

ISRAELI UNILATERALISM: A COMPARATIVE APPROACH

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The sovereign state is a basic and familiar unit of political organization in the international system. It is often considered a stage in the evolution of territorial states in which leaders are accountable for the security and well-being of their citizens (Weiss 2004, 44). In its essence, sovereignty's function is to secure power and order in the state. That power includes the ability and the authority to exercise force. To understand why sovereign actors choose to use force rather than other tactics to meet their goals, Robert Art explains that although military power is more useful for realizing certain goals over others, it "is generally considered of some use by most states for many of their goals" (Art and Jervis 2005, 141).

The use of force, "a continuation of policy through militaristic means," reflects different perceptions of power among various political actors (von Clausewitz 1976, 27). Consequently, when a state acts, a balance of power schema emerges in which each actor hedges its own strength against all other actors within a given level sphere of activity, be it domestic, regional or global. As Inis Claude explains, the balance of power is designed to persuade actors to behave in certain ways in order to limit conflict. While Claude's analysis helps predict the timing of conflicts based on managing and elucidating power relationships (Claude 1962), Art suggests that a lack of transparency among potential combatants is the cause of different uses of force.

Even the keenest understanding of the balance of power in a given situation would not guarantee the ability to contain every conflict. In each situation there is a variety of tactics and strategies

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that actors may pursue, including unilateral, bilateral and multi-lateral action. Unilateralism, as understood in contemporary discourse, is a concept in which a given state engages in an act on its own as an expression of its sovereignty. Typically these actions are made without regard to other potentially affected parties, and are often against the wishes of those parties (Kane 2006, 2). Common unilateral actions include imposing economic sanctions on a belligerent nation, invading a neighboring country, or creating an imposed barrier between territories without the other party's consent.

This analysis will discuss the unilateral withdrawal from a shared-border territory without a bilateral or multilateral agreement. In such a situation, the relatively stronger military power decides to unilaterally partition or to disengage from a given conflict area. Typically, this occurs after political-military goals have not been met and seemingly cannot be met without high risks or costs. Although withdrawal does not terminate the conflict, it can serve as a moderate development that expresses the goal of managing violence without the direct use of force (Bar-Siman Tov, 262). The mitigation of the conflict is dependent on the other parties' favorable reception of the unilateral act.

In order to further understand the decision-making process that leads to unilateral withdrawal, this paper will focus on two recent Israeli examples: the military pullout from southern Lebanon in 2000 and the disengagement of settlers and military posts from the Gaza Strip and northern West Bank in 2005. An analysis and comparison of Israeli leadership and discourse in the two episodes will show the factors and common characteristics behind the repeated Israeli decision to unilaterally withdraw as a means to lessen conflict. It is important to note that this analysis will be largely restricted to the internal Israeli debate regarding its own policies, and that only Israeli factors will be considered, insofar as they relate to the specific concerns within decision-making processes. Further work must be conducted in order to examine the concurrent debate that unquestionably arose within Lebanese and Palestinian societies.

In the two Israeli cases, unilateral withdrawal initially allowed

for short-term gains for the state, but was ultimately responsible for negative long-term results. Though they may fulfill their short-term goals, policymakers hurt their broader ambitions of lasting peace and stability. The Israeli examples, then, must be understood to have wider regional and global relevance. A deeper understanding of its usage is particularly relevant to the Middle East peace process, in which unilateral action has been recurrent.

THE WITHDRAWAL FROM LEBANON, MAY 2000

As Avraham Sela explains, the Israeli presence in southern Lebanon and its “security zone” were products of an Israeli attempt “to prevent Palestinian guerilla infiltrations into Israeli territory.” Only after the 1982 war between Israel and Lebanon did indigenous guerilla groups begin their efforts to drive the Israelis from Southern Lebanon (Sela 2007, 60). To the Israeli public, the financial and military burden of the Israeli-Lebanese conflict remained an issue far removed from everyday life until 1997, when a military helicopter accident killed 73 Israeli troops in transit to the security zone (Clawson and Eisenstadt 2000, 89). Following the increase in media exposure and the development of grassroots protest organizations, Israeli public opinion began to shift toward a reevaluation of the military presence in southern Lebanon. By 1999, public opinion polls indicated that over 55 percent of the Israeli public supported the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanon, and over two-thirds favored a reassessment of Israel’s military policies there (Sela 2007, 70). Additionally, lobbies and parliament members, known as Knesset Members (MK), began pressuring the government to remove troops from the security zone.

