

Israel: It Wasn't the Gaza Disengagement but Netanyahu's Policies That Led to Disaster

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In seeking the historical origins of the October 7 debacle, we must go back to the decisions made by the premier a decade ago

Police face off with settlers refusing to leave a synagogue rooftop in the central Gaza Strip, August 2005. Credit: Yossi Zamir / GPO

Since the October 7 massacre, people on the left and right alike have been relentlessly pummeling the same old punching bag. The roots of that disaster, they argue, need to be sought not in the policies of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, but before his tenure, in the evacuation of the Gaza Strip settlements in August 2005. Such claims can be found, among other places, in articles in both the Israel Hayom daily and in Haaretz. They are also voiced by such cabinet members as Education Minister Yoav Kisch and by right-wing journalists, including Yinon Magal and Amit Segal.

The emphases are, of course, different. The right-wing critique focuses on the military-security issue, whereas left-wingers address the unilateral character of the move, which led to the expulsion of 8,000 settlers. Harsher critics locate the original sin more than a decade earlier, in [the Oslo Accords](#). Undoubtedly there will be some experts who will claim that, effectively, Netanyahu was painted into a corner by the decisions Theodor Herzl made in the First Zionist Congress, in Basel in 1897.

To read present-day reality correctly, it's necessary to recall a few facts and refute a few myths about the disengagement plan. Even more so, it's the myths related to the days that followed Israel's 2005 Gaza pullout that need to be dispelled.

After the second intifada erupted, in 2000, protecting the [settlements in Gaza](#) and the access roads to them became a daily risk and a heavy military and economic burden. The 21 settlements and the areas around them took up about 20 percent of the territory of the Gaza Strip (though the settlers constituted just 0.2 percent of its population). Those areas required steady protection, a situation that wore down the security forces and exacted many casualties, among soldiers and civilians alike. For example, every time a settler family would send their children to school, a full army escort was required.

It's largely forgotten now, but before the disengagement, the Israel Defense Forces was not stationed in the cities, villages or refugee camps of the Gaza Strip; its job was to encircle the settlements intensively. The presence of Israeli civilians in Gaza impeded and hampered the IDF's activity, not the opposite. Contrary to claims being voiced today to the effect that Gush Katif - as the main settlement bloc there was known - was Israel's first "layer of defense," the settlements were injurious to the state's security. That fact is emphasized repeatedly by most personnel of the security establishment.

Nor did the recurring rounds of violence begin with Israel's pullout from Gaza. For example, the military presence there did not prevent Operation Rainbow or Operation Days of Penitence in 2004 (the first directed at threats in the southern part of the Strip, the latter, several months later, at the north). The firing of rockets and mortar shells into Israel also preceded the disengagement by several years. Hamas' improvement of its military capabilities was also not significantly influenced one way or the other by the fact that the IDF was safeguarding a few thousand Jews in the Gaza Strip; and the organization's political strength began to grow - as the municipal elections of late 2004 and early 2005 showed - even before the withdrawal, and did not derive from it.

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"Only now do Israel's citizens understand what would have happened to the 10,000 settlers in 2005 if they had remained in the Gaza Strip," Shaul Mofaz, who was the defense minister at the time of the disengagement, explained this month in an interview with Channel 12. "What sort of protection did it afford Israel? What interest did we even have in being there? We just saved lives [by removing them from Gaza]. [Now people are digging](#) back 18 years to find a few people to blame [for October 7]; that's fine, he [Netanyahu] is permitted to dig. He is permitted."

<A Hamas militant sitting pretty in the captured compound of Fatah security forces, in Gaza City in June 2007. Credit: Mahmoud Hams / AFP

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Attorney Dov Weissglas, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's adviser and one of the architects of the pullout, wrote in his memoir about his years of work with Sharon: "The resumption of shooting from Gaza into Israel stemmed from Hamas' takeover of Gaza, with no connection to the disengagement. Netanyahu leaped at the opportunity and made cynical use of this regrettable development to crow about how his 'forecasts' had come true, and in this way reaped, without justification, a generous political reward."

Indeed, in the public consciousness, a clear-cut connection was made between the Israeli disengagement and Hamas' takeover of the Strip in June 2007. That linkage is the result of skillful political propaganda, which succeeded in erasing the fact that almost two full years separated the events. The argument also ignores the fact that in any event, a few thousand settlers did not have the power to prevent Hamas' takeover of the Strip's millions of people.

