

Effects of the Separation Barrier and the Disengagement Policy on the Israel-Palestinian Dispute and the Middle East Issues

Simon Petermann *

INTRODUCTION

During, and leading up to 2004, the two major issues preoccupying both the Palestinians and the Israelis were the separation barrier instigated by Israeli, and PM Ariel Sharon's disengagement plan from the Gaza Strip and the northern West Bank. The Palestinians waged a political struggle against the separation barrier and related to the disengagement plan with great suspicion.

THE SEPARATION BARRIER

The Palestinian struggle against the separation barrier was prompted by three factors. First, they saw it as Israel's attempt to determine ad hoc the state border. Second, the route of the barrier encroached on PA land, and third, in some places it cut Palestinian farmers off from their land. Thus the PA

* Prof. Dr. Simon Peterman, Center d'Analyse Politique des Relations Internationales, Faculté de Droit, Université de Liège, Belgique. (S.Peterman@ulg.ac.be)
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leadership was concerned about the barrier and requested international assistance for future injustices resulting from the separation barrier.

As early as 2003, the Palestinians announced that they were going to raise the issue at the U.N. General Assembly. They said they wanted to challenge the legality of the barrier in the international court on The Hague. AP reported on 17 October 2003, quoting Palestinian leaders saying that the barrier project was grabbing Palestinian land even before the debate over the borders of the Palestinian state. On 19 December 2003, after the General Assembly condemned Israel and declared that it was illegitimate to expropriate Palestinian land for constructing the barrier, Abu Alaa, Prime minister of the provisional PA government, told Al-Arabia TV in an interview that the U.N. General Assembly resolution on the barrier proved that the international community viewed its construction as an aggressive action. Abu Alaa maintained that Israel was trying to draw the West Bank borders unilaterally, and he was satisfied that the General Assembly took an affirmative stand on the need to transfer the barrier issue to the international court in The Hague. In this interview Abu Alaa addressed Israel directly, saying, "Build the barrier in your own territory. If you want to put your people inside the wall, build it on the green line without any connection to us the Palestinians." Thus Abu Alaa hinted that the barrier means cutting Israel off from its nearby surroundings and turning it into a ghetto, which could adversely affect the Israeli economy. In late June 2004, Nabil Shaath, Foreign Minister of the provisional PA government, referred to an Israeli high court ruling on the barrier, which was handed down before The Hague's ruling. The Israeli high court ruled that the route of the barrier must be altered in certain places to minimize the amount of land expropriated from Palestinians, and to make sure that expropriations were for essential security purposes only and kept to a minimum. Nabil Shaath said he was satisfied with the Israeli court ruling. He said it was the first time the Israeli courts overruled a decision taken by senior political echelons. Given the ruling, the defence ministry had to reroute the barrier in Jerusalem and elsewhere. However, Shaath also said the Israeli high court ruling was not good enough and they would have to wait for the international court decision in The

Hague. On 15 July 2004, the international court in The Hague ruled that the construction of the barrier east of the Green Line was illegal, as it contravenes international law. The Palestinians see The Hague ruling as a victory. According to a New York Times article written by the PLO's legal advisor, Mr Gregory Halil, the fact that The Hague ruled that it is the supreme judicial authority in international law means that the Security Council's right to veto can be cancelled every time it is used to further aggressive interests. Gregory Halil notes that the U.S. used veto rights 79 times, half of them in favour of Israel. He thus believes that in terms of The Hague's ruling, the General Assembly can and is obliged to cancel the veto on draft resolutions submitted to the Security Council if the veto was used for powerful interests or purposes. That is, the General Assembly is authorized to veto the Security Council's veto. Although the hopes pinned by the Palestinians on The Hague's ruling have so far materialized, Israel continues to build the barrier. It turns out there is no one to enforce The Hague's ruling on Israel, while the U.S., which is driven by vested and aggressive interests, does not consider it appropriate to demand that Israel halt construction of the Barrier. In the meantime, it is our impression that the U.S. veto in the Security Council supersedes the General Assembly's authority rather than the other way round.

Iran and the other regional countries, each from its own perspective, agree with the Palestinians about the potential damage of the barrier. Jordan is very critical of Israel in this matter. It claims the barrier jeopardizes the very existence of the Jordanian kingdom. Jordanian spokesmen say that the barrier will create a new refugee problem as continuing construction of the barrier will lead to clashes between Palestinian farmers and the IDF forces securing the building. A mass movement of Palestinians has already begun. This situation is intolerable for the Hashemite regime, as a large influx of Palestinian immigrants into Jordan, if they come, will upset the fine demographic balance between Palestinian citizens, who are already a majority, and the original Trans Jordanian inhabitants. The Jordanian authorities are ever alert to the potential situation in which the Palestinian majority there will become a critical mass and will try to turn the Hashemite