In the 1999 parliamentary elections, candidate Ehud Barak ran on a platform of “returning the boys home.” This campaign promise to withdraw troops from the southern Lebanon “security zone” marked a substantial shift in both Israeli public opinion and military procedure. To many observers the impetus for withdrawal was directly linked to the costs borne by the Israeli military and psychologically stamped on the collective Israeli conscious. Since

the formalization of the security zone in 1982, over 850 Israeli soldiers had been killed. As the Israeli government took responsibility for funding the South Lebanon Army (SLA), its financial commitment had increased by tens of millions of U.S. dollars (Clawson and Eisenstadt 2000, 89). Struck by the high costs of the Israeli occupation, many Israelis began to question the purpose of the security zone's existence. The traditional Israeli stance emphasized the importance of a buffer zone between Palestinian and Lebanese guerillas in order to protect the northern Israeli border from attacks (Sobelman 2004, 9). However, multiple air raids and larger campaigns by the Israeli air force to combat militant rocket attacks challenged the myth of a quiet border (Sela 2007, 65).

As Israeli withdrawal became more likely, Hezbollah leaders began emphasizing their role in the departure of Israeli forces from Southern Lebanon. They pointed to their "group's continued ability to attrite Israeli forces" as the key factor sparking Israel's domestic dissatisfaction with its military presence in Lebanon and the subsequent removal of Israeli troops.¹ In light of this rhetoric, Israeli political and military leaders engaged in a robust debate regarding a potential withdrawal. Many in the military establishment, such as Brigadier General Shlomo Brom, strongly recommended "Israel's continued occupation of the security zone until a peace treaty with Syria is signed" (Clawson and Eisenstadt 2000, 90). Daniel Sobelman adds that much of the military brass was opposed to a unilateral pullout that would allow militant groups, mainly Hezbollah, to gain strength and mobility closer to the Israeli border. Their fear was grounded in an understanding that future tensions with armed militants would create an escalation in violence leading to cross-border conflict (Sobelman 2004, 30). Other critics feared that if the security border zone were dismantled, groups such as Hezbollah would not end their resistance until all of Israel was destroyed (Jacoby 2007, 121). While the security zone had not achieved a full cessation of violence, it successfully halted cross-border guerilla infiltrations.

Yet these opinions hardly amounted to a consensus—even the military was divided. Major General Amos Malka, head of Is-

raeli Defense Forces (IDF) Military Intelligence, argued that an Israeli withdrawal would begin an era of mutual deterrence on both sides of the border. Using the concept of “sufficient gain,” Malka emphasized that each actor was committed to preventing civilian casualties and avoiding a dangerous escalation. Leading Israeli MK Yossi Beilin’s plan calculated that an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon would address Syrian and Lebanese hopes for stability and prosperity. Assuming that Hezbollah had limited objectives that would be satisfied by an Israeli withdrawal, Beilin believed that the group would restrain its future operations (Sobelman 2004, 36). The inevitability of an Israeli withdrawal became apparent as the debate continued. Many leaders began to recognize that if “Israel’s actions [earned] regional and international legitimacy,” there would be a strong possibility of deterring further attacks and limiting Hezbollah (Sobelman 2004, 31). An Israeli withdrawal, many reasoned, would deprive Hezbollah of its ideological motive for existence (Jacoby 2007, 120).

