

Disengagement

In August 2005, the State of Israel “disengaged” from the [Gaza Strip](#), removing all Israeli military installations, 25 Israeli [settlements](#) (4 in the West Bank) with over 8,000 residents. The Israel disengagement was unilateral, and was not the result of negotiations with the Palestinians.

The disengagement plan was first proposed in December 2003, by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, a long-time advocate for settlements, in a policy address to the annual Herzlyia Conference. Sharon argued that in the absence of a serious Palestinian peace partner and amidst [ongoing Palestinian terrorism](#), Israel needed to take unilateral steps to ensure its own security and improve conditions on the ground. Sharon stated: “...it is a step Israel will take in the absence of any other option, in order to improve its security.” “The purpose of the disengagement plan is to reduce terrorism as much as possible, and grant Israeli citizens the maximum level of security. The process of disengagement will lead to an improvement in the quality of life, and will help strengthen the Israeli economy.” The plan was approved by Israel’s cabinet in June 2004 and by the Israeli Knesset in October 2004. Mechanisms were put in place to implement the pull-out, including the establishment of a “disengagement authority.”

The disengagement plan required the uprooting and resettlement of 25 Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip and northern West Bank. Many of these settlers had lived in the area for decades and built lives, families and businesses there.

Public opinion polls showed that the majority of Israelis supported the disengagement. Supporters of the plan argued that this painful move was

necessary to protect Israel in the long term. They argued that the cost of protecting 8,000-plus Israelis living in the midst of one million-plus Palestinians was hurting Israel's economy and society. The disengagement would also allow Israel's security apparatus to better protect those West Bank settlements which are more heavily populated, of clearer strategic or historical importance to the State, and likely to be annexed to Israel in a final status agreement with the Palestinians. Finally, they argued that an Israeli presence in the Gaza Strip was always intended to be temporary, and that it was tacitly understood that Israel would give up control of Gaza and uproot its settlements as part of any negotiated final agreement with the Palestinians.

Opponents of the plan argued that Israel was retreating from Gaza "under fire" – that the decision to disengage was a capitulation to Palestinian terrorism, and not in the context of mutually agreed concessions. They argued that this move would be perceived as a show of weakness by the Palestinians and the Arab world, and rather than strengthening Israel's security, would lead to increased threats and attacks in the future. Some opponents rejected the plan because it called for the ceding territory historically significant to Jews. Others were opposed in principle to the very idea of uprooting Jews from their homes.

Opponents of the plan organized large demonstrations in the period leading up to and during the disengagement, and groups traveled to the Gaza settlements where they staged (primarily) non-violent protests against the evacuations.

While initial plans called for an evacuation of all settlements by September 15, the army's operation was much quicker. Moreover, despite predictions of widespread "civil war" and amidst protests and acts of civil disobedience by some settlers and other opponents, the evacuations went remarkably smoothly and civilly. The disengagement officially began on August 17 and by August 22, all settlers had been evacuated from the Gaza Strip. The evacuation of residents of the four settlements in the West Bank was completed by August 23. The Israel Defense Forces officially left Gaza on September 12.

It was hoped that the [Palestinian Authority](#) would ensure a smooth transition of this area to full Palestinian control, and that many structures in the former settlements – including the extensive greenhouses – would be used to benefit Palestinian housing and industry. Indeed, James Wolfensohn, the U.S. special envoy to the Middle East and former president of the World Bank, raised \$14 million in private donations to purchase the greenhouses from their Israeli owners so that Palestinians could take over these profitable enterprises. However, in the immediate aftermath of the Israeli withdrawal, Palestinians entered the former Israeli settlements and burned buildings – including synagogues – and materials from buildings and greenhouses were looted. Some of the greenhouses are operational and there is some building in the settlements for Palestinian industry, educational institutions, and for private housing.

The evacuated settlers were compensated for the loss of their homes and businesses. However, even years later, many have yet to find permanent housing or employment, and among these former Gaza settlers there is much dissatisfaction regarding the Government's assistance and responsiveness to their situation.

While the Israeli military fully withdrew from the Gaza Strip in the disengagement, [Hamas](#)-controlled Gaza (it took over the territory in 2007) represents a serious security challenge to Israel. In response to Hamas terrorist attacks and the launching of thousands of rockets at Israeli population centers, the IDF has conducted military operations (aerially or on the ground) against Hamas in Gaza in 2008/9, 2012 and 2014. Israel and Egypt control the flow of imports into Gaza due to Hamas' misuse and misappropriation of goods for military purposes.