kingdom into a Palestinian republic. The Hashemite Prince Zayed Raed testified before the judges in The Hague that his country hosted a vast number of Palestinian refugees. We will feel threatened, he said, if the construction of the barrier prompts a new wave of refugees. On 20 September 2004, the Jordanian government spokesman, (Ms.) Asma Khader said Jordan was calling on Israel to remove the barrier. She claimed that The Hague court ruling was binding, and that moving the barrier into the 1948 borders would be consistent with the court ruling. In December 2004, the deputy security of Hashad party, Ahmed Yusuf, said the barrier was a threat to Jordan's national interests, its implications were stealing territory, extending the settlements, and forcefully banishing Palestinians eastwards, in a manner threatening the existence of the Jordanian kingdom. The Jordanians, like the Palestinians, also accept the authority of international law. Jordan's foreign minister Marwan Muasher told the Jordanian press agency on 19 July 2004, that The Hague ruling that was accepted with a sweeping majority of 14 to one judges, is an important international legal, moral, and political precedent. The newspaper Al-Ra'i of the same day stressed that the central issue in Jordan's argument is that the barrier is a Jordanian as well as a Palestinian problem, and its building undermines Jordan's national security. On another occasion, the Jordanian PM said, without elaborating, that the Jordanian kingdom together with the Palestinians was endeavouring to turn The Hague's ruling into a binding U.N. resolution.

Egypt's stand on the barrier is essentially different from that of the Palestinians and Jordan. Egypt cannot claim that the barrier is a threat to its existence. Egypt's view of the controversy is wider, and stems also from regional considerations as befits the largest Arab country. Egypt expressed its satisfaction with the U.N. resolution opposing the barrier, but it took into account those for and against. The Al-Akhbar editorial of 23 July 2004 congratulated the EU for its collective stand supporting the U.N. General Assembly resolution on the barrier. He sees it as EU's traditional support for international legitimacy (of U.N. resolutions), for justice and for human values. The article also attacked the states that exist on "foreign migration"

like the U.S. and Australia. These countries voted against the resolution opposing the barrier. The author takes a clear anti stand, writing that the unipolar country (the U.S.) has become an instrument of destruction and source of aggression in favour of Israel against international legitimacy. Australia, he wrote, under current PM John Howard, works subservient to the U.S. in the international arena, and it is “more American than the Americans”. Al-Ahram reflects more than Al-Akhbar the Egyptian government’s strategic-political credo, which is not anti-U.S. In the Al-Akhbar editorial of 24 July 2004, editor Ibrahim Nafaa wrote that in his opinion the U.N. vote on the barrier was a great moral victory. He noted that 150 states, including the EU states, voted together with the Arabs. Of importance, he wrote, is that Arab representatives worked together and coordinated with each other to pass the resolution opposing the barrier. Ibrahim Nafaa called for Palestinian solidarity, saying that the disputes between and among Palestinian organizations help Sharon to implement his policy. In another article, he wrote that the Palestinians’ bellicose activity against Israel harmed the Palestinian cause and could cancel out Arab achievements in the U.N. and in Hague court rulings. He called for Palestinians to make the best of the opportunities opened by The Hague rulings to implement the required reforms in the PA ruling structure, to formulate an agreed national action plan by all the factions. He warned that if the Palestinians linger and do not do what has to be done, the current opportunity to open negotiations for a political settlement soon, that is, for a Palestinian state, would be lost. Similarly, two articles by the Al-Ahram editor make Egypt’s basic precepts known. His statements on the growing benefits for the Arab cause of coordinating stands internationally are important for Egypt, in order to achieve regional stability. Stability preserves the balance of power in the region, and upsetting the balance can undermine Egypt’s status as the dominant Arab country in the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia as usual, emphasized its own interest and involvement in the struggle against building of the barrier, as it tends to do regarding other issues on the inter-Arab agenda. The Saudi foreign minister Saud Al-Faysal said on 10 July 2004, that the international court determined the illegality of

the barrier's route. He said Saudi Arabia expected the U.N. to take action as part of its obligations for settling the Hague court recommendation. He added that Saudi Arabia played an active part in the court's work by submitting a document of stands and arguments to the court. Saudi Arabia – the foreign minister said – in the concluding session in which the judges read out their ruling. At the same time, an article appeared in 'Al-Yaum' expressing the author's satisfaction that the international court's recommendation could change the status quo. That is, Israel will continue building the barrier despite the court's opinion. He added bitterly that the whole world is not able to change the existing situation in which international law is not honoured. According to the official Saudi response and the press, it is obvious that Saudi Arabia is remote from the Palestinians-Israeli conflict arena, as the intensity of its response cannot be compared to Egypt and Jordan's responses.

Syria hardly responded directly to the building of the barrier. Its stand was expressed via Lebanese President Emil Lahoud who, on 10 June 2004, issued a laconic statement saying that all the international institutions restored the respect for international law. He did not elaborate. Syria's evasion of a direct response was prompted by two factors: one, it was reluctant to make anti-U.S. declarations, Israel's supporters regarding the barrier, as the U.S. accused Syria of involvement in Iraq. Two, the plight of the PA is not and has never been of top priority for Syria. It should be recalled that in the days of Hafez Al-Assad, Syria prevented Chairman Arafat from visiting Damascus.

The Persian Gulf States also paid lip service. GCC secretary Mr. Al-Rahman Al-Atia issued a bland statement describing The Hague's recommendations as important and historic.