Prime Minister Barak used this division among the elites to advance his withdrawal plan in spite of the failed diplomatic efforts with Syria that dominated much of his first year in office. Rather than back away from his campaign promise, Barak used the failed peace initiatives as further support for a new direction in conflict resolution, making the final decision in March 2000 (Sela 2007, 71). Responding to concerns among military leaders, Barak noted that “it is incumbent on Military Intelligence to envision worst-case scenarios,” but that as a political leader he was forced to make difficult decisions that corresponded to changing political realities (Sobelman 2004, 31). The decision to unilaterally withdraw all Israeli soldiers from southern Lebanon without a formal agreement or understanding from a regional actor continued to raise debates and concerns about the consequences and aftermath of such an action. Nevertheless, on May 24th, 2000, the last Israeli soldier left Lebanon in a hastily-conducted withdrawal that shut down the border between the two countries (Blum 2007, 201). Crucially, Israeli forces only withdrew from territories it considered part of the security zone that was created as a result of the 1982 war. Another

22 square kilometers of territory captured during the 1967 campaign known as the Shebaa Farms remains under Israeli control. Unlike the security zone, the Shebaa Farms are contested by Israel, Lebanon and Syria.

DISENGAGEMENT FROM THE GAZA STRIP, AUGUST 2005

Drawing on Israel's experience of withdrawing from southern Lebanon as well as the removal of Israeli settlers from the Sinai desert in the late 1970s, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon announced a new unilateral plan involving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in 2003. At the Herzliya Conference on Israeli National Security in December of that year, Sharon embraced the idea of unilateral disengagement and warned the Palestinian leadership, particularly the Palestinian Authority, that a failure to cooperate and move toward peace would lead "Israel to initiate the unilateral step" of removing all settlers from the Gaza Strip and dismantling four settlements in the northern West Bank (Zelnick 2006, 35). Although an Israeli withdrawal would be a first step in the long-desired reestablishment of Palestinian sovereignty in a territory controlled by Israel, many Palestinians were wary of Sharon's decision. To many Arab leaders, Sharon's hawkish history of supporting settlements in occupied land and his notorious military background did not qualify him to be a partner for peace (Zelnick 2006, 65). Comments made by Sharon prior to the disengagement fueled Arab fears that the Israel prime minister's calls for withdrawal were being used to manipulate the situation to Israel's benefit. At an internationally-sponsored peace initiative proposal in 2003, for instance, Sharon warned that continued hesitation to cooperate would lead the Palestinian people to "receive far less than they could obtain in direct negotiations based on the Road Map" (Bar-Siman-Tov 2007, 262).

While the disengagement plan allowed Israel to retain strategic powers in the territories by preserving its military power, border control, and water rights, disengagement was also seen as a way to lessen the enormous military and financial costs of maintaining the Gaza settlement. By the time of Sharon's announcement in De-

ember 2003, there were only eight thousand Jewish settlers residing in the Gaza Strip among over 1.3 million Palestinians. Jewish settlers, under the protection of the Israeli military, controlled over 40 percent of arable land and 50 percent of the available water resources (Baylis 2009, 151). Under these circumstances, many Israeli leaders viewed disengagement as a way for Israel to define its own borders by its own terms (Pressman 2006, 360).

Much like Barak's action on Lebanon in 2000, Sharon's decision to disengage drew heavy criticism. Many among the military establishment felt that leaving Gaza would strengthen the myth that terrorism can defeat national armies. Retired Israeli Major General Yaakov Amidor labeled the operation "a strategic error of historical magnitude," arguing that Palestinian militants had witnessed the effects of Hezbollah violence in southern Lebanon and emulated their tactics to achieve the same outcome. Amidor claimed that disengagement would establish a state in which "Hamas will have freedom of action and be joined by the umbilical cord to Hezbollah," thus increasing the security threat on multiple borders (Zelnick 2006, 35). Yet despite heavy criticism, particularly among his own party, Sharon executed his plan. By the summer of 2005, the last Jewish settler was removed from Gaza.

REASONS FOR ISRAELI UNILATERALISM

Before analyzing and comparing the motives underlying each case of unilateral action, it is necessary to first understand the general differences in their implementation. In its May 2000 withdrawal from southern Lebanon, Israel ended a longstanding military presence in a foreign, hostile land by removing its posts and installations from a security zone that had been created to buffer Israel proper from militant activity. In Gaza, on the other hand, the Israeli army undertook a much larger operation: they not only dismantled military positions that had been held for almost four decades, but were also charged with the removal of eight thousand Israeli citizens. Although differences abound, Israel acted unilaterally in both cases, and examining common variables will help us better

understand Israel's reliance on this method. And though each situation presented unique difficulties, and, as indicated, drew unique criticism, both withdrawals achieved the similar result of formally ending the permanent Israeli presence in those areas. This analysis will highlight three factors that influenced Israeli decision-making in both 2000 and 2005: the increase in violence, the perceived lack of political openings and partnership, and the latitude to use the withdrawal to strengthen claims to other disputed territory.

