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A Peaceful Evacuation: Building a Multi-Project Battalion by Leading Upward

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The Turbulent Birth of the Unilateral Disengagement

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon shocked the entire political spectrum on December 18, 2003, when he announced:

> "...if in a few months the Palestinians still continue to disregard their part in implementing the Road Map, then Israel will initiate the unilateral security step of disengagement from the Palestinians... The Disengagement Plan will include... a change in the deployment of settlements, which will reduce as much as possible the number of Israelis located in the heart of the Palestinian population... This reduction of friction will require the extremely difficult step of changing the deployment of some of the settlements..."

Then, on February 3, 2004, Sharon clarified that the disengagement would primarily be from the Gaza Strip: "It is my intention to carry out an evacuation—sorry, a relocation—of settlements that cause us problems and of places that we will not hold on to anyway in a final settlement, like the Gaza settlements."

Sharon, who was one of the settlement movement's staunchest allies, outraged and alienated many of his right-wing nationalist supporters, while eliciting startled disbelief from his left-wing opponents in Israel. He had been elected on the mandate to protect the settlements, which he described as being "no different from Tel Aviv." He applauded the strategic value of Jewish communities such as Netzarim in the Gaza area, declaring that "the fate of Netzarim is the fate of Jerusalem."

The disengagement plan was indeed divisive. Failing to gain the support of several senior ministers, Sharon agreed that his party would hold a referendum on the plan in advance of a vote by the Israeli Cabinet. Most polls showed approximately 55 percent of party members supporting the plan before the referendum, which was held on May 2, 2004. In the end, more than 60 percent of the voters cast their ballot against the disengagement plan.

Sharon announced that he accepted the referendum results and would take time to consider his steps. However, he and his government largely ignored the results and approved an amended disengagement plan on June 6, 2004. The plan was approved with a 14–7 majority, but only after two ministers were dismissed from the cabinet. The plan that the cabinet approved called for a complete disengagement from the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, including the relocation of all 21 Jewish settlements there, and a limited relocation of four settlements in northern Samaria. Consequent to passing the plan, two additional ministers resigned, leaving the government with a minority in the Parliament, which forced Sharon to later establish a National Unity government. Opponents of the plan and some other ministers called on Sharon to hold a national referendum in order to prove that he had a mandate, which he refused to do.

Polls consistently showed support for the plan in the 55–60 percent range and opposition running around 30–35 percent. However, the people who opposed the plan were much more active in voicing their opinion. For example, on July 25, 2004, the "Human Chain," a

rally of close to 100,000 people, joined forces to protest against the plan and demand a national referendum. The protestors formed a human chain over a distance of 90 km, from the Gaza Strip to the Western Wall in Jerusalem. A couple of months later, about 100,000 people marched in cities throughout Israel to protest the plan under the slogan "100 cities support the settlements in the Gaza Strip."

On September 14, the Israeli cabinet approved a plan to compensate settlers for leaving the Gaza Strip. The compensation plan used a formula based on location, house size, and number of family members, among other factors. The total cost of the compensation package, as approved by the Parliament, for the 8,000 settlers was about $870 million.

On October 11, at the opening of the Parliament winter session, Sharon outlined his plan to start legislation for the disengagement process at the beginning of November. After several rounds of votes and ensuing upheaval in the government over the following six months, the Parliament rejected a bill to delay the implementation of the disengagement plan on March 28, 2005. In June, the Israeli High Court of Justice rejected the appeal of the settlers against the government.

The Systematic Preparations of the Israeli Defense Forces

It was widely expected that the evacuation from the Gaza Strip, which was part of a unilateral withdrawal without any peace treaty, and which involved 8,000 settlers, most of whom were affiliated with right-wing parties, would be met with strong resistance. The traumatic evacuation of Israeli settlements from Sinai 25 years earlier, and in particular the evacuation of the city of Yamit, as agreed upon in the peace treaty with Egypt, is remembered as one of the most sensitive and divisive events in the history of Israel. Even then, when the evacuation was carried out as part of a peace treaty and most of the

settlers were willing to leave peacefully, a violent confrontation still took place between a small minority of the settlers and the soldiers who were sent to evacuate them.

