

Grieving for Gaza

written by David M. Weinberg | 08.08.2025

As we grieve for Israeli victims of Hamas's October 7 raid into Israel, and for Israeli soldiers killed in fighting Hamas, and for Palestinians caught in the crossfire and starved by Hamas, and for the devastation in Israel and Gaza – let's not forget a key cause of the ongoing disaster: Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's 2005 "disengagement" from Gaza and the attendant expulsion of "Gush Katif" settlers from Gaza. What a whopping strategic mistake!

The wrong and wrenching Israeli disengagement – twenty years ago this week – inspired the October 7 massacre. It not only gave Hamas the opportunity to seize control of Gaza and dig attack tunnels and arm itself to the hilt, but it gave Hamas the motivation and confidence that it could crush Israel.

The fact that the supposed Israeli strongman, General Sharon, fled lock-stock-and-barrel from Gaza in the face of Palestinian terrorism and brutally crushed the Israeli "settler" sector, strengthened extremists in Palestinian society and led to collapse of Israeli deterrence.

Sharon's argument – that after leaving Gaza Israel would enjoy overwhelming backing from the world to decisively crush "residual" Palestinian terrorism from Gaza – turned out to be utter nonsense. Until recently, the world never truly supported Israeli military action against the jihadist Palestinian state that emerged in Gaza. And even today many world leaders refuse to recognize the obvious existential threats that any Palestinian state in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza would pose to Israel for the foreseeable future

The bottom line is that those who understood in real time that the Israeli disengagement was bound to be a disaster for Israelis and Palestinians alike – were right. The resilient Right knew that the ravaging of Gush Katif was a deathblow to Zionism and to Israeli security. The levelheaded Left knew that unilateral withdrawal would boost the worst elements in Palestinian society.

If all this was so painfully obvious, why did Sharon obtain real-time support from so many Israelis? The answer I think is that the disengagement initiative was a trenchant exhibition of bleak and vengeful impulses in Israeli politics. It was not really or mainly about peace with the Palestinians (which Sharon certainly did not

believe in), but, alas, about the crushing of Religious Zionism.

Reflect upon this story from miserable August 2005. This happened several days after the violent ejection of Israelis from the magnificent towns of Gush Katif and the ransacking by Palestinians of the spectacular farms and greenhouses that Israel purposefully left behind for Palestinian benefit. I hosted in Israel a group of 14 Canadian newspaper editors. The group met its peers at all Israeli newspapers, including the then-editor-in-chief of *Haaretz*, David Landau.

Mr. Landau was an English gentleman, and to me, always a good colleague. While we were poles apart ideologically, I appreciated his advice and even his support. I knew that my Canadian guests would find him fascinating. But this time, Landau's radical creed got the better of him, and he proceeded to give a lesson in raw Israeli politics to the unsuspecting Canadians.

"You undoubtedly want to know what I think about the disengagement from Gaza," he told the Canucks. "I'll tell you: I think that it was the most important and uplifting thing that has happened in this country in decades! It gives me great hope for the future. I am delighted by the disengagement. But *not* for the reasons you imagine," Landau asserted with a smirk on his face.

"You Canadians probably think that the withdrawal is a fine thing because it ends the Israeli occupation of Gaza," Landau said, toying with the visitors. "But that's not it," he proclaimed, gesticulating with his hand in a dismissive motion. "That's not what makes the disengagement important."

"And you Canadians probably think that the withdrawal is a good thing because the Palestinians now will be able to build a thriving state in Gaza, and show Israel and the world that they can live in peace alongside Israel. But that's not it," Landau again proclaimed, again waving his hand dismissively. "That's not what makes the disengagement important."

"And you probably think that I think the withdrawal is a very good thing because my sons will no longer have to do army duty patrolling the alleyways of Khan Yunis and Jabalya," said Landau. But that's not it," he proclaimed, his hands flicking furiously and derisively. "That's not what makes the disengagement important. In fact, that's really not important at all."

Here Landau turned red in the face. He began banging on the table and bellowing

at full volume. "I'll let you in on a secret: a dirty little secret known only to true Israeli insiders!" he said.

Now screaming: "The reason why the disengagement is so important; the reason why it is so historic a move; the reason why it makes Ariel Sharon into such a great hero; the reason why it fills me with hope for the future - is because we *crushed* Religious Zionism!" Landau barked.

Shocked silence in the room. And then boom, crash, whack - Landau pounded on the table some more. "We *crushed* the Religious Zionist rabbis and settlers! We *destroyed* their Gush Katif towns, and we *smashed* their political power! We *decimated* the Religious Zionist lock-hold on Israeli politics. And now, now, now... Now there may be, finally, true hope for peace!"

Landau then wiped away the saliva that was literally oozing from his mouth. He had completed this bloody baring of his soul.

The Canadian visitors sat dumbfounded. They had come seeking understanding of Israel's strategic environment and of Israel's diplomatic horizons. Instead, they were treated to an acerbic exhibition of the vindictive compulsions that course through Israeli politics.

EVER SINCE THEN, it has been clear to me that a very deep and central motivation of the Left's enthusiasm for the Gaza disengagement indeed was evisceration of the settlement movement and the disembowelment of the Religious Zionist community that largely stands behind it.

This ugly truism was borne out at conferences in 2015 marking the tenth anniversary of the disengagement, held at the Israel Democracy Institute and the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.

None of Sharon's aides who spoke at these conferences - Dov Weissglass, Yisrael Maimon, Amos Yaron and others - could cobble together a convincing diplomatic rationale for the expulsion; any logic that stood the test of time. Nor did they express any remorse, despite the obviously catastrophic security consequences of the unilateral withdrawal.

Intellectual figures like A.B. Yehoshua and Fania Oz-Sulzberger were no better. No regrets, no political repentance, no recalibration of their ragged strategic

worldview.

“The settlers are just a bunch of fanatic right-wing crybabies,” the foul-mouth Israeli media personality Yaron London roared. “So they had to move a few kilometers away, so what? I moved 16 times in my lifetime and never demanded compensation from anyone!”

Then London let the cruel cat out of the bag. “We had to get out from under your strangling grip,” he told former National Religious Party MK and Gush Katif resident Zvi Hendel, with whom he shared a stage. “The domination of Israeli politics and policy by messianic settler forces was much too overwhelming. So we clobbered you, and I am not sorry.”

David Landau could not have said it better. His successor at *Haaretz*, current editor-in-chief Aluf Benn, this week wrote similarly with disdain about the “massive compensation and valuable real estate” that Gush Katif “evacuees” supposedly received. (Not true.) He would like to see a repeat of the disengagement in the West Bank. Ugh.

The morals of the story are clear: Be very skeptical of fallacies about free Palestinians living in peace alongside Israel (unless Israel maintains full control of the entire security envelope) and beware the ruthless resentments in Israel politics. Israel must rebuff international pressures to rush into risky diplomatic gambits, and Israelis must refrain from ruinous internal reprisals.

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