

One Hundred Days After the Elections: Withdrawal from the Withdrawal Plan?

Lars Hänsel / Katharina von Münster

Executive Summary

Israel's one-sided withdrawal from Gaza in the summer of 2005 has brought the country a period of profound changes. The evacuation of Israeli settlements on the West Bank, the historic motherland of *Eretz Israel*, which was initiated by the Sharon administration, constituted for many a breach of a national and religious taboo for which, however, there were reasons. On the one hand, the failure of the Oslo process had destroyed the trust between Israelis and Palestinians; on the other, demographic forecasts had already prognosticated that the Jewish population would lose its numerical majority in the region between the Mediterranean and the Jordan.

After Sharon's retirement from policy, the subject of withdrawal – *Tochnit HaHitkansut* – became the central campaign issue under his successor, Ehud Olmert. Mr Olmert's convergence plan not only envisaged a complete evacuation of the settlements scattered all over the West Bank, but also the integration of all settlements situated close to the border into blocks belonging to Israel.

The withdrawal has also changed the country's party landscape for good. At the end of November 2005, Ariel Sharon announced his resignation from the Likud and the foundation of his own party called Kadima, resulting in the collapse of the Likud. When the 73-year-old retired from politics after an apoplexy in January, Mr Olmert, a former mayor of Jerusalem who was little known until that day, took over the business of government – an administrator who represented a political style which differed greatly from that of the general.

Some days before Sharon's resignation from the Likud, the labour party had already made the trade union leader Amir Peretz its chairman, so that, for the first time, a representative of the Sephardic (Oriental) Jews took over the leadership of a traditionally Ashkenazic- (European) dominated party. At Peretz's request, the ministers of the labour party left the government, which made parliamentary elections inevitable.

The outcome of the elections which were carried out on May 28, 2006 came as a surprise to many. Most of the forecasts made during the election campaign turned out to be wrong, since until the election day itself large numbers of people were still undecided and, moreover, the unexpectedly low election turnout favoured the small parties.

The pensioners' party managed to land a coup, winning seven seats straight away. Its triumph symbolises one of the main concerns of the Israeli population – to tackle questions of social security first and foremost.

From then on, the Knesset consisted of the following parties: Kadima won 29 seats; the labour party, Ha-Avoda, 19; Shas, twelve; Likud, twelve; Yisrael Beytenu, eleven; the National Union/National Religious Party, nine; the pensioners' party, Gil, seven; United Torah Judaism, six; Meretz, five; the United Arab List, four; Hadash, three; and Balad, three as well.

The dominant campaign issues were external and social security. Kadima took up the issue of external security and linked it with the handling of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, although Mr Olmert's concept of one-sided withdrawal met with the approval of a large part of the population at first. As the withdrawal plans grew in scope, the Likud and many settlers saw danger ahead and dark visions of the future confirmed. Only the settlers living on the "right" side of the fence and those who would resettle to the motherland, given appropriate incentives, supported Mr Olmert. The central issue of the labour party – and other parties as well – was the social question, the more so as the publication of a report on poverty in January, according to which one in four Israelis is considered poor, caused lively discussions. The Shas party, which has a special interest in the social concerns of the orthodox Jewish-Sephardic population, and the pensioners' party, whose objective is to increase and secure retirement pay, felt obliged to attend to this issue as well.

Naturally, Mr Olmert's convergence plan was the first subject on the list of the coalition negotiations about forming a new government. Only two of the three possible Kadima coalition partners – the labour party and the pensioners' party – accepted the plan; the Shas voted against it and was subsequently exempted from signing the corresponding article of the agreement. The composition of the cabinet itself came as a surprise: The fact that Peretz was appointed minister of defence and the government no longer includes a representative of the Soviet immigrants made people sit up, as did the fact that in the future, there would be no more settlers' representatives in the ministries for construction and infrastructure. The new government particularly focuses on the social question, next to the subject of withdrawal and the drawing of new borders.

The convergence plan poses difficulties not only in terms of its incorporation in government policy but also in terms of its implementation: Mr Olmert can neither rely on a strong party nor on an assured coalition. The Kadima lacks both a clear party programme and a party infrastructure. It remains to be seen whether Mr Olmert will succeed in keeping his party members on course even in political disputes. Moreover, Mr Olmert cannot expect any further concessions in the matter of withdrawal from his coalition partner, Shas. In the Knesset, he will probably be confronted with considerable opposition from the Right – the Likud and the Yisrael Beytenu. There are no Arab parties within the coalition, even though their support would be especially important should the Knesset vote on the plan.

Furthermore, there is little international support for Mr Olmert's plan: Washington especially demands negotiations with Abu Mazen, London and Paris are not prepared to support the convergence plan publicly in any way, and even the European Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy, Mrs Ferrero-Waldner, rejects – despite a certain amount of praise – Israel's plan to fix its borders unilaterally.

Finally, even in the country itself, support for the one-sided withdrawal dwindles, especially in view of the most recent developments in the Gaza Strip. The head of government's intention to talk to the settlers hardly promises any success. Israeli Arabs consider the plan with mixed feelings, since they fear that it could lead to emphasising the Jewish character of the state of Israel, possibly abetted by the amendment of the Citizenship Act of 2002.

If Ehud Olmert wants to push through his convergence plan, he will first have to tackle other socio-political projects successfully to obtain support for his overall policy. In view of the need to maintain the stability of the coalition, religious questions, for example, would be of importance, since secular-religious differences can be seen in many areas – in the management of the army, in education, in the constitutional question, in the immigration issue, and in the

question of civil marriage. The pressure on the government to take action in this and other problem fields, such as economic policy, is immense.

The implementation of Mr Olmert's plans is impeded not so much by the above-mentioned problems as by current developments in Gaza. The fact that the withdrawal has not been coordinated with the Palestinians is one reason why Israel is still a target for Qassam rockets which, in turn, has led the Israelis to target extremist leaders. When, only a short while ago, rocket fire increased in intensity, the Palestinians began using a new rocket type and, to cap it all, killed two Israeli soldiers and took another one hostage, Israel adopted fiercer measures, including a massive multilevel military action in the Gaza Strip. The success of these measures, i.e. a rocket cease-fire and the release of the abducted soldier, remains in abeyance.

The signs in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict do not point towards its resolution, only towards its management. A foundation of mutual trust as a basic condition for negotiations on both sides is no longer there. The Palestinian side let it be known that negotiations which only focus on the issue of settlement withdrawal are of no interest to it as the power base of both Abu Mazen and Ismael Haniya remains unsettled. In this respect, two developments may be observed that go in opposite directions: On the one hand, Mr Olmert's convergence plan is eroding, and people increasingly understand that long-term stability can only be obtained by negotiations. On the other, the process of finding and building up a representative suitable for negotiating on behalf of the Palestinians is far from complete.

By 2008, its 60th anniversary, Israel wants defined national borders. This objective calls for a successful and wise policy – be it on the basis of Mr Olmert's convergence plan or on another scheme. But even if the withdrawal should become reality, it would require an enormous political, diplomatic, financial, and military effort. And this is exactly what could put the country to a new crucial test.