The evacuation from the Gaza Strip was sure to be even more traumatic, despite the government's declaration of the evacuation as a national mission. At the beginning, it was unclear whether the evacuation would be carried out by the police or the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), both of which were reluctant to take responsibility for the mission. The police leadership was simply worried that it lacked sufficient manpower to carry it out. The IDF claimed that its forces were trained to protect the country from its enemies, not to evacuate citizens from their homes. Also, the IDF was worried that the lack of public consensus would not only render the accomplishment of this mission more difficult but might eventually affect its ability to carry out its normal tasks. Eventually, the government decided that the IDF would be responsible for the evacuation with assistance from the police.

At the same time, a parallel civil administrative body was established and tasked with developing both temporary and permanent accommodations for the evacuees while maintaining their community structure; finding and developing new employment opportunities for them; providing psychological assistance to adults and youths; and facilitating the transfer of compensation packages. Unfortunately, the majority of the settlers was firm in the belief that the evacuation would not take place and thus for a long time refused to interact with this new organization.

In late October 2004, the Israeli Parliament formally approved the government's decision. Major General Dan Harel, head of the Southern Command, was put in charge of the mission. He formed a small think tank that began examining the meaning of the decision, including the operational implications for the day after. He invited Lieutenant Colonel Daniel, the chief psychologist of the Southern

Command, to join his small think tank, telling him: "You psychologists have a rare opportunity this time to take front stage and professionally lead a complex military operation."

Daniel conducted searches to locate relevant information on the topic of evacuation to learn from the experience of the past. The two sources that seemed to be most relevant were the evacuation of the French civilian settlements from Algiers in the 1950s and the evacuation of the city of Yamit, which had been the largest Israeli settlement in Sinai. In both cases, it turned out that no preliminary preparations for the evacuations had been carried out, and it became clear that they were not suitable models for the current project. As Daniel commented, "We were forced to act upon our own healthy intuition."

In that spirit, Daniel gathered together the IDF's psychologists one day in November 2004 for a "day of thinking together," with the objective of expressing and listening to their different opinions about the potential problems expected in the evacuation project—an attempt to batten down the hatches. The key question identified during the meeting was how to execute the mission according to the government's guidelines while ensuring that the damage incurred during the evacuation itself, as well as the day after, would be minimal.

Daniel recalls:

> "Due to the complex situation, we were concerned that the emotional burden on the soldiers would be too heavy. On the one hand, over-determination can lead to uncontrolled exertion of force. On the other hand, over-sensitivity might land the soldiers in situations in which they are not able to exert force at all. Our success will be measured by the ability to help people find the correct balance between determination and sensitivity. Following the assembly, I coined the clear and catchy slogan 'with determination and sensitivity,' which became the vision of the entire disengagement."

Many other key issues were identified during the meeting, and following the meeting Daniel distributed a document to the various military entities summarizing the critical aspects of the disengagement project from the psychologists' point of view. The next step involved the establishment of a team of leading psychologists who would help the commanding officers of the various units to combine the operational aspects of the disengagement project with its "softer" aspects.

The IDF's psychology group continued with preparations for the various scenarios, finding that often the greatest concerns were not about the anticipated intensity of the settlers' physical resistance, but rather about the soldiers' ability to withstand heart-rending scenarios that might affect them emotionally and thus compromise their performance. Daniel gave a good analysis of the problem from the military perspective:

> "It seemed to us that it was very important to reinforce the mental capacity of the evacuators, which constituted a critical tier in building the individual's strength as part of the whole. After several weeks of deliberating between several alternatives, we found that the most appropriate solution, from the perspectives of both the evacuees and the evacuators, was to use large concentrated masses of soldiers as an effective means of psychological warfare."

On the one hand, concentrating a large force of soldiers opposite the evacuees might weaken their will and ability to resist. On the other hand, a larger group of evacuating soldiers might minimize the probability of individual deviations on the part of the soldiers.

