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Coordinated Disengagement

Opportunities and Barriers

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About the Study

This policy paper attempts to address the changes that occurred in the political arena in the wake of Arafat's death and to examine their impact on the implementation of the disengagement plan. It focuses on the dilemma of whether this plan can be viewed as an act of divorce, in the way Ariel Sharon did when he devised the plan, or whether the changes can provide an opportunity to lay the foundations for long range political arrangements or a final solution which recognizes the limitations of both sides.

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Table of Contents

A. Changes in the Israeli-Palestinian Arena in the Wake of Arafat's Death	7
B. Potential Barriers to the Implementation of Disengagement	13
1. Obstacles within the Palestinian System	13
2. Barriers within the Israeli System	17
C. If these Barriers are not Dealt With	20
1. Problems on the Palestinian Side	19
2. Problems on the Israeli Side	24
D. Strategies to confront	26
E. Conclusion	33

A. Changes in the Israeli-Palestinian Arena in the Wake of Arafat's Death

Arafat's death brings to the Israeli-Palestinian arena and to the entire Middle East hopes for the dawn of a different era and of political breakthrough. After the forty day period of mourning over Arafat, the Palestinian arena is behaving as if a weighty obstacle has been removed from its path; as if new blood has begun to flow in its veins. In the celebratory atmosphere of the campaign in which Abu Maazen was elected chairman of the Palestinian Authority, the Palestinian public expressed satisfaction not only over the campaign, but also about its ability to affect the results of the elections. This completely contradicts the atmosphere of similar elections in Arab countries. Despite the fact that voter turnout did not surpass 50% of eligible voters in the PA, these elections are considered unprecedented in the Arab world in terms of their fairness, their outcome, and the orderly fashion in which they were carried out. (It is important to note that these do not refer to voter registration. Polling dates were posted by the PA early in August, complying with European demands, and calling for all voters who wanted to, to register, in order to prevent manipulation and counter-feit.) In their articles, Palestinian publicists even stressed Arab countries' envy of the Palestinians.

The developments and events taking place in the Palestinian Authority since the death of Arafat which indicate a change can be pointed out in:

- **Diplomatic Activity.** Since Arafat's death and Bush's reelection, intense diplomatic activity has been taking place. Presidents, heads of state, ministers and senior functionaries from Arab and Western

countries have been making frequent calls upon the offices of Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Maazen) and Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala). This keen activity is an outstanding change after more than three years of isolation and closure which Israel imposed on Arafat, during which most representatives of those states refrained from holding meetings with him.

- **Palestinian Leadership.** Among the four senior people in the Palestinian Authority, there are indications of a quiet division of authority: Abu Maazen as chairman of the PLO, Farouk Kaddumi as chairman of Fatah, Abu Ala as prime minister, and Rouhi Fatouh as acting president. It does not seem that significant figures, opposition groups or political rivals are challenging this arrangement. This shows the lesson learned in the Palestinian arena from the Arafat era: it was clear to all that after his disappearance from the scene, the style of government would be different, characterized by more decentralization and delegation of authority, and transparency. The separation into three branches of government, reflected in the division of authority by the three leaders, is a most meaningful move in the eyes of the Palestinian public, which desires to emulate the democratic regime in Israel. Many Palestinians expect that this process will be implemented de facto during 2005, with the completion of elections for the presidency, the local council, the legislative council, and the institutions of Fatah.
- **Abu Maazen's status.** Abu Maazen confronted Arafat more than any other Palestinian figure, in light of sharp disagreements between them regarding issues of governance. As a result, he was the target of severe criticism on the part of a large cadre of senior figures close to Arafat, whose political existence depended on the latter. However, Abu Maazen today enjoys the status of "number one", and his leadership after the elections is growing stronger. His rivals from the days of his short-lived government (May-August 2003) are cognizant of that fact. It is clear to all that there is no figure beside Abu Maazen capable of standing at the head of the Palestinian governmental sys-

tem at the present time, even if his leadership and political agenda are different from those of Arafat. Marwan Bargouti was a presidential candidate as well, but withdrew his candidacy a number of weeks before the elections. Bargouti's withdrawal not only made Abu Maazen's election campaign easier; it also served to moderate the opposition among the middle generation in Fatah, which sought, by introducing Bargouti's candidacy, to protest against being pushed aside from decision-making positions.

- **Optimistic Sentiment in the Palestinian Population** is expressed, *inter alia*, in public opinion polls published since Arafat's death. These polls exemplify both the dimensions of the criticism of him, due to his functioning and management, and the ardent hope, which has taken root in the hearts of many, that new opportunities in the internal Palestinian arena and in the negotiations with Israel will develop in the aftermath of his death.
- **The Status of Palestinian Opposition Organizations.** There has been a substantial decline in the status of these organizations since Arafat's death, clearly manifested in the polls. The most outstanding plunge is that of Hamas, which lost a substantial part of the support it enjoyed prior to his death. From an average of 30%, its support has declined to an average of 18% after his death. This public stand is decisive for two reasons: first, since the impression caused by it greatly strengthens Abu Maazen; second, since Hamas has always attributed great importance to the public mood. This change is likely to effect the decision making process in that organization, and even to change policy or decisions which have already been made. Hamas' willingness for power-sharing is likely to restore some lost public support, already evident in significant achievements in the municipal elections in the west bank and the Gaza strip.
- **Israel's Position Regarding the Unilateral Character of the Disengagement Plan.** Since Arafat's demise, Israel has expressed a willingness to show flexibility regarding the unilateral nature of the disengagement, and to coordinate it, in part, with the Palestinian side.

