-winning stunt at Al-Aqsa. He first proposed his disengagement plan in 2003. Approved by Israel's cabinet on June 6, 2004, it was endorsed by a Knesset majority on Oct. 25 that year.

Academics have pondered the true motivation behind Sharon's dramatic Gaza gesture ever since, and whether he planned to remove additional settlements. Just months after the withdrawal from Gaza, however, he suffered a stroke that left him in a coma until his death in January 2014.

Sharon was hailed by many in the international community as a peacemaker because of the withdrawal from Gaza in 2005. But in a surprisingly frank interview with the Israeli newspaper Haaretz in October 2004, Sharon's senior adviser, Dov Weisglass, revealed that the motive behind the destruction of the settlements was purely ideological.

The significance of the disengagement, he said, was "the freezing of the peace process. And when you freeze that process, you prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state, and you prevent a discussion on the refugees, the borders and Jerusalem. Effectively, this whole package called the Palestinian state, with all that it entails, has been removed indefinitely from our agenda."

Weisglass, who was credited with helping to formulate the plan, added: "The disengagement is actually formaldehyde (a chemical used to embalm dead bodies).

"It supplies the amount of formaldehyde that is necessary so there will not be a political process with the Palestinians."