Iran did not deal much with the barrier. In July there were two important reactions. The first was from Iranian Foreign Minister Kharrazi who said the building of the barrier is the best proof of the Zionist regime's apartheid policy. The second was a sarcastic statement made by President Khatami at a press conference, that is was below the dignity of the U.S. administration and nation to waste its might and capabilities on an issue that was not in its

own interests. Khatami added that for the Americans, Washington is the capital of the U.S., but unfortunately, the U.S.'s international capital is Tel Aviv. The fact that the Iranian press did not give much attention to the legal and political struggle against the barrier was because Iran views the Israeli-Palestinian question in militant terms and operates accordingly.

The U.S. is currently the main foreign player in the Middle East virtually did not intervene in the barrier issue. On one hand although it does not identify with Israel's stand on the route of the barrier, it does accept Israel's claim that the barrier is a security imperative. The American official line is thus rather neutral. As a result, the press generally did not take an unambiguous stand in favour of either of the sides. The New York Times and the Los Angeles Times and the British press on the whole covered the barrier issue in the same way as the rest of the U.S. press. An exception was *The Guardian*, which criticised Israel claiming that the attempt to separate Israel and the Palestinians will not last long.

DISENGAGEMENT

The Palestinians regarded the barrier and the Israeli Prime Minister's disengagement plan from the whole Gaza strip and from several settlements in the northern West Bank differently. The Palestinians believed that their interests would suffer heavily if Israel builds the barrier. They also felt helpless, because they saw no practical way to prevent this damage. By their bitter outcry before the international community and their leader's statements regarding the supremacy of international law they actually meant that the international community must enforce The Hague international court's decision against the building. However, these statements were no more than desperate protests. On the other hand, although they generally rejected the disengagement plan, at a certain moment the Palestinians saw its advantages. Even HAMAS leaders stated on occasion that Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip is an indication of the Intifada's success. For this reason, they said, war must go on until final victory is achieved. However, the PA leaders perceived the situation resulting from Israel's

announcement of the disengagement plan as more complex. They suspected that the disengagement was nothing but a manoeuvre the nature of which is unclear. They found it hard to believe that Sharon, who over the years was the primary initiator and encouraged Jewish settlement in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip would suddenly change his spots and sincerely intend to disengage from the Gaza Strip. Palestinian spokesmen raised various assessments. They said that Sharon did not really plan to disengage and was merely hoping to impress the world with his disengagement declarations and thus gain new international credit. Another hypothesis was that Sharon indeed planned to disengage from the Gaza Strip and a small part of the northern West Bank, but that this move was meant to strengthen Israel's hold on the West Bank. This version took anchor in the Palestinians' mind after the October 2004 interview given by Prime Minister Sharon's close associate, Mr. Dov Weisglass, to Ha'aretz. Mr. Weisglass explained in the interview that the disengagement plan was not part of a more comprehensive plan to disengage from occupied territories, but was an independent self-contained plan. Since October 2004, the Palestinian media has extensively covered the disengagement issue. This could have to do with the fact that according to the timetable set by the Israeli government, the process was to end in October 2005, that is, in a few months. Given Weisglass's words, the Palestinians' main argument was that disengagement must be part of the Road Map. President Bush's Road Map maintained that the two rival sides must take a series of steps in order to begin negotiations for the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel. In October 2004, the PA communications minister said in an interview to the newspaper Al-Halij that the disengagement plan was a bad plan, because it was unilateral, ignored the Palestinian side, and was not linked with the Road Map. He said that Sharon planned to kill off the peace process and prevent the establishment of a Palestinian State. It therefore appears that Israel's plan for a unilateral disengagement from Gaza and part of the West Bank increased the Palestinians' suspicions with regard to the real intentions behind disengagement. In an interview he gave to CNN in October 2004, Saeb Erekat, a senior PA official, gave the impression that the Palestinians had

reservations about the disengagement plan being unilateral. He said that Israel's Knesset (parliament) had no right to dictate the Palestinian people's future. He called on the Israeli Government to return to the negotiation table and make the plan to disengage from Gaza part of the Road Map. On 21 October 2004, the PA Prime Minister Abu Alaa expressed his pessimistic view to the Canadian representative Ron Wilson. The disengagement plan, he said, in meant to divert international interest (from the Road Map) and do away with it. Abu Alaa added that the world and even the 'Quartet' forgot about the Road Map. He referred to the interview given by Dov Weisglass to the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz, and said that this man made clear in the interview that the disengagement plan was meant to kill off the peace process in order to prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state, to annex Eastern Jerusalem, and to discard the refugee and border issue. One cannot tell, said Abu Alaa, whether the disengagement is a first or a last step. In November 2004, after Arafat was no longer in power, Palestinian statements became more optimistic. On 15 November 2004, a revolutionary resolution was taken at the PA Supreme Follow-up Committee meeting, according to which the Palestinians were ready to accept "any part of our land without commitments, undertakings or agreements that would affect the national goals and principles agreed on by our people and national institutions." According to this, the Palestinians are willing to receive any territory, from which the IDF will disengage, whatever the reasons for which Israel has decided to disengage from them. Please note that the temporary PA Chairman at that time, Mahmoud Abbas, chaired the Supreme Follow-up Committee meeting, and inspired the resolutions. Mahmoud Abbas himself repeated the Follow-up Committee stand in an interview he gave to CNN two days later. In the interview he said, "The Palestinians must be ready for the Israeli disengagement when it occurs." However, Mahmoud Abbas was apparently still anxious. In an interview to al-Arabiya television, he expressed his concern that the disengagement plan was nothing but an American-Israeli plot, which included other issues except for the disengagement, such as: a secret agreement to allow Israeli settlements remain in the West Bank, and the refugee issue. Mahmoud Abbas's concerns