This willingness, vocalized in various statements made by senior Israeli officials including Prime Minister Sharon, is perceived by Palestinians as being one of the signs of positive changes taking place in the region after Arafat's death.

The questions raised by this development are as follows: is it prudent to continue advancing the disengagement plan as initially prescribed by Sharon? In other words, is it desirable to take a unilateral action of divorce and build a wall between the parties, ignoring the existence of the other side? Or is it preferable to see the developments taking place in the Palestinian arena as an opportunity for renewed confidence-building between the parties, aimed at bringing an end to violence, and, gradually, conciliation between the two peoples? There is still uncertainty regarding the strength of the new leadership *vis-a-vis* the Palestinian public, and the extent of its influence over it. The Palestinian public is aware of Arafat's responsibility for the political deadlock in the region over the past four years. This awareness has increased support for Abu Maazen and the positive signals he receives from the Palestinian population. However, this support is liable to wane, just as similar hopes have in the past, if it is not constantly reinforced by all parties in the Palestinian-Israeli power structure. Palestinian history abounds with transitions from hope to disappointment and from optimistic expectations to crisis. Every such transition has involved outbreak of severe violence, which sunk the local arena back into chaos. Who can pledge that history will not repeat itself? And can Israel, being the stronger side of the equation of forces, contribute to changing this destructive historical routine?

It seems that the answer to this question is to be found in the unique political constellation which has formed. For the first time in Palestinian society, and possibly in the entire Arab world, a rare connection between the leader and the led public has been created; they see eye-to-eye the vital interests of society, they point toward the same goals, and aspire to attain them. This common viewpoint also grants Abu Maazen legitimacy of the kind that Arafat never had. True, this legitimacy is lacking the respect which Arafat, symbol of the Palestinian struggle, enjoyed, but it possesses trust and reliability. Moreover, Arafat is seen – whether secretly or openly – as an object of ridicule, whereas Abu Maazen's image is free of such ridicule. One of the problems which leaders in

the Arab world must confront is the constant need for legitimacy, since the interests of the ruler and those of society are not identical. From that very angle, Abu Maazen is actually beginning his journey from a relatively good position. If he should succeed in strengthening and stabilizing that position, it is likely to develop into a model which Arab states in the region will aspire to emulate.

As a state with decisive effect on the internal Palestinian arena, Israel can determine Abu Maazen's fate by the policy it adopts henceforth. A change in policy will require reevaluation of patterns of thinking and of the decision making process regarding the Palestinian issue. The struggle must no longer be perceived as one determined by the fear for Jewish existence; it must be approached, instead, with a heightened awareness of events in Palestinian society and a greater sensitivity to the signals relayed by the Palestinian public. Most of this public sees Israel, *de facto*, as the factor upon which the success of the future Palestinian democracy depends.

In the latest "Herzliyya Speech" (December 16, 2004), Prime Minister Sharon expressed his willingness to affect a certain change in the implementation of the Disengagement Plan. His comments, however, fail to indicate a change in the Israeli perception of the Palestinian arena. Sharon said, *inter alia*: "In light of the new opportunities and the potential for new Palestinian leadership, Israel will be willing to coordinate certain issues regarding disengagement with a future Palestinian government, a government willing and able to take responsibility for the areas which we will evacuate."¹

It seems, therefore, that the execution of the disengagement is likely to take on the character of a defining process: it can determine, to a great extent, the direction which the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians will assume in the post-Arafat era. In order to ensure positive momentum, there is a need for deeper recognition of the atmosphere, processes, and trends crystallizing in the internal Palestinian arena regarding the future of society and of the Palestinian entity.

1 <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3019580,00.html>

In light of the above, it seems that the preferable option today is coordinated disengagement, that is, an effort to coordinate and agree upon the execution of every detail of the plan. This option should be based on the following principles:

- The establishment of an elected Palestinian Authority, which will enjoy wide domestic legitimacy and trust on the part of a decisive majority of the Palestinian public. In other words, the strengthening of the apparent trend in the Palestinian arena since the disappearance of Arafat.
- Inclusion of all or most influential political factors in the germinating Palestinian governmental system. It is expected that this system will crystallize with the completion of most elections scheduled for 2005: presidential, municipal, legislative council, and internal elections for the institutions of Fatah.
- Israeli willingness to concede the unilateral character of the disengagement and to carry out all or most of it through coordination and dialogue, in step with the advancement of the abovementioned processes.
- Presentation of an Israeli vision indicating the beginning of a political process which will not end with the evacuation of the Gaza strip and northern Samaria. Declarative events such as the Sharem Al-Sheik Conference (8.2.2005) are insufficient. There is a need for frequent manifestation of the vision on the media and communication levels developing between the two parties.
- Inclusion of a third party, assisting the Palestinian transition to autonomous administration of the Gaza strip after its evacuation. This party should also be responsible for monitoring and preserving the stability of the regional security which will develop.

