

Owls: Olmert's 'convergence' policy

by [Menachem Klein](#) in the [May 2, 2006](#) issue

By 2010, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert promises, Israel will have a border on the east. “Convergence”—withdrawal from the occupied territories—is the name of the game after the end of “disengagement.” Parties that do not agree to “converge” will not enter the government. It sounds convincing. Who needs the agreement of the Palestinians and the approval of the world when we Israelis alone have been determining the facts on the ground since 1967? The important thing is that the United States is on our side.

According to Olmert, the March 2006 elections were a referendum on his unilateral disengagement plan, and the results give him a green light to implement it. His minister of foreign affairs, Tzipi Livni, went even further, stating that Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas is irrelevant.

Let us assume that the plan is possible, and that it is only Israel and the Americans who determine the political reality. Let us flow with the idea. Is this going to be a regular border, that is, a clear line with walls and fences, beyond which there are no Israeli forces? Absolutely not. The very fact that according to Olmert there is no partner on the Palestinian side obliges the Israeli army and the Israeli General Security Service to be present on the other side of the convergence line.

Conclusion: it is not Israel that is converging, but the settlers. Israeli forces will be present in territories that are defined partly as “enemy territory” and partly as “hostile territory,” which serve as a base for hostile actions and terrorism. The control of the territory and the gathering of intelligence on what is happening there will remain in the hands of Israel.

Olmert also declared that Israel will keep the Jordan Valley as a security strip. Thus we are speaking practically about three border lines: the one with the fences and the wall, across which there will be no settlers but only security forces; the one that separates the Palestinian population from the Jordan Valley; and the exterior one, along the Jordan River. The length of this threefold line is 929 kilometers, three times the length of Israel’s borders on the eve of the Six-Day War in June 1967.

Caught between the wall to the east and the June 4, 1967, border will be 375,000 Palestinians, including 200,000 in East Jerusalem. Only about 5,000 of them are Israeli citizens. Because of its concern to preserve a massive Jewish majority, Israel is unwilling to give full citizenship to such a big number—indeed, more than 10 percent of the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Israel will continue to see them at best as a hostile population that needs to be controlled. In other words, between the wall and the 1967 line Israel will continue to have a Palestinian “other.”

To these main lines must be added secondary lines: the roads that link the Jordan Valley to the territory on which Olmert calls for convergence, and the roads in the Palestinian territories to be used by the forces that control the population and ensure that it does not rise in rebellion or destroy the fences and walls within which it is imprisoned. Every such road separates the Israeli force from hostile territory, and they too are a kind of border.

According to Olmert’s plan, Israel must deter about 2 million Palestinians from rebelling, press the Palestinian Authority to eject the terrorists from its midst and recruit collaborators and informers from its ranks. So it will be necessary to continue with the system of encirclement, closures, checkpoints, arrests for the purpose of intelligence gathering, night raids and assassinations of junior and senior activists.

In other words, the settlements will converge behind the fence, but the military occupation will continue outside it. A certain amount of relief will be given to the Israeli army, because its soldiers will not be obliged to escort settlers to their aerobic dance classes or to evacuate buildings in illegal outposts in the face of resistance from the settlers and their supporters. But in terms of the security burden, nothing substantial will change.

The Palestinians will not reconcile themselves to this situation for long, all the less when ruled by a Hamas government. If Hamas cannot fulfill its election slogan (“In one year of Kassam shelling we achieved what the Fatah could not achieve in ten years of talks”), very few Palestinians will remember its charity and welfare agencies and the integrity of its leaders. Since its inception, Hamas has been attentive to the desires and yearnings of the Palestinian public. It stands to reason that Hamas will continue to heed its public and not ignore Israel’s actions.

