

Sharon's Gaza Pullout: Not Gonna Happen!

By [Tanya Reinhart](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

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We gather here at difficult times, when it seems that the Palestinian cause has been almost eliminated from the international agenda. The Western world is hailing the new “peace vision” of Sharon’s disengagement plan. The day this plan passed in the Israeli Knesset (parliament) last week was hailed by *Le Monde* as a historical day. Who would pay attention to the two line news piece that on that same day, the Israeli army killed 16 Palestinians in Khan-Yunes?

It is pretty much known even in the West that Sharon’s plan is not about ending the occupation. With regard to the Gaza strip, the disengagement plan published in the Israeli papers on Friday, April 16, specifies that “Israel will supervise and guard the external envelope on land, will maintain exclusive control in the air space of Gaza, and will continue to conduct military activities in the sea space of the Gaza Strip”. In other words, the Palestinians will be imprisoned from all sides, with no connection to the world, except through Israel. Israel also reserves for itself the right to act militarily inside the Gaza strip. In return for this “concession”, Israel would be permitted to complete the wall and to maintain the situation in the West Bank as is. The innovation in the Bush-Sharon agreement that approved this plan is that this is not a proposal awaiting the approval of the Palestinian people. Now the Palestinians are not even asked. It is Israel and the U.S. who are determining the facts on the ground. Israel marks the land that it desires, and builds a wall on that route.

For those who oppose Israeli occupation, it is clear, then, that Sharon’s disengagement is just a plan for maintaining the occupation with more international legitimacy. However, there is one presupposition shared in all discussions of this plan - that in the process, Sharon also intends to dismantle the settlements of the Gaza strip, and return the land they are built on to the Palestinians. I should say that had I believed this might happen, I would have supported the plan. The Gaza settlements, together with their land reserves, security zones, Israeli-only roads, and the military array protecting them, occupy almost a third of the strip’s land, which is one of the most densely populated areas of the world. Had this land been returned to its owners, it would be a step forward. We should never forget that the Palestinian struggle is not only for their liberation, but for regaining their lands in the occupied territories - lands that Israel has been appropriating since 67. As long as the Palestinians manage to hold on to their land, under even the worst occupation, they will eventually also gain their liberation. Without land, what is at stake is not just their liberation, but their survival.

But what basis is there to believe that Sharon indeed plans to dismantle settlements at some point? Certainly not the content of the resolution passed by the Israeli Knesset on October 26 - the day that has been depicted by Israeli and virtually all Western media as a

“historical” day with “dramatic” resolution. In fact, the Israeli parliament voted to approve “the revised disengagement plan”, which was previously approved in another “historical meeting” of the Israeli Cabinet, on June 6, 2004. So it is appropriate to check what was actually approved at that Cabinet meeting.

Ha’aretz’ ceremonial headlines on June 7 declared “Disengagement on its way”. But here are the smaller letters in the body of the report: “At the end of a dramatic cabinet meeting yesterday, the government passed Ariel Sharon’s revised disengagement plan, by a vote of 14-7, but the decision does not allow for the dismantling of settlements and the prime minister will have to go back to the cabinet when he actually wants to begin the evacuation process. ...The decision on the evacuation of settlements will be brought to the government at the end of a preparation period... [that] would end next March 1” (Aluf Benn, Gideon Alon, and Nathan Guttman, Ha’aretz, June 7, 2004). Elsewhere in that paper it is explained that “ there was no approval of actual evacuations... A second government discussion would be held in this regard, ‘taking into account the circumstances at the time’ ” (Aluf Benn, Ha’aretz, June 7, 2004). The only thing the Israeli government, followed now by the Israeli Knesset, have approved, then, is to have a discussion of the idea of dismantling Gaza settlements sometime next year. It was also decided that in the meanwhile, building and development in the Gaza settlements may continue: “The approved plan ensures ‘support for the needs of daily life’ in settlements slated for evacuation. Bans on construction permits and leasing of lands were also removed from the prime minister’s proposal” (ibid). And indeed, on the ground, slots of land are still being leased (for ridiculously cheap prices) to Israelis who wish to settle in Gaza, and building permits are granted by a special committee appointed by the government in the same “dramatic” meeting on June 6.(1)