In July 2000 a poll was conducted among Palestinians on the role that violence played in Israel's decision to withdraw from southern Lebanon. Sixty-three percent of respondents believed that Palestinians should emulate Hezbollah's violent tactics. A majority of Israelis has consistently agreed that "armed confrontations have helped them achieve national rights in ways that negotiations could not" (Shamir 2007, 37). These sentiments echoed the Israeli criticism that withdrawal could strengthen the bases of support for militant activities. Yet by 2000, over 850 IDF soldiers had been killed as a result of violence in southern Lebanon (Clawson and Eisenstadt 2000, 89). Similarly, in Gaza, the asymmetric war against guerilla-style militants continued to cause Israeli military and civilian casualties. In the second intifada, which began in 2000 and spanned six years, over one thousand Israelis were killed (Smith 2010, 498). The growing perception of the cost of war among Israelis was a potential limit to Israel's military options. Jeremy Pressman writes that ongoing conflicts showed that Israel "could not bring about an end to the conflict short of wiping out the Palestinians, something Israel was not prepared to do" (Pressman 2006, 370).

Israeli public opinion began to reflect a new understanding of violent conflict. The Israeli public grew tired of prolonged conflicts. Many began to see the IDF presence in southern Lebanon as more of a war and less of a security operation (Blum 2007, 237). By 1999, over 55 percent of the Israeli public supported the withdrawal of Israeli troops.² Similarly, 60 percent of Israelis were in favor of Gaza disengagement by 2004, as other strategies aimed at ending the conflict appeared unsuitable (Bar-Siman-Tov 2007,

160). In the late 1990s, grassroots organizations such as Yesh Gvul (“There is a limit”), a group of army reservists, and Four Mothers, families who had lost relatives as a result of the conflict, began criticizing the military establishment’s decision to remain in Lebanon. These groups represented growing support behind the emergent opinion to leave Lebanon (Jacoby 2007, 124). A growing number of casualties, dramatically increased by a helicopter collision that killed dozens of soldiers, kept the issue in the public spotlight and reminded Israelis that unilateral withdrawal was a means to end the violence. The IDF received an increasing number of letters regarding the occupied territories, as well as requests by soldiers who refused to serve in the West Bank and Gaza (Bar-Siman-Tov 2007, 264).

At the same time, Israel’s adversaries began to understand the connection between increased violence and political gain. Hezbollah leaders pointed to their group’s ability to “attrite Israeli forces” as the key factor behind the Israeli debate over unilateralism (Clawson and Eisenstadt 2004, 8). For Palestinians, military resistance brought benefits that decades of negotiations and diplomatic arrangements had failed to produce. The Israeli explanations of voluntary withdrawal and strategic disengagement did not seem to convince the Palestinians and Lebanese. Instead, they believed that their own actions were the leading cause of Israeli unilateral withdrawal (Efrat 2006, 190). In both cases, the costs of a continued Israeli presence, most notably Israeli casualties, had outweighed the benefits of remaining, even if not all of Israel’s strategic objectives had been met. Critics have debated the amount of political flexibility that the Israeli government had in withdrawing. Sela has emphasized in his analysis the role of public opinion and grassroots pressures, while Bar-Siman-Tov has focused on military maneuvering of a disengagement that retained Israeli preponderance at a significantly reduced risk (Bar-Siman-Tov 2007, 261).