B. Potential Barriers to the Implementation of Disengagement

The option of coordinated disengagement is likely to be confronted by several barriers, which could derail it and even cause frequent crises, curtailing the positive atmosphere. These barriers originate in both systems – the Israeli and Palestinian – each of which aspires to minimize, to the extent possible, the internal friction involved in advancing this process. Possible barriers are briefly discussed below.

1. Obstacles within the Palestinian System

- **Fear of “playing into the hands of Israel”.** The fear of “playing into the hands of Israel”, or of a “trap” set for the Palestinian side by Israel by the very declaration of a unilateral move, concerns conservative figures on the Palestinian side. There is also fear that even if the Palestinians fulfill Israeli and U.S. expectations – namely, even if they reorganize the Authority and lead a process of democratization of the regime (*e.g.*, transparency, and inclusion of opposition factions in the government) – they will not necessarily be appropriately rewarded by Israel. The conservatives argue that the Palestinian need for democratization can wait until the end of the “occupation”, and that any deviation from efforts to end the occupation jeopardizes the ultimate Palestinian goal: the liberation of Palestine. We have learned that at

times, these voices have veto potential. They are a substantial barrier on the path to changing the internal Palestinian dialogue and to the establishment of democratic patterns of government.

- **The diminishing support for the opposition organizations**, which is liable to prevent their integration into the government. As previously mentioned, since Arafat's disappearance, a reduction in support for Hamas has been indicated in the polls. This is likely to cause (or might already have caused) a change in Hamas' policy regarding participation in the government, contrary to its declarations before Arafat's death. The hopeful public mood on the Palestinian street clearly indicates to Hamas that it must integrate or lose grassroots' support. This situation is reminiscent of the period before the implementation of the Oslo accords; namely, a clear aspiration to return to the peace process is indicated in the Palestinian public, an aspiration usually accompanied by demands to halt all acts of violence. In this situation, Hamas is likely to renege on its willingness to participate in government, to focus its political participation on local government and to feel that it has legitimacy to continue its acts of violence against "the Israeli occupation".

- **The fear of a civil war** impedes the deterrence ability of the Palestinian Authority. Abu Maazen, like Arafat before him, and all the heads of the Palestinian organizations, emphasize and reemphasize their commitment to this issue. They have frequently expressed their fear of a "Palestinian Altalena".² As a result, the main efforts to calm the arena and to preserve stability will be carried out by way of dialogue. On the one hand, dialogue has the positive potential of reaching understandings and establishing democratic patterns; but creating dialogue may mean creating a monster. That is to say, the Authority's deterrence ability is likely to be gradually weakened as a result of

2 The Altalena was a ship carrying weapons for the Irgun, an opposition organization in the Zionist movement, sunk in Jaffa port on orders of government of the infant State of Israel in 1948. In Israel, the Altalena affair is a symbol of the threat of civil war. (*Translator's note*).

attempts, like those in the past, of Hamas and other opposition organizations, to test the reactive force of the Authority, by way of violence toward Israelis. The frequent statements by Authority spokesmen, claiming that the terrorist attacks against Israel contradict the Palestinian national interest, are most positive; but in the internal Palestinian arena they are interpreted as attempts to show that the Authority is no less patriotic than the opposition organizations, that it is just trying a different way, and that it has not irrevocably laid down its arms. These apologetics during periods of crisis with Israel weaken the Authority from within.

- **Arafat's legacy.** Abu Maazen is likely to endure this legacy like a mill stone round his neck. The commitment to Arafat's political legacy, which Abu Maazen expressed clearly just prior to the presidential elections, was not intended for the elections alone. It also reflects an attempt to differentiate between the functioning of Arafat, which was considered by all to be a failure, and his political vision, which is accepted by a majority of the Palestinian public.

This political vision reflects the fundamental Palestinian positions in negotiations: a Palestinian state with boundaries according to the 1967 lines (the 1948 armistice lines), Jerusalem as the capital city and a just solution to the refugee problem. Abu Maazen's capacity to demonstrate flexibility in the political sphere will greatly depend upon his success in introducing changes into the system of government and its functioning. Such changes would require the expression of a similar feeling of flexibility on the part of the public, who usually want to feel that Israel has given something in return, or to see that Israel relates to the changes.

- **The lessons from the interim agreements with Israel.** From the Palestinian point of view, the interim agreements were a most negative experience, and there are many lessons to be learned from them. The Palestinians' feeling is that Israel exploited and is exploiting these arrangements in order to determine facts on the ground, and that she is obstructing any future possibility of creating a formula upon

which the permanent status agreements can be based. The distrust on this issue focuses mainly on the problem of settlements. The Palestinians claim that throughout the entire period of the Oslo accords (1994-2000), Israel did not succeed in fulfilling even one of its obligations according to the accords. The construction within and without the settlements continued constantly, new settlement outposts sprang up by the day, and the Israeli army failed time after time, when called upon, to evacuate them. Although a petition of support signed by 500 Palestinian intellectuals published in the press (December 25, 2004) endorsed the termination of violence and of the armed struggle, however, the same petition voiced determined opposition to interim arrangements or solutions involving a “temporary state”.

