

Gaza in Context

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During the course of August, Israeli settlers were withdrawn from Gaza and from some settlements in the northern part of the West Bank. Some analysts saw this as the start of a revitalised peace process, and it is certainly necessary to see this unusual development in its wider context. At the same time, the month of August also saw the aftermath of the London bombings, a continuing high-level insurgency in Iraq, further issues relating to Iran, and a significant attempt at an attack on two US warships at Aqaba in Jordan.

The Gaza Withdrawal

The withdrawal from numerous settlements in Gaza and from four small settlements in the West Bank was completed in an operation that was, from Mr Sharon's perspective, far less violent than had been expected. The numbers of settlers were small, around 8,000, but they occupied large areas of land and had been a continuing security headache for the Israeli defence forces, with those in Gaza living alongside well over a million Palestinians, many of them crowded into densely packed refugee camps. The withdrawal had some historical significance – it was the first of any substance since the evacuation of settlers from Sinai after the Camp David accords had been agreed between an earlier Likud leader, Menachim Begin, and Anwar Sadat of Egypt at the end of the 1970s.

The relative ease with which the operation was completed contrasted strongly with predictions of widespread violence and even armed resistance from the settlers, and there appear to have been three reasons for the rapid completion of the operation. One was that very large numbers of police and army personnel were used, around 30,000, and they received extensive training in order to handle the settlers with a minimum of violence, in marked contrast to tactics frequently used in dealing with Palestinians. A second reason was that a significant minority of the settlers were in Gaza for economic rather than religious motivations and were prepared to move when offered generous compensation.

The third reason was that in the balance between Israeli public support for the settlers and for the Israeli armed forces, it would be the armed forces that would win every time. While the withdrawal from Gaza caused considerable controversy in Israel, with the Jewish population divided over the issue, support for the armed forces is consistently at a high level, and this made it very difficult for the settlers to risk any kind of violent confrontation with the troops.

With the withdrawal completed, the issues that remain are the motivations for the policy and whether it marks a significant step on the path to a peaceful settlement. While Israel's dominant international supporter, the United States, has declared itself for an independent Palestinian state, with the Gaza withdrawal seen as a major step

towards this, there appears to be no pressure being put on Israel to proceed with further withdrawals from the West Bank, occupied now for nearly 40 years.

Three separate motives lie behind the Gaza withdrawal. One is that the settlements were proving massively costly to maintain, given their encroachment into a heavily populated Palestinian territory. In this respect, it was not just the settlements themselves but the wide corridors needed for the routes in and out of Gaza and the large areas of cleared land that were required around each settlement. All needed constant round-the-clock guarding, and just for the benefit of a few thousand settlers.

A second motive is that an isolated Gaza presents much less of a security problem for Israel than one containing scattered settlements. All access from the sea is controlled by the Israeli Navy, the airport remains closed, the land border with Israel is heavily fortified and even the border with Egypt is controlled by the Israelis. Moreover, the Gaza economy would be dependent on Israel for expansion, not least in terms of providing employment and markets, and even in terms of supplies of water.

A third motive is that the Jewish population of “Greater Israel” – Israel and the Palestinian territories – is progressively losing the demographic war, in that, on current trends, Jews will be in a minority in the whole territory in perhaps a decade. This was an issue among Israeli politicians 15 or 20 years ago but was partly ameliorated, from their perspective, by the immigration into Israel in the early 1990s of around a million Jews from the Former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. This altered the Jewish/Arab demographic balance for some years but the rate of immigration into Israel has now slowed to a trickle, while the Palestinian birth rate has been maintained at an unusually high level.

It is worth stressing that the high birth rate among Palestinians is not as a result of the kinds of factors that have operated in many third world states in the past five or six decades. Rather, it is a matter of direct intention for hundreds of thousands of Palestinians for whom raising large families is seen directly as part of their responsibility towards the future of their people. Indeed, this combines with the intractability of the peace process to result in a growing movement among some Palestinians and Israelis towards a “one-state” solution, with all people in Israel and the occupied territories being full citizens with full voting rights. In such a future, and with Israeli Arabs and Palestinians comprising about half of the total population, a secular state of some kind would be the likely outcome.

Such talk is anathema to most Jewish opinion as it would mark the end of the Jewish state and of wider Zionist aspirations, but it does indicate how deep-seated the issue of the demographic balance has become. Support for such a “one-state” solution remains small, and comes mainly from Palestinians, but for many Zionists it is easy to see why it is seen almost as a time bomb striking at the very existence of Israel.