Thus, the IDF operational plans attempted to amass a huge force. The plan called for the IDF and the Israeli police to amass a force of about 42,000 troops on the ground plus a backup force of 13,000. The 55,000 soldiers would be divided into six circles, each of which would have a different function. The first circle was designated to be inside the settlement responsible for the evacuation. The other five circles would be responsible for supporting the first circle, for stopping

protestors from disrupting the process, and for responding to Palestinian terrorist activities should they occur during the disengagement.

The soldiers operating inside the settlements, who would be performing the most difficult task of evacuating the settlers, would be unarmed and under strict orders not to use violence unless violence was used against them. Thus, they would be allowed to remove the people physically, but not to use violence against them. Due to the need to concentrate so many troops, the army decided that not only combat units would take part in the evacuation, but also soldiers and commanders from rear units and various staff entities.

It was decided that women would be evacuated only by female soldiers or policewomen, so the increased presence of women in the evacuation force was required. The IDF recognized that the task of the female soldiers was likely to be more challenging than that of the men. First, because it was decided that female soldiers who had children would not take part in the evacuation, it was expected that most participants would be rather young and therefore possibly more fragile. Second, as a result of this decision, they would simply be outnumbered by the female population among the settlers. The female soldiers would also have to cope with various unique requirements, especially regarding evacuating mothers and their children. For example, it was strictly forbidden for the female soldiers to separate the children from their mother in such a way that the mother would not see her children or that the children would not see their mother. It was thus clear to the IDF that an additional effort must be invested in the preparation of the female soldiers.

During the first months of 2005, the group of psychologists continued in their efforts to expand and refine the guidelines for the evacuation, often through workshops that prepared the evacuators through practice and at the same time served as a lab for the psychologists. In these workshops, the participants were trained to evacuate children and families from their homes and to cope with the possibility of evacuation under fire and violence on the part of the settlers. Various

scenarios that were expected to take place during the evacuation were practiced, and role playing in which the participants played both the evacuators and the evacuees was performed. It was found that playing the role of the evacuees was effective in helping them to exhibit greater sensitivity and better embrace the required new culture "with determination and sensitivity."

The Fight for the Makeup of the Battalion

It was late April 2005 when Yaron, a Lieutenant Colonel in the Israeli Air Force, was summoned by his commanding officer and asked whether he wanted to volunteer for the evacuation operation as the commander of a battalion. At the time, Yaron led a design engineering unit in the Air Force, though earlier in his career he served as a deputy battalion commander in the Paratroopers.

Yaron, who perceived it as a personal challenge, immediately responded favorably and one week later was informed that the Air Force Commander had approved his appointment.

On May 10, the Brigade Commander convened a forum where Yaron first learned that his manpower would be coming from three very large Air Force dispatching bases, each one hosting a large variety of units. He also learned that the forces designed to take part in the evacuation would be composed of two divisions, each made up of two brigades, which were in turn comprised of three battalions each. His battalion would be one of the three battalions of the Air Force's Blue Brigade.

When Yaron learned that he would have to build his battalion from scratch, he got to work immediately. The battalion would eventually be composed of 700 people, including 3 evacuating companies and 1 company serving the day-to-day needs of the battalion. Each evacuating company included four platoons, and each platoon was composed of two squads. According to the plan developed by the

IDF, it would be the responsibility of the individual squad, composed of a commander, 12 male soldiers, 4 female soldiers, and 1 policeman, to approach each house and evacuate its inhabitants.

The battalion staff included officers and senior NCOs from a variety of Air Force positions: staff personnel, mechanics, engineers, pilots, anti-aircraft personnel, and so on. Although the process of placing people at the different levels of the battalion (squads, platoons, and companies) was being implemented, Yaron encouraged the battalion's company commanders to initiate ongoing meetings with their soldiers. Because they all continued to serve in their dispatching units in their original capacities, these meetings took place twice a week in various formats whenever the soldiers had time off from their ongoing activities.