On the left side of the map, the criticism is not directed at the military implications of the disengagement, but at its unilateral character. The scholars Lev Grinberg and Daniel De Malach wrote recently in Haaretz (Hebrew edition), "The original sin that led to the present systemic collapse was the unilateral exit from Gaza, which is mistakenly called the 'disengagement.' The withdrawal was planned with the aim of foiling the establishment of a Palestinian state, in the knowledge that in the wake of the severance [of Gaza] from the West Bank and from Israel, and the siege [imposed by Israel], there would be dire distress in Gaza, which would lead to violence against Israel." The authors do not cite a shred of evidence, however, to show that the planners of the disengagement intended to "foil" a Palestinian state and that they knew that as a result of the move "dire distress" would arise in Gaza that would necessarily generate violence.

On the contrary, even many critics of the disengagement agree that it was consistent with the country's division into two states, and also with the "road map" drawn up by President George W. Bush in 2002. This was also the perception of the State Department, resulting in an exchange of

messages between Sharon and the president. In May 2004, the representatives of the Quartet (U.S., Russia, United Nations, European Union) announced support for the disengagement as part of the Road Map.

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Giora Eiland, who as head of the National Security Council planned the disengagement in practice, also saw it as one element in a broader policy move planned by Prime Minister Sharon, and he was one of the most vociferous objectors to its “unilaterality.” In a 2006 interview with Haaretz, he referred to the move as a “missed opportunity of historic proportions,” because its planning was not completed and because “the move along a unilateral path leads us to the classic solution of two states for two peoples, and I think this is an impossible solution.”

That “unilaterality” characterized Sharon’s policy as long as Yasser Arafat was alive. From Sharon’s viewpoint, as long as Arafat headed the Palestinian Authority, it was not possible to move ahead with negotiations, certainly not so soon after Operation Defensive Shield in 2002. However, in November 2004, after Arafat’s death and the return to power of Mahmoud Abbas, the need for unilaterality looked less and less necessary.

Sharon made it clear in a conversation at the time with Sen. Joe Biden that following Arafat’s death, “new opportunities arise for cooperation and for an alternative implementation of the disengagement plan together with the PA.” Weissglas, the plan’s mastermind, wrote that “its implementation was coordinated fully with the Palestinians: In many lengthy meetings, across tens of hours, arrangements were discussed to deploy the Palestinian security forces... Detailed arrangements were discussed concerning the future of the property that would remain in the settlements after the evacuation... We helped as much as we could... to arrange all the economic-civilian aspects between Israel and the Palestinians after the withdrawal. The more time that passed, the more willingness and satisfaction the Palestinians displayed over Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza.”

So tight was the coordination that Weissglas was able to relate that the Palestinians’ apprehensions had given way to far-reaching aspirations, such as Abbas’ remark to Omar Suleiman, Egypt’s chief of intelligence, that “Gaza should be turned into Singapore.”

The claim that the plan was aimed at thwarting a future Israeli pullout from parts of the West Bank also fails to meet the factual test. Eiland reiterated numerous times that Weissglas “met with the Americans and committed us to a major unilateral step both in Gaza and the West Bank... The Americans’ impression was that it would be a withdrawal from 60 percent to 80 percent of the West Bank.”

Even though the historical documentation remains classified and therefore inaccessible, there is no disputing the fact that Sharon considered removing, in addition to the exit from Gaza, another 17 settlements from Judea and Samaria (which had a total of 15,000 residents). The idea was shelved because of opposition by the United States, which argued that the Palestinians would not be able to take responsibility for the territory to be evacuated. In the light of this, it was decided to implement a much smaller evacuation of four settlements from northern Samaria. What Sharon would have managed to carry out in the future had he not lapsed into a coma in January 2006, is already another question.

Israeli forces leave the Gaza Strip in September 2005. Credit: David Bachar

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The conflict between Fatah and Hamas, which reached its climax in Hamas' takeover of Gaza in June 2007, surprised everyone involved. There are good reasons for thinking that Hamas itself was surprised by the weakness of the PA's security units. Leaked documents show that Abbas and his aides did not view Hamas as a genuine military threat. Marwan Kanafani, a top adviser in the PA, told the Americans that Hamas was among the least of Abbas' problems. Sharon and his aides spoke in a similar vein at the time.

At the same time, the opinions and assessments in Israel about any benefit that might accrue to Israel from Hamas' takeover of Gaza were not uniform. Amos Gilad, for example, who was director of policy and political-military affairs in the Defense Ministry, speaking with a State Department official in September 2005, said that, "we will be lost if Hamas becomes a true force and part of political life." The director of Military Intelligence, Amos Yadlin, who is frequently seen these days on television as a commentator on the war, saw things differently. In a June 2007 conversation with the U.S. ambassador to Israel, Richard Jones, just a few days before Hamas seized control of the Gaza Strip - the content of the discussion appeared in Wikileaks - Yadlin said Israel would be "happy" if Hamas took over Gaza, because the IDF would then be able to "deal with Gaza as a hostile state." The ambassador wondered whether Yadlin wasn't worried about Hamas' ties with Iran. Yadlin "dismissed the significance of an Iranian role in a Hamas-controlled Gaza 'as long as they don't have a port.'"