In these circumstances, withdrawal from Gaza removes well over a million Palestinians from this calculation, but it does not mean that an economically viable Palestinian state is made more likely. This depends on developments in the West Bank where all the indications are that the Sharon government has not the slightest of intentions of withdrawing – indeed consolidation is the order of the day. It is true that the four small and isolated settlements in the northern part of the West Bank have

been evacuated, and it is possible that a handful more will be dismantled in the coming months. At the same time, though, three other processes are under way, all of which consolidate Israeli control of the great majority of the territory.

The first is that the building of the security barrier or “wall” is continuing, especially through key areas around Jerusalem. This encroaches deeply into the West Bank in many places, effectively amounting to a land grab that creates “facts on the ground”. Israelis argue strongly that this is an effective security measure against suicide bombers, but this would be more believable as a primary motive if the wall stuck to the old “green line” that marks the Israel/West Bank boundary of pre-1967 days, instead of taking in large areas of Palestinian land.

The second process is the expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, especially the building of large numbers of new settlements in Eastern Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside. Most such settlements are not occupied by religious groups but by young families that move in for economic motives because of the availability of subsidised housing. Even so, they steadily alter the geographical balance, making the idea of East Jerusalem as a future capital of an independent Palestine less and less feasible.

Finally, across the West Bank as a whole, many large Jewish settlements remain, all connected by strategic roads that divide the much larger areas of Palestinian population into numerous isolated cantonments that are easily controlled through scores of roadblocks. Transit between the north and south of the West Bank across greater Jerusalem is very difficult, but movement by Palestinians within smaller areas of the West Bank is frequently subject to long delays, consistently limiting the economic potential of the whole area.

Although these difficulties persist, the withdrawal from Gaza is still seen by many analysts as a substantial change for Palestinians, and it is just possible that extensive international support combined with restraint from Israel could see rapid social and economic progress, but this will depend on both internal and external politics. Of the former, although the withdrawal from Gaza has not been as divisive in Israel as was feared, it has caused very deep divisions within the ruling Likud Party, so much so that Mr Sharon now faces a leadership challenge from Mr Netanyahu who, if successful, would certainly harden his party’s policies towards the West Bank.

Of the external political factors, most European states want to see further progress, including substantial withdrawals from the West Bank, but the mood in Washington remains firmly pro-Likud, backed by the influence of the Christian Zionists (see the January 2005 briefing, *Elections and their Consequences*). The extent of this latter link is rarely appreciated, but it is not uncommon for evangelical Christian churches in the United States to be directly twinned with Zionist settlements in the occupied territories. This alone is a significant factor in militating against a genuine long-term peace process leading to a two-state solution.

Iran and its Nuclear Ambitions

One positive effect of the successful withdrawal from Gaza is that it removes fears that a sudden Israeli air strike on Iranian nuclear facilities might be engineered if there

was a major political crisis in Israel. Such a diversionary tactic may have seemed implausible but was not ruled out in high political circles in Western Europe. While the risk of such a strike from Israel may have diminished, it has come at a time when the new Iranian government under Mr Ahmedinejad has taken a rather more robust line in its dealings with the EU3 (France, Germany and the UK) over its putative nuclear ambitions.

This is also coincident with the formation of Mr Ahmedinejad's new cabinet, drawn heavily from the Revolutionary Guard and from senior intelligence figures, and representing a marked departure from the government of his unsuccessful reformist predecessor, Mr Khatami. At the same time, approval of the new cabinet and of the more junior ministerial posts had to be given by the Majlis (Parliament) and this proved much more difficult than expected, even though the Majlis currently has a conservative majority. While most of the President's nominees eventually got through, this unexpected problem indicates that Mr Ahmedinejad is not a conventional conservative. Much of his support stems from the Revolutionary Guard and from those poorer sectors of Iranian society that have become thoroughly disenchanted with the corruption and incompetence that has been a feature both of reformist rule and the clerical power base.

The significance of these issues for Iran's external relations, especially on the nuclear issue, is far from clear. At the technocratic level, Iran continues to develop its economic ties with China, India and Russia, and there is certainly widespread public support within the country for its nuclear power programme. It is probable that the current firmer stance with the Europeans will be at least maintained – Iran may not actively seek a confrontation with the United States, but also will not be inclined to change its policies in the face of US threats. In any case, developments in Iraq and in the United States itself have meant that the Bush administration currently has serious preoccupations of its own.