- **The disparity between the aspiration for independence and its recognition by the grace of Israel.** Many Palestinians felt frustration and humiliation due to their dependence on Israel resulting from the signing of the Oslo accords. The accords portrayed a transition from a pitiful situation caused by Israel to a situation of partial independence given them by Israel’s grace. This portrayal of independence, as one not attained through struggle and sacrifice, undermines heroic myths which develop in any society in the throes of a national struggle, and weakens the leaders negotiating with Israel. For this reason, unilateral disengagement is interpreted by the Palestinians, first and foremost, as an appropriation of their right to decide their own fate, and only then as an achievement of the goal of the armed struggle or the Palestinian terror.
- **The status of the third party.** The Palestinians have always endorsed the involvement of a third party, as a balancing factor, given Israel’s great might. But in this case there is, as expected, great sensitivity regarding the function which a third party will perform: will it focus on assistance and training, or will it intervene in the administration of internal issues? A patronizing attitude is likely to arouse reactions such as: “compromise of independent decision making,” “the loss of the dream of a Palestinian state”, and so on. Arafat’s disap-

pearance greatly reduces this concern, but does not completely remove it, and it is likely to limit the third party's contribution to the implementation of the disengagement process.

2. Barriers within the Israeli System

- **The Jewish existential fear.** The security doctrine of the State of Israel since its establishment has been built upon this fear, and it has caused the IDF to overreact at times to threats identified in the field, arousing the other side's impulse of revenge. This Israeli position was formed during a period when Israel was weak in comparison to her neighbors, when the feeling of an existential threat was a concrete one. Today, Israel possesses security and economic power which all the Arab states put together do not have. This power places the initiative in Israel's hands and allows her a large measure of control over events. Ultimately, the use of such might turns the Palestinians into a David, confronting a Jewish Goliath and attempting to prove he will not be broken by his might.
- **Mistrust of the Palestinians.** Israel doubts the will, and even the capability, of the Palestinians to end terrorism and to agree to the establishment of a Palestinian state within the 1967 boundaries, even though most leaders of the Palestinian nationalist movement declare their willingness for such a compromise. Notwithstanding the confidence the Israeli public has in Abu Maazen, his deep commitment to "Arafat's legacy", which he declared just prior to the presidential elections, reinforces misgivings regarding this issue. It worries many in Israel, despite their understanding that reality necessitates such declarations in the context of campaign promises. Israelis interpret these declarations as an attempt to trick Israel, and are convinced that Abu Maazen is the same old product in a different package. From the political standpoint, this is a burden which decision makers will not be able to ignore.

- **Political Opposition.** The opposition in Israel is creating coalitional instability and making the implementation of the disengagement plan difficult. The source of the opposition is the fact that the right wing parties refuse to even consider the terminology of territorial compromise with the Palestinian side. Such compromise would entail the destruction of the settlement enterprise which they have championed since the middle of the 1970's, and shatter the dream of return to the ancestral inheritance - the land of Israel – a dream they have passed on to the younger generation. This opposition is a difficult barrier to overcome, since these parties and bodies are capable of applying intense public and political pressure to halt and impede the disengagement plan.
- **Threats of insubordination** by soldiers who are residents or supporters of the settlements. Fears of insubordination by supporters of the right wing particularly on the eve of disengagement run high. Wide scale refusal to evacuate settlements is likely to bring into question the unity of the army and to severely damage the stability of the governmental system of the State of Israel. A plan has therefore been devised, by which the police will carry out the evacuation, and IDF soldiers will secure it in the external periphery (that is, they will receive the evacuees and prevent their return to the settlements). It is very doubtful whether this plan can be carried out; it seems that the evacuation will require the use of especially large forces which the police cannot provide.
- **Threats on the lives of senior functionaries and officers** responsible for the evacuation. These threats, which originate in the radical circles of the settlers and their supporters, are likely to increase as the date of evacuation approaches. These circles see the disengagement, and specifically the evacuation of settlements, as halting the process of divine redemption, a conviction which motivated them to settle the territories. For some time, ranting demonstrations outside the homes of senior functionaries have become routine. Opposition may not necessarily go beyond this form of protest, but one cannot ignore

the possibility that individuals from the radical fringes may take drastic steps, like murder or physical violence toward those responsible for the evacuation. Should violence pervade the internal controversy in Israel, it is likely to completely derail the entire disengagement process.

- **The prospect of damage to Islamic holy places.** The concern regarding these places is already on the agenda of the Israeli security system. The source of this threat too stems from radical religious circles among the settlers and their supporters, since they see the conflict with the Palestinians as a religious, not a national, conflict. Plans to explode the Al-Aqsa mosque are known to have been made in the past, and there is growing concern about a similar attempt today, against the background of the current disengagement plan. If this threat is carried out, it is liable to ignite the area in a such way that will completely change the face of the Middle East, and may even lead to Israel's loss of sovereignty.