Although the increase in violence suggests a motive and justification for withdrawal and separation, that conclusion fails to highlight the impetus for acting unilaterally. As Bar-Siman-Tov indicates, it is extremely rare to find a situation where the “initiat-

ing side prefers, from the outset, unilateral disengagement without an agreement as a conflict management strategy” (Bar-Siman-Tov 2007, 262). Therefore, it becomes necessary to replace the respective withdrawals within the larger political framework of their time. Although Barak ran for office under a platform of withdrawing the troops from Lebanon, he spent much of his first year in office seeking peace with Israel’s Arab neighbors. During that time, there was a focused attempt for an agreement with the Syrians that would involve both the return of the Golan Heights and the withdrawal of IDF troops in exchange for peaceful relations with Israel. However, negotiations halted after ten months when Syria proved unwilling to accept Israeli demands (Sela 2007, 71). Meanwhile, Israeli leadership continued to ignore Hezbollah as a suitable partner for negotiation. These events, coupled with the protracted violence, eroded public support for a prolonged occupation and forced Barak to deliver his campaign promise without a Syrian or non-state partner (Clawson and Eisenstadt 2004, 89).

In the Palestinian context, Israeli leadership looked at the breakdown of peace talks following the Camp David summit and Taba in 2000-2001 as evidence that the Palestinian Authority did not want a negotiated settlement (Pressman 2006, 369). In the eyes of the Israelis, the outbreak of the second intifada and the years of persistent violence and terrorism indicated “a lack of morality” and that there was no true Palestinian partner ready to negotiate (Bar-Siman-Tov 2007, 264). Israel chose to isolate—not work with—Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat. To many Israeli leaders, Arafat represented a Palestinian effort dedicated to the destruction of Israel through both violence and demographic pressure (Zelnick 2006, 26). They pointed to his insistence on the Palestinian right of return, his refusal to disarm militant groups such as Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and his tampering with other elected officials such as Abu Mazen. Even after Arafat’s death in 2004, the Sharon government refused to recognize a Palestinian partner due to Mazen’s inability, or possibly his reluctance, to end media and educational propaganda against Israel (Bar-Siman-Tov 2007, 271). This denial of any potential partner is best exemplified in a letter

sent from Sharon to U.S. President George W. Bush, in which Sharon explains the rationale of disengagement because “there exists no Palestinian partner with whom to advance peacefully toward a settlement” (Bar-Siman-Tov 2007, 268).

Unilateral withdrawal represents a decision among Israeli leaders to avoid being forced into untenable political scenarios, or to wait indefinitely for partners they perceive to be genuine; it was hailed by the international community as a creative response. It is important to note that both Hezbollah and the Palestinian Authority regularly blame Israel for the increased violence, and reject the idea of a lack of partner as an Israeli refusal to restart the peace process. The Israeli government was skeptical, if not uninterested, in small confidence-building attempts by the Palestinians, such as small shifts in policy and temporary cease-fires (Pressman 2006, 372). In Lebanon, Israel overlooked discredited local parties, choosing instead to work solely with the United Nations. Yet Israel’s unilateral behavior was grounded in its implicit cooperation with other parties. The withdrawals were conducted under international guidance and with international support. And in both Lebanon and Gaza, the adversarial Arab factions drew down or completely halted attacks to allow for the removal of an Israeli presence from their lands (Makovsky 2005, 26).

The final, and perhaps most pertinent, factor was Israel’s choice to withdraw from certain areas in order to successfully defend other territory under its control. During the Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations prior to the Israeli withdrawal, it was widely believed that the removal of troops would be tied to the return of much, if not all, of the Golan Heights to Syria. Throughout the negotiations, Hezbollah, acting as Syria’s proxy, continued its armed struggle in the hopes of pressuring Israel into giving up other areas such as the Golan Heights and the Shebaa Farms (Sobelman 2004, 68). By acting unilaterally, but still having its withdrawal internationally recognized by the United Nations, Israel not only wedged a divide between Syria and Lebanon, but also shifted the talking points in the negotiations with Syria. Prior to 2000, it was expected that a peace deal with Syria (including the Golan) would

lead Syria to exert its influence over Lebanon and follow suit with an additional peace deal (Hof 2000, 3). The unilateral withdrawal changed this equation so that the fate of the Golan Heights now resided squarely with Israel (Blum 2007, 237). Should Israel choose to transfer the Golan Heights to Syria, it will likely do so on its own terms.

