

Bringing It All Back Home

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On August 15, Israel will begin its withdrawal from Gaza, the first step in Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's vaunted disengagement plan. Israel has pulled out of occupied lands before—most notably from the Sinai—but no other Israeli pullback has aroused such dramatic and fearful speculation. Having exhausted legislative means to block the withdrawal, Gaza's 8,000 settlers and their supporters have threatened every manner of resistance—from staging acts of mass civil disobedience, to encouraging soldiers to refuse orders to evacuate them, to firing on IDF personnel involved in the operation. In short, the Gaza settlers have succeeded in raising the specter of Israel's first civil war.

Israel's security establishment has taken this threat seriously and prepared itself for such a horrific contingency. Fearful that an extremist might attempt to take the life of the Prime Minister, the Israeli government has assigned Sharon a level of protection that the late Yitzhak Rabin would have envied. In the West Bank, the IDF has already started to place settler leaders whom they suspect of plotting terrorist attacks under administrative detention, a procedure normally reserved for Palestinians, not Jews. Because of fear that religious army units might turn into the nuclei of fundamentalist militias, last spring they were ordered disbanded. Equally telling, Israeli police have been discussing the need to protect the Temple Mount from rocket and mortar attacks by settlers, arguing that it will require over 5,000 officers to protect Al-Aksa during the withdrawal.

Such preparations for violent civil conflict between the Israeli state and its citizenry are unprecedented. While Israeli politics has always tolerated a level of fierce political debate without many parallels in the Diaspora, Israel's remarkably diverse political communities did not become so polarized until the commencement of the peace process in the early Nineties. It was only with the 1995 assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin that Israelis began to realize that ongoing conflicts between Right and Left, the religious and the secular, and nationalists versus the peace camp might indeed lead to full-scale inter-Israeli violence.



The ironic value of the Al-Aksa Intifada is that it allowed Israelis to temporarily put aside such differences, however uncomfortably, and collaborate together one last time in defense of their country. Even though the IDF's brutal counter-insurgency campaign had its obvious dissenters—take the refuseniks, for example—the second Palestinian uprising from 2000–2004 allowed Israelis to put off dealing with nearly every significant internal political debate that took place during the affluent and peace-driven 1990s. Pushed aside by the need to mobilize the entirety of Israeli society to deal with the war, questions about the relationship between religion and state, the development of a constitution, civil rights for non-Jewish citizens, and increasing discrepancies between rich and poor were postponed indefinitely.

However, with the death of Yasir Arafat in late 2004, it became increasingly apparent that Israel had won its fifth major war. With suicide bombings at an all time low, prisons overflowing with captured guerrillas, and a new Palestinian leadership waiting in the wings that was willing to cooperate with Israel, it was inevitable that the specter of internal civil unrest put off by the Intifada would reassert itself. Those internal conflicts were exaggerated further by Sharon's decision that now was the time to withdraw from the clearly indefensible settlements in Gaza.

As divisive as Sharon's disengagement plan has been, it has served to align the pragmatists within his own Likud party

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with Israel's parliamentary Left. Leftists who were once harsh critics of Sharon's counterinsurgency policy now hold seats within a Sharon-led Likud/Labor government. However, if it appears that the withdrawal has blurred distinctions between Left and Right, that is only a mirage. Despite personal friendships that transcend party lines—such as that which exists between Sharon and Deputy Prime Minister Shimon Peres—this alliance will only last as long as Sharon needs Israel's Left to support the disengagement.

Even with the coalition government in place, the threat of civil war looms on the horizon. Whatever form Israel's government takes over the coming months, and perhaps years, it remains incumbent on Israel's Left and its growing number of supporters in the Diaspora to begin thinking outside of the box of the withdrawal. The Left must not only begin laying the groundwork for a full withdrawal from the West Bank as well as Gaza, it must begin to address how the internal conflict between religious and secular, settlers and peaceniks, might be avoided. Even though it may be impossible to influence Israeli government policy at this immediate juncture, to paraphrase Antonio Gramsci, if we don't start to cultivate a new common sense about the meaning of this crisis, no new political directions will ever follow. For a country so paralyzed by its inability to resolve its own conflicts—both with the Palestinians and with Jews—any attempt to address these internal issues will indicate that the Left has a sincerely heart-felt desire for political transformation.