- **Israeli opposition to third-party involvement.** Involvement of foreign countries – with the exception of the U.S. – in Israel's relations with the Palestinians has always roused Israeli opposition. Such involvement is perceived as liable to put pressure on Israel and tie her hands in her struggle against terrorism. Israel is concerned over the inclination of European states in favor of the Palestinians, and Egypt is not a desirable participant, since she is naturally and publicly committed to the Palestinian side, and is certainly incapable of remaining objective. As for the U.S., it declaredly aspires to bring about processes of governmental transparency and democratization in the Arab world. Israel is concerned that if the Arabs cooperate with such processes, it will obligate the U.S., sooner or later, to pay a price – a price “in Israeli currency”.

C. If these Barriers are not Dealt With

The barriers discussed above reflect the residues of hostility, bitterness, and mistrust between the two sides throughout more than a century of conflict, which have determined the character of life for both populations in our area. The death of Arafat has significantly decreased the number of barriers, some of which resulted from his personality and functioning in the course of over forty years of leadership. However, his death has not made the fundamental problems confronting Israeli and Palestinian leaders disappear. Refraining from dealing with these barriers prior to, during, or after implementation of the disengagement plan is likely to rekindle the very problems which the plan is intended to resolve. These problems will now be briefly discussed.

1. Problems on the Palestinian Side

- **Destabilization of Abu Maazen's status.** The predicted election of Abu Maazen as the Chairman of the Palestinian Authority was came about. Until now, his rivals in Fatah have not made statements against him in public. However, there is a concern that they will interpret Israel's moves as an anti-Palestinian conspiracy, and the negotiation which Abu Maazen is trying to conduct with Israel – as surrender and an affront to Palestinian national dignity. Secular and Islamic opposition organizations are likely to join this contention, thus fettering Abu Maazen's ability to maneuver. One must remember that the responsi-

bility for the fall of the Abu Maazen government (in summer 2003) is not credited only to Arafat; many within the Fatah camp, Hamas, and other groups believe that it was the result of Israel's reluctance to allow Abu Maazen any sort of gain at the proper time. Such gains would have been likely to balance his weakness *vis a vis* Arafat and allow him and his government to function. This lesson is deeply engrained in the Palestinian consciousness, and it can be assumed that the Palestinians will continue to strictly monitor Israel's *de facto* implementation of steps she has committed to.

- **The continued existence of two separate “Authorities” within the Gaza strip.** This situation existed in the Gaza strip between 1994 and 2000, when the Hamas movement chose to “sit on the fence”. Namely, it is expected that the Islamic opposition organizations will continue to act according to their own agenda, in which “armed opposition” to Israel plays a central role. One reason for this situation in the Arafat era was the dual signals his declarations sent to the opposition and to the security apparatuses. As a result of these mixed signals, these organizations did not prevent anti-Israel activity, and moreover, felt free to engage in it.³ In addition, the status of the internal leadership of Hamas was weakened in comparison to that movement's external leadership. The latter was affected also by pressure on the part of fundamentalist factors such as Iran and Hizbollah.⁴ The legislative council has a dangerous potential. Non participation in the council will leave it outside the political system, free of responsibility

3 It should be noted, to Abu Maazen's credit, that unlike Arafat, he presents his position in an unequivocal way. His statements are respected even in the Hamas camp, due to their straightforwardness and sincerity. In one meeting held with Abu Maazen after Arafat's death, Mahmoud Al Zahar, the senior Hamas representative in the Gaza strip, said: “this is the first time we have submitted written material to representatives of the Palestinian Authority. Until now, we communicated with them orally.” According to him, the Hamas did so in of recognition of the serious attitude presented by the new leadership.

4 The Iranian backed Shi'ite militia in Lebanon, which operates with Syria's complicity. (*translators note.*)

of any kind, and will once again perpetuate a situation of two Authorities within one Authority. The reduction in the level of support for Hamas, as seen in the polls since Arafat's disappearance, is a factor which deters its participation in elections. At present, Hamas appears to be overcoming this by successfully addressing the public mood. However, it is unclear as yet how it will choose to act in the elections to the legislative council.

- **The danger of civil war.** This danger is likely to resurface if a situation of chaos redevelops within the Palestinian Authority. A crisis situation is likely to develop for various reasons: a crisis in the negotiations with Israel, a destabilization of Abu Maazen's status, an internal struggle within the Fatah camp over a sense of deprivation by some of its activists or a significant growth in Hamas's influence. In the event, senior members of Fatah are likely to take steps, both in order to exact revenge from internal political rivals and in order to fetter Hamas. Israel is liable to find herself paying the price, since such an outbreak will always be interpreted as an Israeli conspiracy, and bring an increase in terror at its heels. One must remember that Hamas continues to show determination in its commitment to refrain from civil war; it has proven that in the past, and will ostensibly continue to pursue the same policy. Even if attacked by Fatah, a central part of its reaction will be directed toward Israel: it will vent its rage through the increase of terrorism against Israel.
- **Development of hubs of unrest in the Palestinian public.** Those will indicate, as they had in the past, the humiliation and defeatism involved in forging accommodations or agreements with Israel. They are likely to gradually develop if Abu Maazen is unable to show his people concrete achievements. In the event, statements and signals will be made, condemning the abandonment of Arafat's legacy and the desecration of the honor of the fallen and of the nation. As before, protest will be sounded against the humiliation and the defeatism involved in any accommodation or agreement with Israel. All these will gradually destabilize the legitimacy of the Palestinian leadership and

are likely to develop not only within political bodies and organizations, but also as a result of inspiration by influential figures, such as intellectuals, publicists and other speakers. These figures are also likely to voice criticism and lead a campaign that will weaken the leadership. Since the new leadership cannot enjoy a super-status - immune to criticism - like that of Arafat, it must confront critical attacks in an “Israeli fashion”, which will require it to act with greater transparency and sincerity.