The Iraq Insurgency

Among these is the continuing insurgency in Iraq. August was one of the worst months for US forces since the war began two and a half years ago, with 85 troops killed. Injuries also remained at a high level – in the four weeks to 30th August, 496 troops were injured of which over 150 were seriously injured. Throughout the month, four issues dominated the overall picture. One was the large number of attacks on Iraqi security forces, continuing a pattern that had developed over the previous 18 months, and the second was the persistent use of considerable force, including multiple air strikes, by US military units as they tried to take control of cities and towns in North West Iraq. Repeatedly it proved possible to clear insurgents out of particular districts, but they re-emerged almost as soon as the US forces were scaled down after the particular assault.

If the US aim has been to take control of districts and then hand them over to Iraqi security forces, then the policy is proving to be a consistent failure – the Iraqi forces do now have the capability to exercise control and the US forces are too thinly stretched to provide longer-term support.

The third issue was the continuing problem of economic sabotage by insurgents, with August seeing numerous attacks against the energy infrastructure. By the end of the month, fuel rationing seemed probable on top of immediate shortages, even though Iraq is one of the world's richest countries in terms of oil reserves.

The final issue was the continuing political stalemate as attempts were made throughout much of August to produce a constitution for submission first to the legislature and then to a countrywide referendum planned for October. While a constitution was eventually agreed, it currently does not have the support of most members of the Sunni minority and, as such, increases the longer-term risk of a decline into civil war.

Domestic Dissent

The continuing loss of life among the US military in Iraq, and the much larger numbers of soldiers being seriously injured are both having a cumulative effect on US public opinion (see the June 2005 briefing, *Iraq, Afghanistan and US Public Opinion*). This came right to the fore during August when the mother of a soldier killed in Iraq, Cindy Sheehan, made camp close to George Bush's vacation ranch near Crawford, Texas, demanding an explanation from him for the Iraq policy. Her demonstration attracted widespread media attention and gave the first indication that a nation-wide anti-war movement might be starting.

At the same time, while President Bush's popularity has certainly slipped, there remains substantial support for the Iraq policy, even though the early response to the devastation left by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast contrasted markedly with US rapid reaction capabilities when applied to Iraq. Opponents of the war remain hopeful that there has been a change in the domestic mood, but, as suggested in previous briefings, the oil security factor remains central to the thinking of the Bush administration and it would take a fundamental long-term change in domestic politics to have any substantial effect on the US military posture in Iraq.

Al-Qaida

Although there were suggestions that the perpetrators of the bombings in London may have had links with the wider al-Qaida movement there was little evidence of this until right at the end of the month when a pre-recorded videotape of one of the bombers was broadcast on the al-Jazeera satellite news channel, along with that of one of the al-Qaida strategists, Ayman al-Zawahiri. This does not confirm a connection, as the videotape may have been acquired by other means than a pre-planned operation, but it indicates the links that exist.

In any case, although the London bombings indicate a continuing capability for action by militants against US allies, an incident with even greater implications may well turn out to be the attempted attack on two US warships in the Jordanian port of Aqaba in Jordan on 19th August. A 40,000 ton amphibious warfare ship, the *USS Kearsarge*, and a second ship, the 15,000 ton *USS Ashland* were targeted by three Katyusha unguided artillery rockets that had been secreted into the town. All three missiles

missed their targets, with one killing a Jordanian guard at a nearby warehouse and another landing across the nearby border in Israel.

This was the first major attack on US Navy ships since the bombing of the *USS Cole* in Aden Harbour in 2000, but its significance also lies in the location of the attack. Jordan is a particularly close ally of the United States in the region and there had been a widespread view that its security forces had a very strong control of dissidents and potential militants. The 19th August attack, which was quickly claimed by the Iraq-based al-Qaida associate, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, indicates that this is not the case, and that the al-Qaida movement has capabilities that stretch across the region.

Conclusion

While it would be good to be able to suggest with confidence that the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza might prove to be a turning point in the Israel/Palestine peace process, and that the loss of domestic support for the Bush administration might cause a reformulation of policy towards the Iraq insurgency, there is little to support either proposition. The Gaza withdrawal could still be the start of something much more positive but there has been no substantive change in the US position on Israeli activities in the West Bank.

Perhaps more troubling is the fact that the UK government, at least at the level of the Prime Minister, is simply not prepared to countenance any possibility of a connection between the London bombings and the situation in Iraq. Until that outlook changes, it is difficult to see the UK embracing a realistic assessment of the current state of President Bush's global war on terror.

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The second volume of these briefings from May 2004 to April 2005 will be published later this year by I.B. Tauris in the *ORG International Security Report 2005*.