most probably resulted from President Bush's statements during Ariel Sharon's visit to the White House. In the visit Sharon revealed to Bush the details of his plan to disengage from the Gaza Strip and part of the northern West Bank. Sharon's plan was enthusiastically adopted by President Bush, who rewarded Sharon by declaring that he supported a resolution plan between Israel and the Palestinians, according to which the Jewish settlement blocs in the West Bank will be annexed to Israel. The President also said that the State of Israel is not obliged to absorb refugees, unless both sides agree upon criteria for doing so. However, it must be remembered that at the same time, President Bush said he was committed to the Road Map, which ultimately advocated the establishment of a viable Palestinian state. Ultimately, despite the concerns, Mahmoud Abbas' approach was in accordance with the statements of the Supreme Follow-up committee, as mentioned above. We do not know to what extent this stand of the PA chairman led to the agreement between the PA and Israel on coordinating action between the sides on the question of the disengagement in order to ensure Israel's withdrawal from Gaza and the northern West Bank without shooting incidents and other disturbances. Militant actions against Israel have in effect waned and on 3 February 2005 at the 4-way summit conference in Sharm al-Sheikh, Mahmoud Abbas and Ariel Sharon undertook to maintain the cease-fire. It is not clear, however, to what extent Mahmoud Abbas will be able to enforce his will on various fighting groups, since immediately after the end of the summit conference two major opposition elements – Hamas and Islamic Jihad – announced their reservations against Mahmoud Abbas' version with respect to the cease-fire for which they demanded clear commitments in writing regarding international guarantees for its implementation. The announcement says, among other things: "The version (regarding the cease-fire) expressed in Sharm e-Sheikh does not satisfy our expectations and we will not announce a 'hudna' without clear Zionist commitment." Quiet was generally maintained during February between all sides but the Islamic Jihad blatantly violated the Hudna on 26 February 2005 when one of its men blew up in the middle of Tel Aviv and caused loss of life and injuries among the Israelis.

The chances of implementing the cease-fire are still unclear but Sharon announced at Sharm e-Sheikh that the disengagement would go forward in any case. There is no doubt that the PA wants a cease-fire to regain full Palestinian control of Gaza, but the key remains in the hands of the opposition organizations and they have not yet had the last word.

Jordan and several Arab countries supported and still support the disengagement plan despite their suspicion of the Israeli government's final goals. Jordan, like the Palestinians, demanded that the disengagement from Gaza be linked to the Road Map. Foreign Minister Marwan Muasher gave expression to this stand and to Jordan's special motivation for supporting the disengagement. On 5 August 2004, the Jordanian newspaper *Al-Dustar* quoted the Foreign Minister saying that Jordan's support for the disengagement does not derive from its desire to play any (ruling) role in the West Bank. On the contrary Jordan aspires to block any possibility of linking the West Bank to Jordan. He said this link would impose on the Jordanian kingdom the responsibility for the fate of the Palestinian refugees and this is completely unacceptable to Jordan. This point of view apparently derives from Jordan's unreserved support for the establishment of an independent and sovereign Palestinian state. The minister claimed that the disengagement from Gaza is only one step towards ending the Israeli occupation from all Palestinian territory. In this connection, he also said that the withdrawal from Gaza must be part of the Road Map and the withdrawal from Gaza will be total. Jordan (as well as Egypt) dealt with the question of disengagement from another aspect – the necessary reforms in the structure of the Palestinian government since Jordan had a clear interest in ensuring that following the withdrawal from Gaza, the Palestinian leadership would be able to efficiently control most of the vacated territory in order to prevent a situation of chaos being created in the Gaza Strip, a situation that could endanger the stability of the regime along the coastal strip and emphasized the vital need for rapidly implementing reforms in the PA's structure. In a press conference Minister Marwan Muasher held on 13 September 2004, he announced that Jordan was prepared to train Palestinian policemen. From October Jordanian press and official Jordanian spokesmen have devoted

much attention to the disengagement issue. Al-Rai printed an article on 12 October 2004 strongly criticizing the continued military activity against Israel by the radical Islamic movement. The author maintained that the escalated violence endangered the chances for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. The writer also warned against the possibility that the radicals among the Palestinians could coerce their agenda on the entire public. In his opinion this could create a situation of anarchy and uncertainty. This conservative point of view reflects without a doubt the attitude of the Jordanian monarchy. The same newspaper wrote on 27 October 2004 that the Palestinians must prepare beforehand to receive a good part of their homeland and that everything must be prepared for the realization of this goal. It also said that the withdrawal and evacuation of the settlers required the PA to control Gaza with a strong hand. There was much Israeli military activity in the Gaza Strip in October, which resulted in serious damage to property (the destruction of houses) and loss of life. The press reacted with bitterness to Sharon's policy towards Gaza and his motives. The Jordanian journalist Muhammed Kaus wrote on 27 October an article in 'Al-Arab Al-Yom' denouncing Sharon in strong terms. He wrote that the Arabs do not believe that the man of war Ariel Sharon would bring peace one day and it was illogical to think that the "man of death" would become a man who desires peace. He also wrote that this blood spilling person has a political agenda of his own, his own security theory and plan to destroy the Palestinian problem and prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state in Gaza and the West Bank. At the same time the newspaper Al-Arab Al-Yum published an article by the editor denouncing Sharon. He wrote that Sharon has a special dilemma regarding the question of withdrawal from Gaza. The editor explained that all previous withdrawals by Israel were conducted on the basis of an agreement and Israel demanded a heavy price for each and every withdrawal. For the withdrawal from Sinai the U.S. paid billions of USD in economic aid and to build new air bases in the Negev. In return for the Oslo accords Israel received secret technological know-how from the U.S. Based on this know-how, markets in Europe and throughout the whole world were opened to Israel and it once again earned