Similar motivations and goals seemed to have been behind the disengagement from Gaza. That move, combined with a physical security barrier under construction in the West Bank, has contributed to a growing consensus that Israel's move in 2005 signaled a shift in the geographic focus of settlement, rather than a total abandonment (Pressman 2006, 370). Palestinian leader and Fatah member Mohammed Dahlan blasted Sharon over his West Bank intentions and argued that disengagement was nothing more than a ploy to strengthen other settlements (Zelnick 2006, 63). At the same time, President Bush responded to Sharon's explanation of the disengagement by affirming the Israeli point of view. In his letter he wrote: "In light of new realities on the ground, including already existing major Israeli population centers, it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations" will represent a complete withdrawal to the armistice line of 1949 (Smith 2006, 530). To the Israelis, this constituted a milestone in U.S.-Israeli relations, confirming in writing that the United States understood Israel's strategic and demographic realities.

In such a framework unilateral withdrawal allowed Israel to dictate the terms under which land was being transferred. Israel was not forced to withdraw by violence or a political dead-end. As a result, these moves relieved international pressure for a more comprehensive and expansive land transfer (Bar-Siman-Tov 2007, 265). Unilateral action was an attractive option, as it not only sought to stabilize areas of confrontation and reduce military expenditures, but also preserved valuable Israeli territory—the Golan Heights and the West Bank (Hovsepian 2008, 282). Leaving these territories with an understanding of retaining others was strategic and came at a reasonable cost to much of the Israeli public, since practically no future peace plan included the Gaza Strip or south-

ern Lebanon in Israel (Efrat 2006, 184).

CHANGING THE RULES OF THE GAME

In effect, the two withdrawals have come to be understood as “down payments” on the respective territories Israel retained. By withdrawing, Israel has delayed the political processes in both arenas for the foreseeable future (Thomas 2009, 152) and strengthened its own position domestically and internationally. As Dov Weisglas, the senior advisor to Sharon during the disengagement, explained in an interview, “With the proper management we succeeded in removing the issue of the political process from the agenda. And we educated the world to understand that there is no one to talk to” (Shavit 2004). Fundamental to this line of thought is the idea that unilateral withdrawal provides added security. In its essence, unilateral disengagement “aims more to minimize damages and losses than to maximize gains” (Bar-Siman-Tov 2007, 263). As such, it is chosen only when it makes a situation less dangerous than alternative conflict-resolution tactics.

Many critics of the Lebanon withdrawal warned that Israel would create a power vacuum, which would lead to a large-scale intensification of the conflict. Fearing “far reaching” consequences from both the Syrians and the Iranians, military and political leaders alike assailed the initiative (Sobelman 2004, 11). Similar arguments were levied against the government five years later as the disengagement was charged with strengthening Palestinian militancy and Arab solidarity against Israel. Yet in Gaza, the continued military and civilian presence had led Sharon to believe that not to disengage was actually more dangerous to Israel (Bar-Siman-Tov 2007, 273). The redeployment of troops to the Israeli side of the border in each area has both reduced sources of friction and provided fewer targets for attacks (Efrat 2006, 187). While Israel removed its troops from within the Gaza Strip, it maintained its position of ensuring security for Israeli citizens and, as such, reserved the right of future military engagements within the territory—a position markedly different from its complete withdrawal

from southern Lebanon (Hovsepian 2008, 283). That strategy was strengthened by a significant reduction of violence over a six-year period from 2000 to 2006 in southern Lebanon (Hovsepian 2008, 282). In Gaza, removing Israeli troops was also a removal of potential targets for Palestinian militants.

In choosing to act unilaterally, Israel appeared to forsake bilateral and multilateral approaches in favor of an understanding that separation creates the least-negative results. As each withdrawal approached, some analysts began touting the idea of “mutual deterrence,” since Israel’s opponents might also be nervous about upsetting the newly-defined status quo. (Sobelman 2004, 33). These analysts saw the lack of large-scale attacks following the withdrawal as affirmation of their hypothesis. Withdrawal was a calculation by Israel, a bet that the risk of having dangerous neighbors is preferable over a costly, and potentially deadly, continued occupation (Zelnick 2006, 29).