The Left's first step should be to really listen to settler threats of civil conflict and take them both seriously and thoughtfully. On the one hand, they must be understood for what they are: direct attacks on the state. On the other, we must read between the lines of such violent rhetoric in order to hear in it the sense of trauma settlers believe they will experience trying to fit themselves back into a society that they reject and that has rejected them. Even if the settlers are brought back peacefully, with no attempt to violently block their evacuation, we must remember that they are coming from a religiously homogenous world of frontier Judaism where rabbis constitute the political leadership, halachic law is considered more important than civil law, and the experience of violence is so commonplace that it will be difficult for former settlers to imagine living life without it. Despite Israeli society's identifiable deficits in all of these areas, integrating people who are accustomed to living in a world as extreme and anti-modern as the settlements will be an enormous challenge.

Because the settlers really do hate modernity, they will be intolerant of the elements of modern political life we take for granted, including civil law, multiculturalism, equality between men and women, and ethnic minorities. And, based on their bitter experience of parliamentary democracy—the kind which *voted* to remove them from their homes—ex-settlers will clearly have problems with democratic political processes. Though settlers will be extremists on such issues, however, they will not be unlike many other constituencies in

Israel that are unhappy with the country's current social and political constitution.

The settlers' difference from the many other groups in Israel and the much larger problem that Israel faces with them is that the settlers are coming from a closed community in which they have always known they are right and everyone else is wrong. An uncomfortable analogy to cultism is in order here. Like the survivors of a utopian commune gone terribly wrong—think Jonestown, or the countless countercultural communities of the 1960s like Philadelphia's Move that devolved into violent millennialist sects—settlers will require their own version of deprogramming. To work, such deprogramming will have to compassionately address—from a uniquely Jewish perspective—how the religious Zionism these persons were indoctrinated with perverted their Judaism, severing it from every caring and humane element within the Jewish tradition itself. In other words, in order to integrate the settlers, Israel will have to develop a process in which Judaism is essentially *re-taught* as a tradition of civility, tolerance, and respect for the Other. In essence, settlers must learn that Judaism can be a religion at home with liberal democracy.

As sentimental as such a proposal might sound, it is the only appropriate cultural framework to begin such a project of reeducation. Why? Because it isolates the religious reason that lured people to settle in the Occupied Territories: *Judaism*. Communicating that we understand the importance of the settlers' faith would reassure them that the evacuation was not an exercise in religious persecution but a political decision made on behalf of preserving the welfare of the entire state of Israel. While it would be impossible to empty the Occupied Territories of their religious significance—even from a liberal Jewish perspective—such an exercise would, over time, prepare the ground for withdrawing from the Occupied Territories in their entirety by reminding the settlers that their faith is stronger than any particular policy decision or piece of ground.

What I am suggesting here intentionally does not speak to the settler's blatant disregard for the humanity of the Palestinians or to the crimes that they committed against the Palestinian people. The Left must be pragmatic. There will be no support in Israel for criminalizing the settlers—the Right, in any case, will quash any such attempts to do so. The demand for justice will come with time. The new mentality we are speaking of—one that reconciles Judaism with the values of liberal democracy—will play an enormous role in that process. And perhaps that understanding of Judaism will help both settlers and the Israelis who live within the Green Line and have suffered through every Arab-Israeli war since 1967, recognize how successive Israeli governments have cynically played the religion card to everyone's detriment: the settlers, residents of Israel, and the Jewish people as a whole.

Zionism can continue to live with Judaism. Just not the settler's kind of Judaism. Because in this instance, it is a synonym for civil war. □