



*No. 37/2005*

## **Can Palestinians manage the Gaza disengagement?<sup>i</sup>**

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With the unilateral Israeli disengagement from the Gaza Strip approaching, there are increasing concerns about the fate of the 1.3 million inhabitants of the territory after the withdrawal. Up to now there has been no clear information given out to Palestinians regarding the actual process of disengagement, and no guidance as to what life in Gaza will be like afterward. Will there be freedom of movement? Will there be safe passage to the West Bank? What will happen to the lands that were occupied by the settlers? Israel still refuses to give the Palestinians vital details related to the disengagement plan, despite the 10 meetings held between the two sides over the past few months.

Palestinians will look for a tangible improvement in their living conditions - unrestricted freedom of movement, an end to violence, the restoration of law and order, an improvement in the economic situation and the renewed possibility of realizing their aspirations to establish a state based on the 1967 borders. There are many questions with no clear answers, but more worryingly, there are doubts on both sides as to whether the Palestinian Authority (PA) can take charge of Gaza.

Although the present Palestinian leadership views violent confrontation as an obstacle to realizing its political aims, its non-implementation of security reforms is liable to lead to ongoing instability. More problematic, however, is the current cease-fire, which in

the absence of viable PA dominance is based solely on the will of the Islamist organizations - Hamas and Islamic Jihad. If the PA's current reluctance to reform continues, its ability to enforce law and order at the Palestinian street level may diminish and clashes might take place between armed groups. Moreover, the worry is that the PA will not succeed in building a well-functioning authority, especially as elections have now been postponed until well after the disengagement, and that chaos will prevail in Gaza.

It is generally believed that PA President Mahmoud Abbas will be unable to carry out necessary reforms and rebuild the security services without the support of the European Union and the United States. Without urgent and massive financial aid from the international community, it will be impossible to improve the Palestinians' economic conditions to the extent and at the pace needed to prevent a re-emergence of frustration.

Around 45,000 Palestinians presently work in Israel, 30,000 of them illegally. The disengagement plan will sharply cut this number - and also the amount of work that factories in the Palestinian territories perform for Israeli companies. All this might deal another serious blow to the PA after years of failure to reduce economic dependency on Israel. This is due to the Palestinian leadership's lack of an economic strategy focused on developing sources of employment. The Palestinian economy, especially its labour market that has remained dependent on Israel, is liable to suffer another severe blow because of the Israeli disengagement.

Although a certain number of work permits will be issued over the next few years to Gazans, this will soon change. On July 6, Amiram Gil wrote in the Israeli daily Haaretz that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plan is for Israel to stop using workers from the Occupied Territories by 2008. This will lead to increased unemployment in Palestinian areas and to a rise in crime, which in turn will have a grave impact on the quality of life of Palestinians. Increased unemployment will also lead to conflicts between the rich and the poor, thus further dividing Palestinian society.

The PA's economic leadership has mainly devoted its efforts to organizing monopolies controlling, among other things, gasoline, flour, sugar, cigarettes, cement and steel. These monopolies made money for the PA and those affiliated with it. In addition, the

PA's economic leadership devoted great efforts to please donor states with projects that were not always properly planned. The PA preferred projects creating symbols of sovereignty and prestige, such as the airport, a power plant and a port in Gaza, as opposed to creating labour opportunities through long-term projects to increase trade and employment.

The result is that the Palestinian labour market has remained largely dependent on the Israeli economy, which will have implications for the situation in Gaza after disengagement, especially if Palestinians are denied access to jobs in Israel. There has been no PA social plan to increase employment and there has been no plan to reduce poverty and ease economic hardship - both likely after disengagement.

The PA also must decide what to do with the land that will return to Palestinian control. The Israeli government has said it would demolish settlers' homes after disengagement. However, the PA must control possible looting and deal with squatters claiming they have a right to evacuated land. Although the PA insists the post-disengagement process will be transparent regarding the redistribution of land, there are concerns that land will be distributed to reward loyalty to the PA. The transparency of the redistribution process will be crucial to the image of the PA in the eyes of Palestinians and the international community.

If the image of corruption is not curbed, support for Hamas and other extremist parties will rise, even among the more secular Palestinians, since they have a cleaner image. Most important, however, will be the threat of increased internal violence in various parts of Gaza due to the weakness of the PA and its institutions. In order to avoid this, the PA must not hesitate to track down the perpetrators of violent actions and bring them to justice. The militias cannot be tolerated and cannot be given a free hand on the streets of Gaza if law and order is to prevail. This will be essential in proving the legitimacy and the capability of the PA to the international community, and thus work to put pressure on the Israeli government to carry out further disengagements in the West Bank.

Internal violence will also prevent Gazans from living normal lives after the disengagement. If social problems such as unemployment and housing are not dealt with urgently, crime and violence will increase, forcing Gazans to live in a continued

state of fear. It is imperative that the soft approach to gun crime and the terrorization of neighbourhoods by armed gangs end and that criminals be put behind bars, not incorporated into the security forces and the police as is currently being done.

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<sup>i</sup> The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Centre for International Political Studies (CIPS)

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