Between 2000, the year of the withdrawal from southern Lebanon, to 2006, the year following the disengagement from Gaza, there was a steady decline in Israeli public support for the notion of a Greater Israel (Shamir 2007, 34). This unilateral mentality confirms a new point of view among Israeli leadership known as the “demographic sense argument,” which justifies withdrawal based on current demographic realities and future trends (Thomas 2009, 152). The argument prioritizes an Israel that has an overwhelming majority of Jewish citizens rather than a larger geographic area that also includes non-Jews. This shifts the impetus for peace and conflict-resolution away from humanitarian concerns and international pressure toward an inward looking understanding of the conflict. By disengaging from Gaza, the Jewish state sidelined 1.3 million non-citizens, placing them under their own Palestinian governance. Similar withdrawals from parts of the West Bank may follow in order to advance this line of thought to its logical conclusion: an Israeli state entrenched in its own territory with only a limited amount of non-Jewish citizens (Brom 2007, 15). An added incentive to this schema is that it allows Israel to put pressure on Palestinian leaders to showcase their own leadership abilities and

assume more direct responsibility for their people, a feat that has been hard to achieve due to international isolation and an economic blockade on Gaza (Bar-Siman-Tov 2007, 274).

Although U.S. policy is that “no action should be taken by any party to the peace process that would prejudice the outcome of final status negotiations” (Muasher 2008, 206), the Israelis appear to be lowering the expectations of the Palestinians (Zelnick 2006, 65). Withdrawal represents an internalization of the two-state solution and a reluctance to fight a demographic battle with the Palestinians, while the process of disengagement enabled the Israelis to redefine the physical and metaphorical boundaries of negotiations. The current Israeli position has become very clear: “Defense and security preclude a complete return to the 1967 borders” (Zelnick 2006, 65).

WILL UNILATERALISM CONTINUE?

By withdrawing from Lebanon and disengaging from Gaza, the Israeli leadership was able to gain international support, reduce its financial liabilities, and dramatically reduce violence in the short term. Israel has maintained its military superiority through incursions and its economic power through its heavy blockade of Gaza. Yet two questions remain.

First, will Israeli leaders continue to implement unilateral withdrawals as a means of addressing conflicts in the future? And second, will other actors adopt similar actions when faced with a political stalemate? To answer these questions, we must first look at the longer-term effects and outcomes of the two prior examples.

Although the first six years after the withdrawal from Lebanon yielded substantial short-term security and economic gains for both Lebanon and Israel, the outbreak of large-scale violence in the summer of 2006 casted significant doubt on the prudence of unilateralism. The border with Lebanon remained hostile due to the Lebanese government’s inability to disarm militant groups such as Hezbollah, as well as the occurrence of skirmishes and Israeli air-raids. Limiting Israel’s deterrent capability, Hezbollah had free-

dom of travel throughout Lebanon and gained much closer access to Israeli population centers (Brom 2007, 9). Finally, in response to an increase in rocket attacks and the kidnapping of soldiers, Israel engaged Hezbollah in a 35-day military conflict, known as the Second Lebanon War, which resulted in the deaths of hundreds and the destruction of civilian infrastructure along the Lebanese-Israeli border. To many, the war demonstrated Israel's vulnerability to a guerilla movement in an area that it had evacuated without a security arrangement (Jacoby 2007, 112). Many critics directly attributed the 2006 war and Hezbollah's growing military capabilities to the hasty May 2000 withdrawal.