- **Resignation by Abu Maazen.** Unlike Arafat, Abu Maazen does not intend to hold on to power at all cost. He resumed his senior role in the Palestinian leadership despite the crisis caused by the fall of his government and despite the conflict which broke out between him and Arafat. His ability to do so is largely thanks to his retreat from the Arafat’s inner circle on the one hand, while refraining from political sabotage and personal criticism on the other. Abu Maazen continued to be loyal to Arafat, despite his feelings of frustration and bitterness. There is a danger that if he fails in dealing with difficulties, whether internal or those caused by Israel, he will forfeit his leadership position.
- **The Somalia Model.** Chaos in the Gaza strip is likely to recur, whether due to resignation by Abu Maazen, a destabilization in his political status, the failure to coordinate or cooperate with Israel, or a combination of all of these. In such case, there will be no internal force with sufficient power to achieve hegemony and impose order. The control of the Gaza strip is likely to be split, much like in Somalia, between various gangs, each active in a different area. This itself, is likely to serve the interests of Hamas, which commands a great capacity for rallying support from the wretched and the oppressed, whose dependence on it will grow stronger. In time, the chaos is apt to lead to the complete takeover of the Gaza strip by Hamas.

2. Problems on the Israeli Side

- **Continued Israeli skirmishes into the Gaza strip.** Attempts to commit terrorist attacks or to fire missiles on Israeli towns are expected to bring about the renewal of Israeli military operations in the Gaza strip. Such acts will perpetuate the distrust on the Palestinian side and increase the opposition in Israel to evacuating additional areas and settlements. In addition, these acts will severely impair the status of the new Palestinian leadership, as the Palestinian public will see it as too useless and weak to contend with Israeli military might. In such circumstances, it is reasonable to assume that the Palestinians will renew their support of fundamentalist organizations, which constantly lurk, waiting for such opportunities.
- **The fall of the government.** Many factors can threaten the stability of the Israeli government: dogged statements in favor of military insubordination, made by very influential right wing rabbis; cases of such insubordination on the eve of, or during, the evacuation; attacks by Knesset Members who oppose the disengagement plan; and harsh criticism of the brute, dubiously democratic steps Sharon has taken in his attempt to endorse the disengagement plan. In this situation, even if a parliamentary majority can be found to support the plan, it is likely to be portrayed as immoral.⁵
- **Violent clashes between the supporters and opponents of the disengagement plan.** Such violent events are liable to break out due to rising tension between the two camps, or an assassination attempt against a political or non-political figure involved in the implementation of the disengagement process. If there should indeed be an attack upon such a figure, his or her status will determine the scope and nature of the clashes. The lesson from the assassination of Prime

5 Especially in light of the deliberations and disagreements in the Likud, called by Likud Justice Minister Tzipi Livni a party “with a skullcap in its pocket”.

Minister Rabin is engraved in the consciousness of many, but there is still a minority liable to see murder as a legitimate means in certain circumstances. The leaders and rabbis of the settlers publicly express resolute opposition to violence, but in light of the impassioned atmosphere pervading this sector, there are no guarantees against future single-handed acts of retribution.

- **The formation of a wide opposition bloc.** Such opposition could arise against the background of international efforts accompanying the stages immediately prior to and following the evacuation. International players will naturally aspire to encourage the rebirth of a bilateral peace process. However, it is reasonable to assume that the opposition in Israel will see this as an attempt to reign the wagon before the horses, explicitly, to procure additional concessions from Israel. The disengagement will be defined by the opposition as the first step in Israel's abandonment of its spiritual values and its territorial assets. Already today, these circles interpret the calls for an international conference as a means of pressuring Israel, and not as an attempt to resolve the conflict. The presence of a third party in the area, in the context of the implementation of disengagement, is likely to support arguments that Israel is surrendering to the dictates of international players, for whom Israel's best interest is not a priority.

D. Strategies to confront

To forestall the occurrence of the scenarios described above, it is necessary, first and foremost, to evaluate the changes taking place in the Israeli-Palestinian arena as a result of Arafat's death and their implications. In this context, a re-examination of the relations between the State of Israel and the Palestinians is needed. In other words, one must examine the interests of the State of Israel, the ways to realize them, and the approach to the Palestinian side. Should one continue listening to declarations frequently made by senior Palestinian religious leaders, intellectuals and functionaries, constantly expressing feelings of rage and discrimination, reclaiming the Palestinians' "usurped" rights? Or should one in fact listen to the internal dialogue in Palestinian society; to the arguments and counterarguments raised in it? It appears to me that the latter approach is likely to teach us more about the character of the Palestinian partner than one public declaration or another by a senior figure. The internal problems generated by day to day hardships are what will dictate, at the end of the day, the level of flexibility and pragmatism of the Palestinian side. They are also likely to be instructive on the motivations behind various Palestinian moves. An in depth examination of these problems will lead to an opinion shift, and to a new definition of Israeli interests. As a result, it will be possible to formulate the right policy toward the Palestinians and to determine the appropriate responses to their occasional outbreaks of violence.