Yaron describes the commonly held assumptions by the top commanders of the Blue Brigade regarding their mission:

> "First, it was assumed that while our task as evacuators might be difficult, all of the hard decisions had already been made by the government and the IDF Southern Command. Second, it was assumed that our only task leading up to the actual evacuation was to build and prepare the three new battalions. Third, it was assumed that by following the training and operational guidelines prepared by the Southern Command and its psychologists, we would be able to prepare the new battalions without encountering too many difficulties or surprises. The difficulties and surprises, it was assumed, would emerge only once the evacuation had been started. Unfortunately, the upcoming events forced me to rethink the validity of each of these three assumptions."

The first surprise encountered by Yaron was that of the behavior among some top officers in the Air Force. On May 17, 2005, he was invited to give a presentation about the mission to the officers of the Blue Brigade. One of those officers did not like what he heard, so he reacted by sending a lengthy email to a Brigadier General, one of

the top leaders in the Air Force, complaining about Yaron's choice of words and overall attitude to the evacuation mission. Among other things, the officer said: "The fact that we are IDF officers in the first circle is not a source of pride, as can be deduced from the battalion commander's words, but a constraint due to a shortage of police troops." He also rejected the statement that the evacuation is a "highly valued mission," claiming that "it might be deduced that the expulsion of Jews from their homes has become a highly valued mission."

Yaron was shocked by the email message:

> "I was convinced that my lecture was very appropriate and the feedback I received directly following the meeting was very positive. I began to realize the complexity of the mission and the way in which the message that I am trying to impart might be misunderstood because of the listener's perception. Most importantly, we are expecting our soldiers to be 'determined and sensitive,' yet here I was not being sensitive enough. Still, I was disturbed by the fact that the Brigadier general, who conveyed the message to me, was not interested in understanding my point of view, and it caused me to start reflecting on the commitment of some of my superiors."

Unfortunately, soon enough Yaron was surprised by the behavior of other top officers in the Air Force, this time the commanders of the dispatching units. Yaron found that the quality and motivation of certain staff being assigned to the mission fell far short of meeting his needs, primarily because of the poor selection process adopted by some of the dispatchers. Yaron made immediate inquiries with the commanders of the dispatching units, who were mostly colonels, through face-to-face meetings, telephone calls, and email communications. Although he found that a few of them acted the way he expected by identifying the most suitable people and encouraging them to volunteer, the majority did not do so, either because they were not convinced that the evacuation was a crucial mission or simply because they did not want to detract from their ongoing operations by spending energy on it.

Major David, who served as one of the squad leaders in the battalion, describes the process of allocating soldiers as random and unstructured:

> "Though some of the soldiers volunteered for the mission, most did not. Only in a small proportion of cases was the process defined according to any criteria. Most of the soldiers, who were chosen largely by drawing lots or by the commanders' arbitrary decisions, did not want to participate in the evacuation mission. The 'fish in the net' syndrome very aptly describes their situation, and they invested a great deal of energy in attempts to be relieved from duty. It was not uncommon to hear 'Why me?' 'What am I doing here?' 'How can I get out of this?'"

Likewise, it did not take long for Major Ilan, one of the company commanders recruited to the battalion, to conclude: "The more I understood the task and the more familiar I became with the people who were put at my disposal, the more concerned I became about the company's ability to execute this problematic mission. I kept asking myself how I could execute the mission with career soldiers who lacked suitable motivation and skills."

Yaron concluded that training the soldiers who he had on hand would not be enough for a successful mission and decided that he must first make an effort to persuade the commanders of the dispatching units to send him their most suitable recruits. He asked his company commanders and platoon commanders to immediately identify those people who were unsuitable for the mission and act to have them removed from the battalion. Yaron then approached the commanders of the dispatching units demanding more qualified people. The responses were disappointing, so Yaron requested an immediate meeting with a Brigadier general and reported to him that: "Without the personal involvement and commitment to the mission on the part of the commanders of the dispatching units, we have no chance of succeeding." During that meeting, the Brigadier general gave Yaron his personal cell phone number and his permission to call

him whenever Yaron saw fit. Yaron's reaction was that: "I finally felt direct openness and communication between the senior commander and his subordinates. It was a very good feeling."