billions of USD. However, in the writer's opinion, the withdrawal from Gaza is a different situation since the withdrawal this time is a unilateral pullout and not a withdrawal by agreement. Sharon therefore understands that he does not have a pretext to demand compensation from the West for the withdrawal from Gaza and therefore he is extracting a high price in Palestinian blood in the form of killing, destruction and uprooting trees. The writer claims that these bloody acts enable Sharon to prove to the extremists in the Israeli public opinion that he is not a coward and it is not the Palestinians who forced him to leave Gaza. The journalist Arub Al-Ratawi wrote in Al-Dustur in a similar vein. He said that the support of other Palestinians and Arabs for the disengagement plan as part of the Road Map is an illusion that will only cause damage to the Palestinian cause because the disengagement from Gaza will translate into action but afterwards there will be a long period of futile waiting that in the end will lead to the declaration of the death of the Road Map. Nevertheless official Jordanian spokesmen continued to support the disengagement plan. In an article that King Abdullah wrote which was published on 12 November 2004 in the New York Times, he mentioned four points that reflected his attitude towards the situation regarding the Palestinian question. First of all, the King claimed that to achieve peace, Israel must integrate to the Middle East. Such a development will be achieved only if an independent Palestinian state arises in the West Bank and Gaza. Secondly, the new Palestinian leadership that emerged after the death of Arafat will be able to realize the vision of a Palestinian state only if it is committed to government reforms. Thirdly, Israel must commit to the Road Map and quickly withdraw from Gaza. Fourthly, the U.S. must go from statements to actions and conduct negotiations to bring peace between Israel and the Palestinians. On 21 November 2004, the Jordanian Foreign Minister said that the disengagement must be accomplished in coordination with the PA and that the withdrawal from Gaza and the northern West Bank must be in the framework of a general Israeli withdrawal from the Palestinian territories. The Jordanian government therefore stood alongside the PA all along in its struggle against the disengagement plan in its Israeli version. Jordan, like the PA, supports

translation into action of the disengagement plan from Gaza and northern West Bank, but on the condition that this move will be an integral part of a comprehensive plan of Israel's withdrawal from all occupied territories. On the other hand, the Jordanian government's backing of the PA and its desire for a strong authority, derives also from the deep fear among Hashemite circles and leaders in Jordan of radical Palestinian movements in Gaza and the West Bank. The Hashemite circles fear that the military actions of the radical groups against Israel, if continued, will increase the influence of these movements on the public opinion of Palestinian living in Jordan and will stir it up against the rule of the monarchy in Jordan.

EGYPT

Although Egypt's stand on disengagement from the Gaza Strip and the northern West Bank is similar to Jordan's, there is a slight difference between them. Jordan considers itself a regular Middle Eastern state, while Egypt regard itself as the leader and most important of the Arab countries. It therefore tends to examine every problem arising in the area comprehensively. Basically, Egypt and Jordan share the opinion that the disengagement initiative is a positive move, as long as it is the beginning of a process at the end of which Israel will pull out of all the occupied territories, and a Palestinian State is established in them. The practical meaning of this joint perception is the understanding that it is necessary to first strengthen the PA so that it can effectively control the Gaza Strip and the northern West Bank, especially after Israel withdraws from them. Secondly, they both think it is important that the new PA soon acquire the status of a government establishing the institutions of the state-to-be. They both attach importance to stopping the Intifada and paving the way for a renewal of negotiations between the sides and ending the conflict between them. They also understand that there are two possible ways to stop the Intifada, i.e. reach an agreed cease-fire between the Palestinians and Israel. The first one is an agreement between the PA and the different Palestinian opposition groups. The second one is forcible suppression of the militant

opposition. Egypt and Jordan differ in their involvement in attaining their common goals. Egypt's involvement in the disengagement plan is much deeper than that of Jordan, and has gained momentum after Yasser Arafat's death. The Egyptians warned the new Palestinian leadership not to follow Arafat's ways. At that time, the journalist Salah Ahmad Salameh wrote in Al-Ahram that Arafat "defended the specific nature of his leadership to the last minute, kept the reins in his hands and neutralized his opponents." For this reason, wrote Salameh, "It is only natural that Arafat's absence creates a complex situation." At the same time, Al-Ahram published articles that unequivocally criticized Arafat's leadership model. One of them said that the new Palestinian leadership must not consider Arafat a role model, and must not ignore the changing political reality. Another facet of Egypt's involvement was its dialogue with Israel. Egypt hoped that the dialogue would enhance the effort to strengthen the new Palestinian leadership by having Israel improve the lives of the Palestinians in the territories. The Egyptian-Israeli dialogue was effective. However, in October 2004 the IDF operated extensively in the Gaza Strip and the residents suffered heavy casualties and damages. The rapprochement process was therefore somewhat disrupted for a while. Egyptian media reactions to the IDF operations were harsh. Egypt's press doubted Sharon's willingness to make progress and reach an agreement as dictated by the Road Map. On 18 September, 2004, the newspaper 'October' wrote that Sharon was ultimately planning to keep all the West Bank settlements and deny the Palestinians' right to establish a state of their own, and that he was about to abandon forever the debate over the future of four million Palestinian refugees.

