

B474. "Beware the Public Diplomacy Disaster." Forward, (February 25, 2005) p. 7.

The headlines from the Middle East these days are full of optimism. Prime Minister Sharon and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas have been all smiles since this month's summit in Sharm el-Sheikh, and Sunday's Israeli Cabinet approval of the Gaza disengagement plan is being taken as a major step toward finally ending the conflict.

The recent flurry of peace moves is indeed cause for hope, but in the rush to put forward a positive face, Israel appears to be setting itself up for a major public diplomacy disaster. Jerusalem has repeatedly implied that it will accord full sovereignty to Gaza and eventually to a Palestinian state, but security considerations make it clear that Israel will have to maintain some control over these territories.

So it will be that when Israeli troops withdraw from Gaza and the Palestinians fly their flag over it, the world will assume that the Palestinians are free at last to do what all other states are free to do: conduct their own affairs, including controlling their borders. Then, when Israel inevitably interferes with Palestinian sovereignty — say, to intercept a cargo plane full of Hezbollah operatives landing at Gaza's airport or a commercial ship delivering heavy weapons to Gaza's seaport — the world will be aghast.

I have yet to find a single American public leader, pundit or editorial writer who begins to understand this elementary but important fact. True, Israel has long recognized that when it comes to its national security, it cannot go by what opinion makers consider right and true. Moreover, it often has ignored such considerations and been able to proceed quite well, thank you.

However, few in Israel would deny that the costs of flaunting public opinion are considerable. Inasmuch as is possible, then, security measures should be implemented in a way that does not fly directly into the face of what so many public leaders and people hold dear: the sanctity of sovereignty.

Support for sovereignty and the national rights it implies have greatly intensified since the American invasion of Iraq, because many leaders and citizens fear that a lower regard for sovereignty opens the door to more unilateral actions. But for reasons I cannot fathom, Israeli representatives have largely avoided this subject.

When the Israeli ambassador to the United States, Daniel Ayalon, gave a private briefing on the withdrawal recently to a group of opinion leaders, he talked about "leaving Gaza" but did not indicate that Israel would have to retain some control on Gaza's airport and seaport. He did mention in passing that some arrangements would need to be made to secure the border with Egypt, but he left the impression that this could be carried out by the Egyptians or maybe even an international force.

The inadequacy of such an explanation has already been shown by Palestinian security chief Mohammed Dahlan's recent comment that the Gazan-Egyptian border could turn into "another Sheba Farms," the contested plot of land on the Israeli-Syrian-Lebanese border that has long been a flashpoint. A public diplomacy debacle on the issue is not hard to imagine: Weapons continue to be smuggled across the Gazan-Egyptian border, the Israeli military moves in to take action, the Palestinian Authority cries foul, and the world rails against Israel

for broaching Palestinian sovereignty.

One might suggest that these issues be spelled out in a treaty to be made with the P.A. Such arrangements may satisfy lawyers, but they hold little international political currency.

Once Israel turns over control of Gaza or parts of the West Bank to the Palestinians, there is no way I know of to convince the world that Israeli intervention in Palestinian territory — whatever it says on a piece of paper — is justified, unless there are attacks from these quarters on Israel. That the world, and most Palestinians, does not understand that Israeli security requires something less than full autonomy for a Palestinian state, will make including such clauses in any prospective treaty much more difficult.

So, what is to be done? Speeches, press briefings and other public-relation efforts will do little good, although even that much is not being done. Instead, creative thinking is required that will take into account perceptions and not merely legal clauses and facts on the ground.

As but one example: Instead of calling for Israel's right to control air and sea access to Palestinian territory, reference could be made to joint Israeli-Palestinian patrols, deployed not just on the Gaza-Egypt and West Bank-Jordan borders but also at Ben-Gurion airport and the ports in Haifa and Ashdod. And if Israel will have the right to fly over Palestine — which is essential for the Israeli air force — why not grant Palestinians the same right fly over Israel? Then, when Israel enters Palestinian territory to guarantee its security, as all but the most naive observers believe it inevitably will, the world just might believe that the effort is not aimed at eroding Palestinian sovereignty.

I can understand why, during this honeymoon period, no one wants to raise difficult issues. However, if the new marriage between Israelis and Palestinians is to be a stable one, the partners better be more candid with each other — and with everyone else.