The next day, the Brigadier general sent an important email message to the Air Force's senior commanders in which he instructed them to give the battalion's tasks "priority and total preference over any other task required by any other entity." The impact of this email was quite significant. This time the response from the dispatching units was more favorable, and the battalion was able to replace many of the unsuitable soldiers.

While attempting to change the composition of the manpower of his battalion by managing his superiors, Yaron and his commanders were also focusing on all the routine operations required to prepare the new battalion. The officers continued with practice simulations of possible evacuation scenarios, using training kits and teams of instructors to boost the knowledge and self-confidence of both the troops and the commanders.

First Lieutenant Benjamin, who served as a squad leader in Major Ilan's company, describes some of the preparations being made by the company:

> "We are practicing a great variety of situations—how to remove a crying child from a house, how to separate a mother from her infant son, how to treat people who are eating their last breakfast at home. We are trying to formulate prepared responses but are heading toward the unknown, knowing there will be things that we will have to deal with in the field."

One of the platoon meetings included an exercise in which each soldier was asked to describe the most serious event that he thought might take place during the evacuation. The other soldiers were asked to respond to the speaker and to assess the probability that his concerns would come true. According to Major David, "This discussion contributed to the coordination of expectations in the platoon. Each

person had to open up and speak freely about his fears and concerns, which constituted another step in the internalization process."

The battalion's group of commanders gradually came together through joint dinners, tours of the Gaza Strip settlements to familiarize themselves with the arena, and meetings in an open and free atmosphere where everyone was invited to listen and voice their thoughts and opinions. All of these contributed to raising the morale and fostering a sense of belonging among the battalion's commanders. On May 31, 2005, all of the battalion's soldiers and commanders gathered for the first time at a resort in Ashkelon for a special event: the formal establishment of the battalion. The event's primary objective was to introduce the soldiers to the battalion's various commanders and functions.

A few days later, the company commanders conducted a preliminary tour in the Elei Sinai area. The objective of the tour was to become more closely acquainted with the settlement, which was assigned to the battalion for evacuation. During the tour, a surprising encounter took place between the battalion's commanders and two of the settlers. As Yaron describes:

> "During the tour, two scowling settlers approached us. One introduced himself as the settlement's security coordinator, and the other one was Arik Harpaz, the father of a girl who had been murdered by terrorists along with her friend two years earlier in the settlement. He seemed angry and emotional and refused to shake my hand: 'I am not willing to shake the hand of an enemy who is coming to evict me from land that is saturated with Liron's blood and from her room that is full of memories. I cannot understand how you are willing as IDF soldiers to evict Jews from their land.'"

Yaron tried to communicate with him, but to no avail. At some stage, the father revealed a gun that was tucked in his belt and said, "I don't know how I will act during the evacuation. I prefer to give up my private gun for fear that I will do something foolish."

The icy conversation "defrosted" a bit when Yaron and Arik shared memories from their military past and together visited the memorial that Arik had erected at the site of his daughter's and her friend's murder. At the end of this emotional meeting, the men shook hands with a feeling that there was a place for some hope. Yet, two seemingly contradictory comments that Arik made just before they parted were cause for concern.

His first comment was: "I admit that the political level 'duped' us by sending the army rather than the police. We will never raise a hand against soldiers. When the evacuating troops come to us, my family and I will hold a ceremony at Liron's memorial following which we will quietly evacuate the settlement."

His second comment was: "I want you to tell your soldiers that we are not the enemy... I understand that you received an order to evacuate... I expect you not to bring soldiers here who come to this mission with joy and enthusiasm. Such soldiers must not be here; otherwise, there will be violence."

Yaron recalls:

> "This was the first time I fully understood the meaning of 'with determination and sensitivity,' even though I've used the term countless times during the last month. It struck me like a lightning bolt. Suddenly I understood it all. In each house, behind each door, my people may find an 'Arik'—someone who does not want to raise a hand against a soldier, and at the same time, someone who might use his gun if he perceives the soldiers as being too enthusiastic. The leader of the squad is the only person who can ensure that at each encounter, at each door, there will not be any misunderstanding, and that the squad will be able to cope in the event that there is such a misunderstanding. Only following the encounter with Arik did I really comprehend its meaning for us. Most importantly, I realized how difficult it is to train people to exhibit this behavior in the kind of chaotic situations that we were anticipating. It is nearly

> impossible to develop the capability for such balanced behavior in two months or even in two years. For these situations, you simply need people with proven leadership capabilities whose skills and attitudes have been developed through a lengthy process of selection, training, and experience."