In an article in Al-Ahram, the journalist Samir al-Shahat rhetorically asked: "If the land of Palestine belonged eternally to the Jews, where would the Palestinian people live?" On 17 October 2004, the leftist newspaper Al-Arabi said that the acts of Sharon's gang, which is armed with the most modern weapons, are more severe than all the war crimes mentioned in ancient and modern history, including those of the Nazis. On 21 October, the journalist Atta Allah criticized the U.S. in Al-Ahram. He complained that both the democratic and republican parties marginalize the Palestinian

problem. There is no doubt, said Atta Allah, that American policy has surpassed simply defending Israel and has granted Israel a green light to do whatever it wished, ignoring international laws and treaties. He also said that the U.S. will endorse Israel's expansion and will allow Israel to swallow Arab territories outside the Palestinian ones. Egypt's anger at the backing Israel receives from the U.S. is also seen in the way the Egyptian press dealt with anti-Semitism. This issue entered the Egyptian media agenda after U.S. congress passed a law against anti-Semitism. The journalist Muhammad al-Said wrote in Al-Ahram that the law was based on premises reflecting ignorance regarding the roots of anti-Semitism. Consequently, the special attitude towards the Jews anchored in the law, may lead the public to the conclusion that the law against anti-Semitism results from Jewish domination of U.S. policy, and this will in itself lead to increased anti-Semitism. This law, wrote the journalist, is not meant to combat anti-Semitism in the narrow sense but to ensure Israel's immunity by prohibiting criticism against it and punishing those who criticize and oppose it. An article that appeared in Al-Ahram on 31 October said that not all American Jews were to blame, although Jewish groups were attempting to monopolize anti-Semitism and apply it only to the Jews. The situation has deteriorated to the point that these Jewish groups were blaming the Arabs of anti-Semitism, while the Arabs themselves are 'Semites'.

The harsh attacks in the Egyptian press against Israel and the U.S. contradicted the Egyptian government's goals and stands. However, Egyptian public opinion is anti-Israeli, anti-Jewish and anti-American. After October 2004, press attacks against Israel and the U.S. ceased almost completely. Egypt's press, directed from above, has almost completely stopped its anti-Israeli and anti-American campaign. Relations between the Egyptian and American governments are tight, and involve high-level strategic cooperation. Clearly, it was necessary to stop the anti-American press campaign in order to maintain the close relations between the two countries. Criticism against Israel was silenced in the Egyptian press after the Egyptian government understood that it would not be able to influence the disengagement process and its results without reaching understandings

with the Israeli government. In November 2004, the situation turned, and Egypt's Intelligence Minister, Omar Suleiman, made frequent travels to Ramallah (and Jerusalem), urging the PA leaders to act resolutely in order to subordinate the different armed groups to one command controlled by the PA. Omar Suleiman's second goal was convincing the PA and its head that the new government to be set up must have integrity in order to neutralize and overrule all the corrupt apparatuses of Arafat's time. It was commonly known that dismissals of this kind will be welcome by the Palestinian public which has not been blind to the fact that Arafat's close associates were getting richer while their own situation was worsening daily. However, Minister Suleiman was primarily preoccupied with paving the way for training the PA security forces by Egyptian experts. In a 26 November 2004 article, Al-Ahram's political editor explained Egypt's stands on the occasion of Mahmoud Abbas's visit to Cairo. He wrote that President Mubarak was going to stress the vital need to unite the Fatah movement and clarify that if the PA leadership does not succeed in achieving Palestinian national agreement, the Palestinians face a tragic future. The importance of Palestinian national agreement was deeply embedded in President Mubarak's perception of the measures needed in order to strengthen the PA. The idea is that national agreement between the PA and the opposition groups can be achieved if the PA finds a way to integrate the opposition in the new institutions about to be established. According to Egypt, national agreement – if it is reached – will minimize the danger of civil war in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Mubarak said that the Egyptians are concerned about the tragic results of such a war. It is therefore not surprising that Mubarak himself and his envoy Minister Suleiman, have been trying to convince different Palestinian organizations such as Fatah and Hamas to take part in the reform process and in establishing the new institutions of the state-to-be. Egypt's media extensively discussed cooperation between Israel and Egypt on Sharon's disengagement plan. The Egyptian press, which until recently showed Israel to be an ugly and vicious state, went out of its way to congratulate Israel on its cooperation. On 8 December 2004, the journalist Hazem abd al-Rahman wrote in Al-Ahram that Egypt and Israel's bilateral