It appears that in the circumstances, the State of Israel would be wise to base her interests on the following principles:

- **End the personalization of the conflict.** Israel should refrain from focusing her concerns on one leader or another, and instead see the entire Palestinian people as a negotiating partner. From this vantage point, the integration of the Hamas-led Palestinian opposition into the government is in the supreme interest of the State of Israel. In other words, it is in the interest of Israel that Hamas adopts the accepted political rules of the game: participation in elections, representation in parliament, and so on. Not only will Hamas' integration oblige it to take responsibility; it will also force it to abide by the rules of the game, according to which no nongovernmental body has the right to bear or make use of arms. In other words, to abandon the cycle of violence. Although such a step will not ensure the complete arrest of terrorist attacks, it will remove a very substantial factor from the circle of violence.
- **Democratization of the Palestinian Authority.** From Israel's standpoint, the democratization of the Authority means transparency of the positions and intentions of the Palestinian leadership, as well as its ability to deal with political rivals. The demand for democracy enjoys wide support from all sectors of Palestinian society. The realization of this demand is likely to be an inter-Arab breakthrough, much like the rather successful elections in Iraq, and after that, to affect additional states in the Middle East. To date, there has been little chance for steps which would advance democracy in the PA, whether due to impediments set by Arafat's conduct, or since Israel did not sufficiently clarify its position on the issue.
- **Encouraging the Palestinians to initiate.** Such a step might surrender the advantage to which Israel has been accustomed during political contacts with the Palestinians; it would, however, be a manifestation of the Palestinian recovery from the underdog status, always waiting to see when and how "the usurper intends to return what it has usurped." Until now, Israel has initiated most of the ideas, formulated most of the proposals, and presented them to the Palestinians. This initiative has secured Israel many advantages, enabling her to

determine, in most cases, the course of the negotiations. On the other hand, the Palestinians have staunchly refused to take the initiative, since doing so is perceived as an act of defeatism and humiliation. It implied that they would have to approve concessions or compromises offered by Israel in advance. This concept was expressed by Sheik Ahmed Yassin after the Arab Summit in Beirut, in which the Saudi political initiative was first presented (March 2002): “any Arab initiative is an act of defeatism ... they usurped; they took ... let them offer proposals, and we shall decide whether to accept or reject them.”

- **A shift in the internal Palestinian dialogue** from a ranting anti-Israeli one to a more moderate one. The goal is to procure the hegemony over this dialogue from the hands of the conservative forces, the slogan slingers, and the boasters. In certain aspects, the internal Palestinian dialogue is similar to the internal Arab dialogue: both are dialogues of protest, demand, blame, and a refusal to assume responsibility. However, there is a relative openness in the Palestinian press, which allows supporters of reform and change to express themselves more liberally than in other Arab countries. Liberal voices rely on a wide public base of democratic consciousness. The changing nature of the dialogue will not only contribute to transforming Palestinian society, but will also dull the tension and hostility between Israel and the Palestinians.

Should Israel choose to base its policy on the abovementioned principles and prevent the realization of the bleak forecasts, she must act in two complementary directions:

1. Adopt **maximizing** strategies, which will increase, to the greatest possible extent, the power of those Palestinian factors likely to advance Israel’s interests.
2. Concurrently, it should adopt **minimizing** strategies, which will decrease, to the extent possible, the power of those striving to bring about chaos and opposing the disengagement plan.

1. Maximizing Strategies. Support of and aid to Abu Maazen should be the focus of these strategies. A series of steps should be taken, which will synergistically strengthen him along the way. A number of such desirable actions will be discussed, alongside patterns of conduct which must be avoided.

- Israel should adhere to the schedule of the disengagement plan and ensure that its first stage is implemented promptly. Concomitantly, Israel should issue a public declaration stressing its willingness to evacuate settlements, both those which in the past it had no intention of evacuating, and those which in the past could not be evacuated due to the public support they enjoyed in Israel. Such an explicit statement would in fact break the taboo regarding the settlement enterprise in the territories. If such a move is made in coordination with and the agreement of Abu Maazen's elected government, it will enable him to contradict the opposition's claim that the disengagement plan is a result of "armed resistance". Such a statement would also reinforce Abu Maazen's efforts to bring about a ceasefire or total end to the armed struggle, increase trust in Israel, and undermine the hegemony of conservative voices among the Palestinians that strive for the continuation of the struggle.
- It must be understood that the key to improving relations between Israel and the Palestinians is the degree of reliability and determination of the Palestinian administration in its fight against terrorism, and not the immediate results reached on the ground. Israel should attach decisive significance to the change in the internal Palestinian discourse, and not to the failures their security forces are liable to experience in the struggle against terrorists and launchers of Kassam missiles. In the week prior to the elections, Abu Maazen raised this issue on the campaign agenda. His victory can be interpreted as the granting of legitimacy, on behalf of his voters, to the continuation of this struggle. Hamas' response to his ceasefire demands reflects their recognition of the election results, despite criticism of forgery and their desire to highlight their own contribution to his success.