Yaron explained that he could have a successful operation with soldiers of average quality, but not with squad leaders of average quality:

> "For my battalion, at the current stage, the key to achieving a peaceful evacuation is the leaders of the squads. I have 24 squads in my battalion, and the success of the evacuation is dependent on the quality of the leadership of each one. They should be able to quickly 'read' each new situation and demonstrate the appropriate response to accommodate both the evacuees in front of them and their own squad behind them. Each one of these squad leaders should be capable of functioning like an independent project manager for each new house they are about to evacuate. I realized that although everybody views me as the commander of a battalion, I would be functioning primarily as the head of a multi-project organization during the evacuation itself."

Given that anticipated role, Yaron immediately started focusing on recruiting the best possible junior commanders, the squad leaders. He started another campaign, this time asking to replace many of the senior NCOs who currently headed his squads with experienced officers, and he asked for Captains and preferably Majors. One more time, the first responses from the top commanders were disappointing. Yet, Yaron persisted and was eventually able to communicate directly with the Air Force Commander, a Major general, and to get his complete support for his request. Toward the end of June 2005, about six weeks after the May 10 meeting with the Commander of the Blue Brigade, Yaron finally felt satisfied with the makeup of his battalion and was ready to focus on the training.

The Speedy Implementation of the Evacuation

The training, which took place primarily according to platoons or squads, was conducted only twice a week, because most soldiers continued with their regular activities at their dispatching bases. On June 28, the first exercise of the entire battalion took place. The objectives of the training were to enhance acquaintance and team-building, as well as to hold lectures and simulations on negotiations and communications. The soldiers were divided up into squads, with one squad simulating the evacuators and the other playing the role of the evacuees. Every half an hour, the squads switched roles. A film was shown, which documented the moving encounter with Arik Harpaz. At the end of the exercise, Yaron gave the participants a formal letter of appointment to the battalion and a book with a personal inscription.

On July 1, six weeks before the evacuation date, the battalion commanders and their spouses gathered at Yaron's house for an evening of acquaintance and team-building. Two days later, an R&R day was organized for all of the battalion's soldiers. All soldiers and commanders were scheduled to leave their dispatching bases on July 25 for six weeks.

At that point, Yaron found himself attempting to fulfill a variety of roles. For his superiors in the Blue Brigade, he was a member of the planning team; for the commanders in his battalion, he was the facilitator of planning and training; for his soldiers (who are not used to field conditions), he was the chief supplier, making sure that when they arrive in late July, their clothing, boots, field accommodations, and food supply will be appropriate; for some of the Air Force commanders of the dispatching units, on whom he was now dependent for the supplies, he was the persistent nagger; whereas for the settlers, he was the government.

Prior to the onset of the evacuation, the soldiers had to cope with a string of demonstrations. This time the demonstrations had

a very clear operational aim: to stop the disengagement by getting tens of thousands of people into the settlements to make it impossible to remove the settlers. The first and the most crucial event took place in the small Israeli village of Kfar Maimon, just outside the Gaza Strip, on July 19, 2005. About 20,000 Israeli soldiers and police troops formed a massive human wall to prevent the 40,000 protesters from penetrating into the Gaza Strip. For three days, the tense standoff continued, after which the protesters finally left.

No violence erupted over the course of those three days, but it was tough for most of the soldiers, as one of them describes it:

> "They called us from home, without any early warning, when we did not expect it... we were not prepared to cope with the mundane difficulties of this task, just standing, sitting, eating, sleeping... it was hot and we were not used to the improvised hygiene conditions in the field... and most importantly, we did not fully understand our task until it was over."