The use of advanced technological methods to control the long border lines may produce a certain economy in the manpower enforcing the occupation, but the change will not be dramatic. There will be a need for many army and General Security Service forces to enhance and enforce the occupation. Additional forces will be required to enforce the occupation on the Palestinians who find themselves between the fence and the June 4, 1967, lines. The presence of many security forces in hostile territory and the long border lines will convert every soldier, vehicle and installation into a target for the guerrilla warfare that Palestinian forces will conduct. The tunnels that were dug in the Gaza Strip and the Qassam missiles fired from there before and after the Israeli disengagement exposed the weak points in Israeli superiority. Many more such weak points can be expected in the West Bank, where the length of the border lines that Olmert proposes and the level of friction are much greater than in the Gaza Strip.

Olmert's proposal shows that he did not learn from the experience of unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. The credit column shows the achievement: Israeli soldiers and settlers are not present in the Gaza Strip. The debit column is much longer. Most Israeli and U.S. expectations did not materialize, because the withdrawal was a unilateral process. Unilateralism obliges Israel to employ force in a variety of ways, and that in itself motivates the Palestinians to respond, sometimes with terrorist attacks and sometimes through the ballot box. Thus Israel finds itself in a state of strategic fragmentation.

But it was not only the experience of the withdrawal that failed in Gaza; also the policy of assassinations was a searing failure. Israel assassinated most of the founders and leaders of Hamas and its main activists, but the Palestinian people brought Hamas to power through democratic elections. What was seared into the Palestinian consciousness was the opposite of what Israel wanted. And the U.S. strategy of containment and management of the conflict was shattered with the rise of the Hamas government. The call by Olmert's government for a total boycott of the Hamas government and the public that elected it shows that it understands that it failed on this point. And what solution does Olmert propose? A return to the unilateral path on a much larger scale.

The U.S. faces a similar problem. Since President Clinton tried to use conflict-resolution strategy and failed, George W. Bush hoped to succeed by implementing conflict-management strategy and by supporting Israel in its army operations aiming to contain the intifada flames. Instead of orienting itself to final goals, as the Clinton

administration did at Camp David in 2000, the Bush administration oriented itself toward the “road map,” which is no more than a process policy with a vague end. Now Bush is in trouble. Not only did the sides not begin to implement the road map, but the strategy is severely wounded by Hamas’s coming to power.

Bush’s alliance with Ariel Sharon was based on using massive force and preemptive strikes against terrorism and preferring unilateral acts with which the powerful side can impose its will without the need to negotiate compromises and concessions. In electing Hamas in free and democratic elections—as far as elections under occupation can be free and democratic—the Palestinians voted for a government that promised to resist any Israeli or U.S. unilateral dictate. In short, both the Israeli and Palestinian elections were a referendum on unilateralism.

Israel and the U.S. see eye to eye on the need to internationally isolate Hamas and cause its collapse. They want to achieve this by cutting off all foreign financial aid and launching a political boycott. They prefer using a stick. They do not have a political carrot in their pocket. They do not plan to encourage Hamas to change completely by showing what it can get in exchange.

Israel and the U.S. should challenge Hamas by laying down an attractive political plan. Such a plan already exists, and it enjoys the support of a Palestinian national consensus as well as that of Arab states. Abbas was elected in January 2005 on the ticket of a plan endorsed by Arab League summits—from the April 2002 Beirut summit to the one in Khartoum in March of this year.

The principles of the plan: On the basis of UN Security Council Resolution 242, Israel will withdraw to the June 4, 1967, borders; the Palestinians will establish their independent state, with Arab Jerusalem as its capital; and an agreed-upon and just solution to 1948 Palestinian refugees problem will be found by the sides on the basis of UN General Assembly Resolution 194 of 1949. In exchange, Israel will achieve a full and secure peace not only with Palestine but with the rest of the Arab world.

Armed with Israeli, American and Arab consent to negotiate along these lines, Abbas can approach the Palestinian people and challenge Hamas. If Hamas refuses to swallow and digest this move, it will lose its domestic and Arab support.

But both Israel and the U.S. refuse to move from unilateralism to end-game negotiations. They encourage Abbas to confront Hamas. Unfortunately, without putting in Abbas’s hands a political carrot, they ensure that he will fail, and the next

Palestinian president will be a senior Hamas leader.

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