- Israel should express public support for the formation of a democratic regime in the Palestinian Authority, and allow all elections within it to take place with due diligence. The Palestinians still feel grim mistrust towards Israel's position on this issue; many believe that the Israeli government (especially a right wing government) has no interest in the development of a strong democratic Palestinian government which will be capable of making decisions, or even of carrying them out.
- It is important that Israel present a binding plan for the continuation of the process, and clarify that the intention is not to evacuate the Gaza strip and the northern West Bank only, but rather that these are only the beginning of a process intended to liberate her from control over close to three million residents. Such a clarification will explicitly express Israel's national need for the establishment of a Palestinian state, and there is a chance that it will ease the worries of the Palestinians, who tend to see any move by Israel as a conspiracy against them. Such a move would also strengthen proponents of democracy and weaken the conservative "I told you so" chorus, which opposes reformists' and pragmatists' attempts to abandon the old path.
- It is important that Israel emphasize its commitment to the Palestinian public – the "silent majority", and declare that she has always seen it as a partner. This public was infused with democratic values during the period of Israeli rule, even while waging an all out struggle against her, and wishes to instill these values in the Palestinian government. Such a declaration is likely to strengthen Abu Maazen's platform, since it will support his argument that more can be achieved through dialogue than through terrorism. It is especially important to accompany this committed declaration with the opening of the Israeli labor market to the Palestinians; this act too would reinforce positive trends.
- Israel must refrain, to the extent possible, from playing into the hands of extreme fundamentalists and those who *a-priori* reject any move

likely to bring the parties closer together. In practice, this entails ensuring maximal restraint, and refraining from military overreaction, so that the Palestinian public's finger of blame will be pointed at the extremists, as indeed was the case from the second half of 1996 until the outbreak of the current intifada. During that period (1996-2000), senior Hamas leaders lamented their mistake, having both lost public support and unable to confront the power of the Palestinian Authority and its supporters.

- Israel must make an effort to penetrate the internal Palestinian discourse, in order to clarify that she is not interested in the use of force, and that her arsenal of advanced weapons is intended primarily for deterrence, not for use. In other words, Israel must emphasize that she is using these weapons for self defense, in response to provocations on the Palestinian side. Today, most of the Palestinian organizations argue that the firing of mortars and the launching of Kassam missiles are acts of self defense.
- Israel should initiate a process of return to the September 28, 2000 lines, according to a schedule coordinated with the new Palestinian government and subject to security needs. This is a step which has the potential of putting important negotiation cards in the hand of the Palestinian administration, in its public struggle against the Palestinian opposition organizations.

2. Minimizing Strategies. As mentioned, such strategies are intended to place at the top of the agenda a) halting Palestinian terrorism and b) neutralizing the more extreme opposition to the disengagement plan on the Israeli side. These strategies may include:

- The expression of willingness, on Israel's part, to negotiate even with representatives of Hamas, on proviso that they are elected in democratic elections.

- A public commitment by Israel to refrain from “targeted killing” of wanted members of various organizations, if the latter announce the termination of their actions against Israel.
- Highlighting Israel’s expected gains from the implementation of the disengagement plan, including: forging agreements and coordinating with both the American and the new Palestinian administrations, and attaining support from the majority of western countries, and even from some Arab states. Briefly, the signal emitted by this public relations strategy will be that the disengagement from the Gaza strip is a vital interest of Israel, and not a retreat due to armed opposition.
- Stressing the significant difference in the eyes of the Israeli public, between Lebanon on the one hand, and the West Bank and Gaza strip on the other, and the high price which this public is willing to pay in order to avoid the horrors of terrorism from these areas. One must remember that at the beginning of the Intifada, many Palestinians argued that the “weakness” exposed by Israel in Lebanon encouraged, or compelled them to use armed force. This argument, although refuted completely by the might which Israel demonstrated in operation “Defensive Wall” (April 2002), reappears now and again in the context of the disengagement plan.
- Expression of willingness and/or commitment to hold a referendum or elections at the end of the first stage of evacuation. Such a move is likely to neutralize the rage on the part of Israeli opponents of withdrawal, and to channel it to dialogue; on the other hand, the opportunity will not be missed again to rebuild the trust of the Palestinian side, since the Palestinians will be convinced at this point that Israel is actually willing to break the taboo of evacuating settlements.

E. Conclusion

The disengagement plan is a radical move, intended to jolt both Israelis and Palestinians. The plan was formulated and designed during the Arafat era, who ceased being a partner in the eyes of Israel and the U.S., and who gradually lost his status also in the eyes of other countries. Now that this era is over, it is no longer possible to accept former conceptions of the Israeli political scene and its inability to adjust in light of the changing regional political constellation. The design of the disengagement plan is indeed intended to provide solutions for this concern. The present atmosphere at the Palestinian grassroots level, and the character of the new Palestinian leadership, have created a “window of opportunity” which did not previously exist. The disengagement plan can serve as a lever to rebuild trust between Israel and the Palestinians, on the way to a permanent status agreement or any other long term arrangement.