

## Framing GABI as GRIT in the Middle East

*By Joshua N. Weiss*  
July 2004

In the past few months much has transpired in the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians. Most of it has continued to be destructive, frustrating, and down right depressing for all involved. So, what does it all mean? Without being coy, it depends on where you sit and why you sit there...in short, it depends on framing.



One action that came as a surprise to many was Israeli Prime Minister Sharon's unilateral declaration of withdrawal from all the settlements in the Gaza Strip and from four small settlements in the northern West Bank. What is Sharon trying to accomplish? Is this a productive act to signal to the other side that the Israelis are getting prepared to negotiate a settlement (AKA GRIT -- Graduated Reduction In Tension) or is it a measure that is designed to exemplify Israel's ability to take unilateral actions that the Palestinians can do little about (AKA GABI -- Grin And Bear It). While those looking at the situation in a larger and more cynical context would say GABI, there may be a usefulness in seeing this action as a GRIT strategy...whether that is the intention or not.[1]

First, a little background. GRIT was developed by Charles Osgood to refer to a gradual de-escalation process in which one side makes a unilateral concession with the hope the other side will do the same. This starts a positive spiral where de-escalation occurs with matched concessions and disarming moves. Is that what Sharon is doing here or is it something different?

He is certainly taking a unilateral action that may ultimately simplify what needs to be negotiated. However, most signs and indicators, including the continued killings, overall dismal relations, security wall, etc..., point to the idea that he is trying to change the facts on the ground prior to a negotiated process. But because perception quickly becomes reality in intractable conflicts, what happens if all the parties, the Israelis, Palestinians, and outsiders (such as the Quartet -- US, UN, EU and Russia) view Israel's actions from the GRIT perspective.[2]

Think this would not happen? Think again. In talks held in the middle of May between US Secretary of State Colin Powell and Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qureia, Powell urged Qureia to "seize the opportunity of a proposed Israeli withdrawal from Gaza as a first step toward statehood next year." When asked about the possibility of the two sides negotiating some future agreement Powell exclaimed "...whatever disappointment existed is behind them, and they can now see the opportunities." So, what are the pros of framing this as a GRIT strategy for the parties involved? Let's take a look at what would happen if the parties involved used the GRIT frame.

From an Israeli perspective the leaders can make a number of claims. First, they can claim to the outsiders that this was a gesture of good will and an effort to jump start a dying negotiation process. This is critical given the role of the Quartet and the US in particular. Second, because Sharon left his larger vision for the situation ambiguous a unique door is open to interpret his actions. Third, Sharon and his group internally sold the move as an act taken now to get something later, which indicates a process of some sort is in the offing. Fourth, Sharon et al also play to their constituents (Israeli populace) in another manner. In a poll published in Yediot Ahronot Daily on May 14th, a strong majority of Israelis showed support for a unilateral withdrawal...with the ultimate goal of a negotiated two state solution. His action can be interpreted fitting into that frame. Fifth, recently Sharon argued that this was territory they knew they would have to give up in a negotiation process so why not just

take the act and get it off the table. Finally, many Palestinians have long believed that Israel was incapable of pulling back from the settlements. This action demonstrates to the Palestinians that Israel is not only capable of pulling back, but willing. For further evidence of this willingness take Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz statement on May 10th, "The decision to establish settlements inside the Gaza Strip was an historical mistake. They are not on the map of interests of the State of Israel."

From a Palestinian perspective, if the Palestinians see this as GRIT, they can take a number of actions and make claims of their own. First, this action by Sharon gives the opportunity to the Palestinian Authority (PA) to make a symbolic reciprocal gesture that might shift the atmosphere ever so slightly back toward the Road Map, which is certainly better than what is happening at the moment. Right now the Palestinians have a very bad BATNA – continued Israeli incursions and killings, continued suicide bombings condemned by most of the world, etc... Second, while pessimists might view this Israeli action as a unilateral show of force, the Palestinians do benefit from having the Israelis pull back in concrete ways. The realization of this benefit came in the form of the PA tacitly endorsing the move...and adding that they want Sharon to make the pullback even greater! Third, with the Israeli withdrawal there will be a day to day reduction in violence – something the PA could take credit for in some fashion if they choose a GRIT frame. Lastly, by viewing this as GRIT and a first step back to a negotiation process with the Israelis the PA can frame this as one concrete step toward a Palestinian state and get on the Quartet's (US, UN, EU and Russia) good side. A side they have not been on for a while now.

Last but certainly not least, from an impact perspective are the outsiders (i.e. The Quartet – most notably the US). First, by framing the Israeli act in terms of GRIT the Quartet can keep the dream of the "road map" alive, which they proposed and have thrown their weight behind. The outsiders have a clear and deep need to save face and this will allow them to do so...at least for the time being. Second, as the war in Iraq continues to plunder into chaos – pushing the West and Arabs into greater tension -- these outsiders need to be seen to be working, at least partially, for Arab causes.

So, given that much of what happens in deeply polarized conflicts is perceptual and based on the side of the fence that you sit, choosing the GRIT frame could actually de-escalate a situation that has suffered from much escalatory rhetoric and action. And framing these ambiguous unilateral actions as GRIT might ever-so-slightly pry open a very tightly shut door.

## **Thanks**

I would like to thank Ehud Eiran, Senior Visiting Fellow at the Program on Negotiation, for his insights and suggestions.

## **End Notes**

1 Even though this plan was put to a Likud Party referendum on May 2nd and failed it seems clear that Sharon will continue along this path in some form. This is particularly the case if it can be framed as a GRIT strategy.

2 I recognize that no sides to the situation are monolithic but I am simplifying for the purposes of this article. The key in peace processes is to keep the middle or moderates believing in the process. What I am stating here takes that into consideration and I also understand extreme elements will do their best to continue to disrupt the process.