A similar power vacuum arose in the Gaza Strip following the Israeli disengagement. After Israeli forces withdrew, it became increasingly clear that true power resided with Hamas and not the once-dominant Fatah party. In the year following the disengagement, Hamas succeeded in making dramatic political gains by participating in elections and, through a military putsch, consolidated its power over the entirety of the Gaza Strip. Many Israeli critics of disengagement have pointed to Israel's perceived weakness in retreating as the main cause for the group's successes. This reflects a larger trend among Arab media and political outlets to frame both the 2000 withdrawal and the 2005 disengagement as Arab victories over Israeli aggression. Militant figures, such as Hassan Nasrallah, head of Hezbollah, and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, have become famous as a result of their defiance and militancy against Israel (Indyk 2009, 388). Some have even linked Hezbollah's success in 2000 to the outbreak of the second intifada only a few months later (Blum 2007, 241). As a result of the Hamas elections, Israel blockaded the Gaza Strip in an effort to isolate the new government. Further aggression between Hamas and Israel has resulted in a continued military presence in and around Gaza, and multiple flare-ups have inflicted extreme consequences, such as the continued loss of life.

Despite the ambiguous, if not outright negative, long-term track record of unilateral withdrawal, the Israeli public appears steadfast in its desire to end the territory dispute. Over sixty per-

cent of Israelis still prefer reconciliation, although public opinion in favor of a two-state solution with the Palestinians dropped ten percent after the Hamas elections, (Shamir 2007, 23). Many had hoped that disengagement would lead to a new dynamic for the peace process. Indeed, before violence erupted in 2006, Sharon's successor, Ehud Olmert, proposed a broad withdrawal plan from the West Bank known as "convergence." The stated goal of this plan was to withdraw 70,000 additional settlers from the West Bank and to dismantle a vast majority of the settlements (Jacoby 2007, 44) with the understanding that the remaining settlements would be incorporated into the final borders of the State of Israel (Zelnick 2006, 154). While some settlements would be dismantled, the vast majority of settlers would be retained. However, the ensuing events and a dramatic increase in violence ended much of the optimism and stalled further unilateral efforts (Efrat 2006, 187).

The Second Lebanon War effectively shelved all further unilateral action. While Olmert's convergence plan shares characteristics with the two prior withdrawals—such as the refocusing on important territory and a perceived lack of responsible partnership—the increase in violence as a result of unilateral withdrawal has shown the counterproductive and dangerous nature of conflict reduction via separation (Shamir 2007, 57). Current Israeli leadership appears unwilling to subjugate itself to further criticism and potential violence without assurances or agreements from other parties (Zelnick 2006, 136). Although violence has dropped in both magnitude and frequency, periodic escalations remain a looming threat in Gaza and on Israel's northern border. Unilateral withdrawal has failed to usher in a renewal of peace talks or even of security arrangements; "joint management" of the conflicts has not been established (Bar-Siman-Tov 2007, 278). Instead, unilateral withdrawal has indicated solely that Israel has a propensity to act on its own. These actions have not only silenced other interested parties but have led to spikes in violence as Israel sidelines other tracks of diplomacy. Israel—and other powers—should avoid future unilateral withdrawals given that they may instigate increases in violence.

Although many Israelis fear a further unilateral withdrawal from the West Bank will bear similar results, the future of this policy nevertheless remains unclear. Whereas the models set forth in southern Lebanon and Gaza do not constitute successful policy, Israeli leadership can look at the Israeli withdrawal from Egyptian territory after the Camp David Accords as a more suitable example. In that scenario, territory was transferred from one government to the other, which allowed for consistent policing and the maintenance of a lasting peace (Indyk 2009, 409). While not purely unilateral, the Egyptian withdrawal demonstrates the need for cooperation and counts regional stability among its potential results;—it shows that working with another state partner changes a state’s considerations and, likely, the outcome. Despite heavy costs, Israeli leadership has repeatedly shown its ability to act alone in an effort to dictate future settlements. In doing so, it has redefined conflict resolution by prioritizing its own security needs at the cost of final-status negotiations.

In such a paradigm it appears that Israel—and perhaps other nations—will continue to act unilaterally as long as separation remains the “least bad” solution that is most likely to guarantee security. Israel’s historical reliance on unilateral action demonstrates its strategic commitment to the policy. Accordingly, one can expect Israel to unilaterally withdraw from a territory if its leaders perceive an environment that is characterized by an increase in violence, a lack of political openings and partnership, and the latitude to use the withdrawal to strengthen claims to other disputed territory. Future decisions to implement unilateral withdrawal must balance the goal of conflict resolution with its historical precedents and the threat of conflict escalation.

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