

Israel plan merits support

COMMENTARY

By ARISTOTLE TZIAMPIRIS*

Israel's decision to unilaterally disengage from the Gaza strip and four West Bank settlements is both risky and bold. It is in the international community's best interest to see it succeed. As a member of the United Nations Security Council, NATO and the European Union, Greece should be involved in all relevant international efforts.

According to the disengagement plan, some 7,500 Jewish settlers who possess about 15 percent of the Gaza strip will completely abandon their homes and businesses and be relocated to Israel.

Full sovereignty will be turned over to the 1.3 million Palestinians, most of whom are currently living in conditions of poverty and high unemployment. The only exception to the disengagement is a tiny strip of land — the so called "philadelphia strip" — that constitutes the border between Egypt and Gaza. Israel intends to retain its control in order to stop the smuggling of arms and goods. From an Israeli perspective, disengagement constitutes a controversial and costly policy. Indeed, it is estimated that its implementation will require at least \$1.5 billion (1.24 billion euros) over the next three years. More importantly, though, is that a rift has been created in Israeli society that cuts across party lines. Many vehemently oppose creating a precedent that could perhaps be applied more comprehensively in the future to Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Others see it as a betrayal of Jews living and prospering in Gaza — some for almost four decades, especially since Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is asking for no concessions in return for disengagement.

On the other hand, many Israelis consider the Gaza settlements as untenable in the long run from a security perspective, welcome the creation of a unilateral approach as a possible solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or consider disengagement as a move that has the potential to reinvigorate implementation of the Road Map.

In this author's view, disengagement will prove successful, not when the last Israeli citizen is safely removed from Gaza, but when Gaza prospers both politically and economically.

If disengagement is perceived as a victory for violent extremism, if it exports terrorism to the West Bank and elsewhere, if it leads to economic chaos and endemic high levels of unemployment, or if it weakens moderate Palestinians and brings to power militant extremists, then it will have done a disservice to both the Israeli and Palestinian



A Jewish settler family stands behind Israel police at the Kissufim crossing, outside the Gush Katif settlement bloc, yesterday. Israel forces sealed off all Jewish settlements in Gaza.

societies. It will, furthermore, have a negative impact on efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian dispute which constitutes the key to political developments in the Middle East. It is precisely within this context that the role of the international community assumes significance. First, the international community should acknowledge and endorse Israel's unilateral disengagement at the level of the United Nations Security Council and should further urge the implementation of at least the first phase of the Road Map. Secondly, large-scale and multifaceted aid ought to be offered to the Palestinians on a long-term basis. Assistance ought to go well beyond the completion of a small sea port and an airport in Gaza (projects that, of course, have important economic and symbolic functions). The goal ought to be nothing short of creating a prosperous economy and a flourishing democratic society. The United States, the European Union as well as Arab and developed states should be generous in their assistance (the recent G8 pledge to spend \$3 billion — or 2.48 billion euros — in the next 36 months in order to help shore up a Palestinian state is a positive first step).

Needless to say, all aid has to be conditional upon the renunciation and condemna-

tion of terrorism. NATO could also assume responsibility for guarding the "philadelphia strip." In such a case, Israel's disengagement from the Gaza strip would be complete and Jewish soldiers would not be under constant exposure and threat on territory that is hard to defend.

NATO's awesome military would also help to put an effective end to illegal border activities. Ultimately, NATO's successful but limited involvement in Gaza could create a precedent for the Alliance's further regional involvement on the basis of institutionalized trans-Atlantic complementarity.

Israel's unilateral disengagement from Gaza deserves to succeed by producing benefits for both Israelis and Palestinians, thus propelling forward peace efforts. The international community must not miss this opportunity to assist in a generous and constructive manner.

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