Still, none of these facts were registered in public consciousness. The actual content of the cabinet decision was reported only once - on that same day - and then disappeared from the papers that keep recycling the stories about its heroic significance. Precisely the same happened in the present round. The fact that the Knesset has only voted to approve “the amended disengagement plan” that contains no decision to dismantle settlements was reported in the Israeli media: Knesset members voting tonight on the disengagement plan have received a copy of the “amended disengagement law” the cabinet passed on June 6, plus appendices containing the principles of the plan and its implementation... According to the compromise negotiated at the time... the cabinet decision “contains nothing to evacuate settlements.” To remove any doubt in this regard, the cabinet decision also states that “after the conclusion of preparatory work, the cabinet will reconvene to separately debate and decide whether or not to evacuate settlements, which settlements, and at what speed, in consideration of circumstances at that time. (Yuval Yoaz, Ha’aretz, Oct 26, 2004) But again, this information appeared only once or twice, buried underneath bold headlines that even compared Sharon to Churchill. This is how a myth is built.

Another test-case for how serious the evacuation intentions are is the issue of compensations for the evacuated settlers. Since the cabinet’s decision in June, many of the Gaza settlers began inquiring, directly or through hired lawyers, how and when they can be compensated. Behind the noisy protest of the settlers’ leadership, many are relieved to be able to finally leave, and are just waiting for the compensations. Anybody intending seriously to evacuate them, would start by compensating first those who are ready to leave immediately, leaving only the ideological minority to be evacuated forcefully. Indeed, for five months, since the cabinet’s decision in June, both the settlers and the Israeli public believe that this is about to happen any moment now. Again, a faith with no basis. Special

committees have worked with much publicity on every detail of the compensation plan. Many believe this was finally approved by the Knesset on November 4. Only in the small letters of what actually happened one can learn that the compensation law has passed only its preliminary first hearing (reading). In principle, the second and third hearing could take place within few weeks, but it was clarified in advance that the second reading will take place only after the government decides on actual evacuation, in March 2005, or later (Yosi Verter, Ha'aretz, Oct 8, 2004.) Till then, no one will be compensated. As Aluf Ben summarized this, "the Knesset will vote in the first reading of the Implementation of the Disengagement Plan Law, which authorizes the government to evacuate settlements and compensate those evacuated. Then there will be debates in the committees, and a second and third reading... and the law could be blocked at any stage" (Ha'aretz, Oct 27, 2004).

Outside Israel, the details of what was actually decided didn't even make it into the news once, and all that is repeated over and over again in the Western media is the propaganda produced by the Israeli political system - headlines from which one could infer that the dismantling of settlements is around the corner. Thus, the political debate around Sharon's plan concentrates only around whether it is good enough. The possibility that this is just another Israeli deceit does not even arise. And if you try to bring it up, you are perceived as having landed from the moon, as has happened to me in several European media interviews.

Deception and lies have been a corner stone in Israeli policy, brought to a new level of perfection since Oslo. While the world believed that Rabin promised to eventually end the occupation and dismantle the settlements, the number of Israeli settlers actually doubled during his rule. At the same time that Barak declared he intends to dismantle the Golan Heights settlements, in 1999, he actually poured money into their expansion. As Sharon promised to dismantle at least the illegal settlement posts in the West Bank, their number kept increasing. Still, none of this is ever remembered. Each new lie is received with welcome cheers by the Israeli peace camp, and by European governments. Since Oslo, every Israeli government knows that all it takes, to ease diplomatic pressure, is to come up with a new "peace plan".

The ritual repeats itself with each new "plan" of this sort. The crucial factor in convincing the world that this time "it is for real" is right wing protest. Of course when the government comes up with a new scheme of deception, the right wing and settlers believe it as well. Rabin's deceit has cost him his life. The same threats are now being directed at Sharon. This is sufficient to convince the Israeli peace camp that Sharon is determined to dismantle settlements. Even serious anti-occupation thinkers write articles warning of the danger of "civil war" with the settlers (forgetting that for this to be even remotely possible, someone should try indeed to evacuate them first). The implication is almost unavoidable: In view of this coming civil war, Sharon is our leader. We should all unite behind him, against the dark forces in Israel.