Immediately after the seizure by Hamas of Gaza, the Israeli government under Prime Minister Ehud Olmert adopted a policy of a tight siege on the Strip, which prevented people from entering and leaving, and blocked the entry of anything other than humanitarian aid. Claims that Fatah officials repeatedly voiced - that Hamas would not be successful at managing the Gaza Strip and would beg the PA to return - were quickly proved wrong. Indeed, top officials in the PA also recommended a tight blockade. "They will surrender to hunger and distress and they will have no choice," Saeb Erekat, a leading PLO official, stated.

Netanyahu has been declaring, in English, that he is against the PA's return to Gaza. That can only mean one of two things: Israel's re-occupation of the Gaza Strip, which will entail years of additional bloodshed - or the preservation of Hamas rule there.

On the Israeli side, the rationale of [a stringent blockade](#) was based on the assumption that the new situation would weaken Hamas, and help lead to its collapse. That conception proved to be a bitter mistake, as Hamas only grew more powerful. Of course, were it not for the siege, the organization would have found it less difficult to build itself up militarily, and would not have had to smuggle materiel in through [tunnels](#) - the very tunnels whose existence stunned the Israeli public in 2014.

In fact, if one is looking for a point in history from which a direct line to the events of October 7 can be drawn, it's best to forgo the disengagement and turn to 2013-2014, to Operation Protective Edge, and the period leading up to it. That was the period that can be likened to a distillation of five years of [Benjamin Netanyahu's policy](#), which preferred to preserve the status quo in the form of Hamas rule and a clear differentiation between Gaza and the West Bank.

In that period, prior to Protective Edge, Hamas was at its weakest since having seized control in Gaza. The Muslim Brotherhood had lost power in Egypt, and Abdel Fattah al-Sissi staged a coup to capture the presidency; the crossing points between Gaza and Egypt were closed; the situations of both Iran and Syria had been weakened regionally; and Abbas' status had become stronger internationally. Against this background, in April 2013, Abbas proposed a reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas, to which the latter had no choice but to agree. The Netanyahu government, in response, threw Hamas a lifeline, announcing that Israel would boycott the Palestinian government of reconciliation and cease to transfer to it the taxes it collected for the PA. Today we know where Hamas got the money that Abbas subsequently refused to deliver to it: in the suitcases of cash from the Qatar government, which were brought into Gaza with the authorization of the prime minister of Israel.

Little remained during Operation Protective Edge of Netanyahu's 2009 boasting and his promises to liquidate Hamas. At the start of the fighting, which lasted from July 8 to August 26, 2014, he did in fact declare that the operation's goals were to inflict a mortal blow on Hamas and eliminate its stockpile of rockets; but those ambitions were soon abandoned, and Israel made do with destroying the terror tunnels - in part. One of the ways in which Netanyahu prevented the broadening of the operation was by leaking a classified presentation from the security cabinet. The leak asserted that a ground operation undertaken to exact a steep price from Hamas could be expected to result in hundreds of casualties among the IDF. It was members of Netanyahu's own government who attributed the leak to him.

We don't yet have a full picture about why the current ground incursion into Gaza in the present war was delayed by some two weeks. The IDF emphasized that it was ready and was just awaiting a green light from the political decision-makers. But it's already evident that Netanyahu and his aides are preparing domestic public opinion for a permanent cease-fire that will not result in the full defeat of Hamas. Foreign Minister Eli Cohen explained a few days ago that Israel has a window of opportunity of two to three weeks, before international pressure is applied for a cease-fire. Concurrently, Netanyahu has been declaring, in English, that he is against the PA's return to Gaza. That can only mean one of two things: Israel's re-occupation of the Gaza Strip, which will entail years of additional bloodshed - or the preservation of Hamas rule there.

The day will come when we will learn the full scope of the array of moves and the policy that Netanyahu pursued until we arrived at October 7. The disengagement, in any event, has absolutely nothing to do with it.

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P.S.

- Haaretz. Nov 23, 2023:
<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-11-23/ty-article-magazine/.highlight/it-wasnt-the-gaza-dis-engagement-but-netanyahus-policies-that-led-to-disaster/0000018b-fcf1-de73-a9bb-fef7ab240000>
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- *Adam Raz's articles in Haaretz:*
<https://www.haaretz.com/ty-WRITER/0000017f-da2b-d42c-aff-dffb52b10000>