relations have an important role in Egypt's foreign relations. It is clear, he wrote, that in a situation of cold peace, it is impossible to change Israel's Palestinian policy. "We hope that relations with Israel will remain sound and viable, as are the relations with the U.S. It is time to abandon anti-Israeli feelings, and those relations with Israel are worthy and must be developed to meet all possible Egyptian interests. Al-Ahram's chief editor, Ibrahim Nafa, explained the ramified relations gradually developing with Israel in connection with the disengagement plan. In a 10 December article he wrote that Egypt was acting tirelessly in order to use its bilateral relations with Israel and other countries "to the benefit of our national interests and in order to restore legitimate Arab rights." Ibrahim Nafa wrote that Egypt, being the largest Arab country, has a role in the Arab-Israel conflict. Nafa addressed Israel and requested removing the roadblocks that make the Palestinians' everyday life difficult. He also requested Israel to facilitate free elections for PA Chairman (the elections were successfully held on 9 January 2005, and Mahmoud Abbas was elected by a vast majority as the permanent PA chairman). He also expressed hope that in addition to improving the Palestinians' situation, political negotiations would begin according to the 'Road Map'. On 16 December the Egyptian Foreign Minister, on Egyptian TV, dedicated most of his talk to Egypt's aid to the Palestinians. He said that this aid aimed at strengthen the PA control in the territories, and will include training the Palestinian security institutions in a way that will allow them to perform their security missions successfully. The foreign minister also listed the issues in which Egypt does not plan to get involved. For example, Egypt will not station forces inside the PA for fear they would have to take part in fire incidents with armed Palestinian groups. They think that a development of this kind may seriously hinder Egyptian efforts to entrench law and order in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. However, according to press reports, Egypt was ready to reinforce its Gaza Strip border by another 750 soldiers, in order to ensure that this turbulent border remain quiet. On 15 December, the newspaper Akhar Sa'a took an unmistakable pro-Israeli position, when journalist Faruq al-Tawil praised Prime Minister Sharon, mixed with sarcasm. He said that every head of state (implicitly Sharon) is entitled to

invest efforts for the benefits of his country. He is considered a national hero because he sacrificed so many Arabs for his people. He is nevertheless attacked by his compatriots and his party, and may even be murdered for turning his back on the extremists.

It is noteworthy that together with words of goodwill towards Israel, some voices were heard against Egypt's rapprochement with Israel. On 11 December, al-Gumhuriya wrote that Israel's stand is no reason for optimism, calls for caution and requires closing ranks and finding resources for a tough and long struggle of wills. Radio Cairo commentator Faisal abu-Hadhra said: "We do not know why Israel's prime minister changed his spots and overnight became a man of conciliation and peace. Sharon never wanted to negotiate. He wanted – and still does – to gain time, believing that time will increase the Palestinians' frustration, and that under these circumstances he will be able to continue building settlements and the separation barrier." Egypt's regime is known to be authoritative. The President has the last word on every matter. In a 19 December interview to the German journal *Der Spiegel*, Mubarak explained his credo. He told his interviewer that he supported the disengagement plan from Gaza because it was "the first step on the way to realizing the Road Map. Israel's pullout from the entire Sinai will serve as a precedent and determine the future of the Palestinian territories. After the Gaza Strip, the entire West Bank will be returned to the Palestinians, and an independent Palestinian State will probably be established by the end of 2008. It is therefore clear that Egypt considers the disengagement plan one stage to be followed by others that would lead to the establishment of a Palestinian state. Cooperation with Israel is therefore tactical.

SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia's stand on Israel's disengagement from Gaza followed to the Arab consensus seen in the Palestinian, Jordanian and Egyptian positions. On 25 April, the Saudi ambassador to the U.S., Prince Bandar ibn Sultan, said in an interview to CNN that he would be at ease if and when

disengagement actually occurs. He also said that any Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories is a positive step, as long as it is not the only one.

The ambassador added that he was not opposed to the existence of a Jewish State on condition that a Palestinian State is established next to it. These words were directed at Americans ears and spoken in Washington, who is generally known for its pro-Israeli policy. However, the ambassador's statement that he was not opposed to the existence of a Jewish state was not unusual. Several years ago, the Saudi government issued a peace initiative between Israel and the Arabs, according to which the Arabs were to make peace with Israel and recognize it, if it went back to the 1967 borders. The Arab league endorsed this initiative. On another occasion, Saudi foreign minister Faisal said that that Israel's disengagement from Gaza was a hoax meant to legitimize the West Bank settlements. He expressed satisfaction over the fact that disengagement was unilateral, uncoordinated with the Palestinians, unsupervised by the Quartet, and contradicting the Road Map. He also said he was sorry that Israel's 'irrational' policy has been publicly and fully supported lately by the U.S. These words of the foreign minister were primarily directed at Arabs ears. Saudi Arabia, which is distant from the Palestinian-Israeli conflict arena, has no difficulty taking this position concerning disengagement, because the positions of other Arab countries neighbouring Israel, the Palestinians included, were almost identical. One of the basic elements of Saudi policy was joining the Arab majority position on any Middle Eastern issue, primarily the position of Arab countries assisted by the U.S.