Indeed, this massive Israeli propaganda works. Throughout the Western world, Sharon is now depicted as a messenger of peace, because he has declared that he is willing to evacuate some of the territories. All of a sudden, Sharon is viewed as the sane center of Israel, withstanding right wing pressure. The prevailing perception is that Israel is finally led by a man of peace, with a respectable determination to carry out painful concessions. And as long as this is the perspective, Sharon can do whatever he wants. The Israeli army terrorizes the Gaza strip. dozens of Palestinians are being killed, including children on their way to school, houses are demolished and agricultural land destroyed. At the time of

operation “Defensive Shield” in the West Bank and Jenin refugee camp two years ago, there was substantial world protest. The last operation “Days of Penitence” in the Jabalia camp in the Gaza strip has hardly received any coverage. Backed by the U.S., Sharon is realizing with frightening efficiency his long-standing vision of evicting the maximum number of Palestinians from their land. In the spirit of Orwell, it was even explained that one of the aims of “Days of Pertinence” is to “expand the security zones” around the Gaza settlements (namely to enlarge their lands, pushing more Palestinians out of these lands), in order to guarantee that when they are evacuated, it would not be “under fire”. (Aluf Ben, Ha’aretz, Oct 4, 2004). But Europe looks the other way, reassured of Sharon’s new vision of peace.

These are difficult days, when Orwell seems to pale, compared to the power of present day propaganda, when it seems that the European governments are immovable in their support of Israel, no matter what crimes it commits; and the Palestinians are dying slowly, with their suffering not even being reported. But in such times, when governments are unwilling to impose international law, the people of the world can still take matters in their hands. Largely unreported, there is a growing on-going joint struggle of Palestinians, Israelis and internationals from the International Solidarity Movement, who stand daily in front of the army and the settlers in the Palestinian territories, in non-violent, peaceful protest, documenting the crime, protecting as much of the land as they can, and slowing down Sharon’s massive work of destruction. For the first time in the history of the occupation, we are seeing joint Israeli-Palestinian struggle. Along with Israel of the army and the settlers, a new Israel-Palestine is forming.

The breathtaking scenery of the West Bank has been sliced up by the new roads that the rulers have built for their own exclusive use. Beneath them lie the old roads of the vanquished. There, on the lower level, is where the other Israel-Palestine treads. For almost two years, Israeli youths arrive in settlement buses and then make their way on foot and in Palestinian taxis among the checkpoints. They trek between the villages in groups or alone. Some sleep in the villages. Others will travel the same route the next day to reach the demonstration. Everywhere they go they are greeted with blessings and beaming faces. “Tfaddalu,” the children in the doorways say, as if they had never heard of stone-throwing. All along the “seam line” in the West bank, along the root of the wall, the Palestinians have opened their hearts and their homes to the Israelis and internationals who come to support their non-violent resistance to the wall and the occupation robbing them of their land. These days, hundreds of Israelis are going almost daily to the West Bank to protect the Palestinian olive harvest from the settlers, who, protected by the Israeli army, try to prevent the harvest.

What has brought young Israelis to stand with the Palestinians in front of the army is the conviction that there is a basic line of justice that must not be crossed, that there is a law that is higher than the army’s laws of closed military zones: there is international law, which forbids ethnic cleansing, and there is the law of conscience. But what makes them return, day after day, is the new covenant that has been struck between the peoples of this land, a pact of fraternity and friendship between Israelis and Palestinians who love life, the land, the evening breeze. They know that it is possible to live differently on this land.

This daily struggle is our hope. It has become possible with the help of individuals from all over the world who come there to join the new form of resistance. They are facing harassment. Many are being stopped and deported, but they still keep coming. As long as more people come, even for a short time, as long as they are backed and supported by many others at home who could not join in yet, the struggle will go on, offering hope where

governments fail.

Note

(1). E.g.: " Yesterday, press photographers were invited in to take a picture of the first session of the committee to deal with the construction in the [Gaza] settlements, headed by PMO Director General Ilan Cohen. The committee is meant to examine the issue of construction and other development projects in settlements that are designated for evacuation. Cohen says Sharon told him 'not to compromise over security needs'. Gaza Regional Council Chairman Avner Shimoni won approval for 26 bullet-proofed buildings in Gush Katif. The new buildings are meant for residences, and school rooms are meant for Kfar Darom, Netzarim and Neveh Dekalim. So far, some 350 development projects have been submitted to the committee" (Aluf Benn and Nir Hason, Ha'aretz, July 27, 2004).

Tanya Reinhart is Professor of Linguistics at Tel Aviv University and a Global Research contributing editor.

<http://www.tau.ac.il/~reinhart>

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