



Return to Gaza: Disengagement has failed

Gerald M. Steinberg

National Post

Thursday, June 29, 2006

As an early Israeli supporter of unilateral disengagement, I admit that this plan, like the earlier Oslo "peace process," has failed. Hopes that the unprecedented move, including the dismantling of all Israeli military bases, checkpoints and even civilian houses in Gaza would reduce the violence and promote mutual accommodation were naive. Almost a year after the exit, attacks against Israelis continue to escalate, Palestinian society is in a state of advanced anarchy and the security pledges from Egypt and Europe, brokered by the U.S., have proven worthless.

The murder and kidnapping of Israeli soldiers by Palestinian terrorists, who launched the attack from a tunnel dug from a house in Gaza under the border, was the last straw. Even before then, the dozens of rockets raining down on houses and schools every week, and numerous other terror efforts, had already signalled the approaching end of this unique experiment in conflict reduction. Instead of taking advantage of the opportunity for progress, Palestinians moved their rocket launching teams into the most densely populated neighbourhoods, goading Israel into responding. And whenever a Palestinian was killed, even when Israel was not involved, they could count on political groups such as Human Rights Watch to condemn the Israeli Defense Force, regardless of the evidence.

The role of the Palestinian population in supporting terror is central, but the international community also bears considerable responsibility for the latest disaster. For years, the Europeans, the UN and others had provided massive support -- financial as well as political -- to PLO leader Yasser Arafat in the hope that he would make peace. After that proved to be a mirage and Arafat died, the members of the Quartet (the European-inspired framework designed to push hopes for peace co-operatively) pressed numerous schemes to prop-up Arafat's successors. These failed to achieve anything of significance.

Without skipping a beat, as soon as the Israelis left, the Palestinians extended the terrorist infrastructure to encompass the resources they had gained. A few months later, the entry of Hamas officials, pledged to radical Islam and the eradication of Israel, sped up this process.

As the attacks accelerated, and no evidence for a change for the better was forthcoming, Israelis also rediscovered the mistake of giving responsibility for their survival to outsiders. The security arrangements negotiated with Egypt and Europe, which accompanied the withdrawal of Israeli military forces from Gaza in August 2005, have all collapsed.

The first agreement was signed with the Egyptians, after former prime minister Ariel Sharon overruled many advisors, and agreed to remove Israeli troops from the 13-kilometer border strip between Gaza and Egypt. The IDF had been very active in stopping Palestinians from smuggling explosives, terrorists and various anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles under the border. Although turning over this responsibility to Cairo was a calculated risk, the hope was by making this move, Israel would be seen to have ended the occupation of Gaza. And perhaps the Egyptian presence along the border and inside Gaza would encourage the Palestinians to turn their energies from war to peace.

In parallel, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice brokered a separate security arrangement covering the Rafiah crossing. On Nov. 15, 2005, Rice pressed then prime minister Sharon to agree to a joint Palestinian-European Union arrangement in this very sensitive area. The U.S. was responding to pressures from the



Europeans, who desperately wanted a major role in what was seen as the latest "peace process."

A short time after the agreement was signed, Palestinians bulldozed a breach in the barrier along the Philadelphi corridor and moved freely into and out of Egypt. The 70 European "observers" were shunted aside and chased away by various Palestinian gunmen. As a result, the smuggling of weapons and terrorists has grown into a torrent, and these agreements have joined many others in the dustbin of Middle East peace efforts.

After paying a high price for these hopes, Israelis have rediscovered the fundamental need for direct control over their own security. This lesson has been learned on many occasions -- in 1948, when no one protected them from a mass invasion that almost crushed the nascent country; in 1967, when the UN suddenly removed the peacekeepers stationed in the Sinai following the previous war; and in 1973, when Egyptian forces were able to use weapons that the American-brokered cease-fire was supposed to have kept far away from the front. But after a few years, the combination of international pressure on Israel and the hopes that perhaps there will be changes this time, have led to another round of Palestinian attacks and a reluctant Israeli return to responsibility for its own security.

It is still far too early to know how the return to Gaza will end. But even if the kidnapped soldier is released, the Israeli forces cannot simply turn around and leave Gaza, waiting for the next attempt. Israel is unlikely to reoccupy the poor and hate-filled cities, but the days when Palestinian groups could simply drive from Egypt into Gaza with weapons and terrorists are over. Reliance on outsiders -- particularly Egypt and the European Union -- for security is over, and Israel has no choice but to resume control over Gaza's borders. This will at least help to prevent more terror and kidnappings, and perhaps eventually convince some Palestinians that the only option they have is to take control over their own society, and finally make the compromises necessary for real peace.

- Prof. Gerald M. Steinberg is the director of the Program on Conflict Management at Bar Ilan University in Israel.