SYRIA

After the fall of Iraq's Baath regime, Syria has been the only Arab state that did not join the U.S. aggressive Middle Eastern policy. It allowed itself to occasionally point an accusing finger at the U.S. for its unreserved support of Israel. Syria's press published hard words against the Americans, especially in the first half of 2004. The attacks decreased later, possibly in view of Syria's concern over U.S. threats of economic and other sanctions,

in retaliation for Syria's alleged assistance to anti-American resistance in Iraq. Syria continued to deal with the Israeli-Arab conflict without necessarily adopting the Palestinian point of view. The separation barrier and the disengagement plan were never first on the agenda of Syria's media.

The Syrian newspaper Tashrin published on 19 February 2005 an article by Ez al-Din Darwish in which Sharon and his government are accused of doing everything to increase the number of settlements and entrench occupation. The writer explains that Sharon is able to act the way he does because he enjoys the 'unexplained' support of the U.S. government. Top American officials, he said, distort facts and describe Sharon as a man of peace. However, the support given to Sharon by the Americans does not reconcile with the claim that the U.S. is committed to the peace process. On 14 June 2004, the newspaper Al-Thawra published an article by Ali Nasser Allah, which says that the U.S.'s only problem with the world, with Europe and the Middle East, stems from its embracing Israel. The U.S.'s arrogance, says the writer, has caused international relations to collapse (referring to the deep crisis between the U.S. and Europe over Iraq). Ali Nasser Allah is of the opinion that the U.S. would not be able to do everything on its own, without international agreement. For this reason, he recommends that the U.S. stop its devious plans in the Middle East and in other parts of the world, and stop covering up its (imperialistic) intentions by slogans of reform, democracy and human rights. Another article published in the same newspaper around that time deals directly with disengagement from Gaza. The writer, Kheir al-Jamali, says that Sharon insists on defining his plan as unilateral disengagement, but actually chose to pull out of Gaza in order to create the impression that Israel is willing to make concessions. Sharon's tactic is to bargain openly and thus get many times more than he gives. According to the article, Sharon is officially pulling out of Gaza in order to enlarge the settlements in other places. Syria's stand on disengagement is basically similar to that of the other Arab countries. However, the disengagement occupied a minor place on Syria's agenda due to the heavy pressure on Syria by the U.S. over Iraq and recently also over Syria's involvement in Lebanon's domestic scene.

SUMMARY

According to an examination of the events that followed the plan to build a separation barrier and the disengagement plan from Gaza and parts of the northern West Bank, it would appear that the Palestinians and Israel's Arab neighbours felt that these two projects were directed against them. The Palestinians perceived the barrier as an attempt to rob them of their lands. Israel's Arab neighbours and Saudi Arabia supported – each in its own way – the Palestinian standpoint. After Arafat's death, the Palestinians changed their stand on the disengagement plan. They no longer considered Israeli withdrawal and evacuation of the Jewish settlements from the Gaza Strip as totally negative. Moreover, the militant Palestinian organizations considered the disengagement plan as the positive result of their operations against Israeli occupation. Neighbouring Arab countries and Saudi Arabia also adopted this standpoint. However, the Palestinians and their Arab neighbours found it hard to believe that Sharon's government would ever agree to give up the occupied West Bank. According to them, the very fact that Sharon mentioned unilateral disengagement from Gaza and did not propose cooperation and coordination with the Palestinians on Israeli withdrawal from all the occupied territories proves that leaving Gaza was the end of the story. This explains the Arab demand to create a binding link between disengagement from Gaza and the Road Map. Israel, on its part, was determined to carry out the two projects with or without Palestinian and Arab agreement. The Arabs continue to claim that Israel maintains an inflexible and uncompromising policy towards the Arab side because it is sure of unreserved U.S. support. This accusation was right as far as the separation barrier was concerned. It was seen in the U.S.'s neutrality with regard to the decision of The Hague International Court. Had the U.S. endorsed the court's decision, Israel would not have dared ignore it. As things stand, the barrier is being built and the Palestinians are unable to stop it. The situation is different with regard to the Disengagement Plan. Here the Americans' stand is not identical with the Israeli one. The American administration maintains that disengagement from Gaza must be part of negotiations on Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank after disengagement

from Gaza, according to the Road Map. This stand was clearly expressed by several American officials. On 2 December 2004, General Colin Powell, then Secretary of State, said that the issue now is Sharon's withdrawal plan and the evacuation of 21 settlements in the Gaza Strip and another four settlements in the northern West Bank. All this, said Powell, is part of the Road Map. That is: other withdrawals will follow, and according to Powell, Sharon will be willing to join the Palestinians on the way to the establishment of a Palestinian state. President Bush himself repeatedly stressed his commitment to the Road Map, especially after he was re-elected. During his last visit to Europe in February 2005, he said that he supported and will act for the establishment of a viable Palestinian state with territorial continuity. It is however not known whether the Americans will continue to link the disengagement plan with other withdrawals. At this time, the Americans are attempting to entrench their exclusive influence in the Middle East, if necessary by force. Bush's administration seems to be convinced that it would be impossible to establish *Pax Americana* in the area without promoting a solution for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. However, past and recent history show that if the U.S. and Europe do not enforce their own solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, there will be no real change in the current political status-quo, and the Palestinians' situation will continue to deteriorate.

President Bush, in his second term in office, may even be ready to take drastic steps against Israel, especially economically. However, his hands are tied by Congress, which for a long time has regarded the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through Israeli eyes. This leads to the conclusion that the chances of an agreement being reached between Israel and the Palestinians are not clear. ❖