Another soldier reported:

> "The platoon commander briefed us and announced that we were part of the 'sixth circle.' We were not familiar with this terminology, and in any case we did not know what it was about. We were surprised, since we were prepared for evacuating people from homes and not for blocking demonstrations. I had grown accustomed in recent days to tasks that were unclear until the moment of their execution, and we called this phenomenon 'the kingdom of uncertainty.'"

On July 27, all of the brigade soldiers were taken for a concentrated training exercise that was defined as the final training in preparation for the onset of the disengagement operation. The exercise was planned to last three weeks and was supposed to simulate the entire course of the evacuation itself, which was also scheduled to last three weeks. All of the troops were supposed to remain in the field without leave throughout the whole exercise.

The commanders of the platoons and the squads practiced behaviors under harsh conditions and various scenarios, such as the abduction of soldiers by settlers, the breaching of houses in which settlers are holed up, negotiations with evacuees, and the encircling of areas using a closed human chain. Daily seminars were held in the field on various issues, with lectures by legal experts, psychologists, and sociologists. The troops also watched professional actors perform simulations of different evacuation scenarios after having received professional guidance from negotiation experts.

On August 3, Yaron's battalion was rushed to a demonstration similar to that of Kfar Maimon but smaller in scope. The battalion was deployed along the roads as a living chain together with police and border police troops. On the next day, the battalion was rushed to yet another demonstration. Although the Gaza Strip had been officially closed to nonresidents since July 13, and although the IDF and the police were largely successful in blocking the attempts to get through, there were an estimated several thousand youth who were able to infiltrate into the Gaza Strip prior to and following the closure.

Following the failed attempt to flood the settlements with tens of thousands of people through the Kfar Maimon demonstration, messages reached the IDF that some families in the Gaza Strip were willing to be evacuated from their homes voluntarily, provided they received a formal request from the State. The IDF decided to postpone the compulsory evacuation by two days and to carry out an interim operation (code name "giving brothers a hand") whose objective was to convince the settlers to evacuate their homes voluntarily. The operation turned out to be successful. IDF officers helped the settlers who chose to evacuate by packing their belongings and carrying them. The voluntary evacuation continued after midnight on August 17 for settlers who requested a time extension to pack their belongings. Afterward, some of the evacuated settlers called the commanders who had participated in the evacuation and thanked them for the sensitivity that had accompanied the process.

Despite the peaceful nature of the voluntary evacuation, Yaron still had his doubts about what was to come:

> "Following the success of the voluntary evacuation, some people thought that the rest of the evacuation would also be very smooth. I was not so confident. I could not easily dismiss other possible outcomes. A few days earlier, I had met with the Deputy Commander of my Brigade, a Colonel who had been in charge of the evacuation of settlers from the Gilad Farm, an unauthorized outpost in the West Bank, several years ago. He described the thorough preparations that his troops had undergone, the difficulties they had encountered, and the lessons he had learned. I was fully aware that in the Gilad Farm case, the settlers had been ready to fight, violently if necessary. Yet, I could not forget the numbers. During the first day of the operation, there were already 140 wounded soldiers, none very seriously, but nevertheless wounded. Although my battalion was not going to face unauthorized settlements, we had no idea how many of the illegal infiltrators might have come from places like the Gilad Farm. We could not forget that what we saw as an evacuation, the residents of the settlements saw as an expulsion. Thus, I made all my commanders aware of the need to stay vigilant."

The day of the onset of the forced evacuation finally arrived on August 17. The entire country was tense. The radio and TV news broadcasts went live, and media representatives from Israel and abroad were everywhere. Major David recalls:

> "It was a heavy feeling of responsibility—an entire nation had its eyes on us. The words of one of the settlers especially became engraved in my head: 'everyone, evacuators and evacuees, must leave here with a scar so that we never forget what happened here.' At the beginning, I felt that this attitude was in sharp contrast to our approach that no one should leave even with a small scratch. But then I realized that we were focusing only on the

> immediate physical damage, while the settler was referring to the long-term psychological consequences. Now I believe that we were both right."

Yaron recounts:

> "We began passing between the houses, listening to families... the settlement was in a state of great sadness, families sat on the ground like in mourning and wept. The scene was not easy, but we tried to exhibit a lot of patience. I went around monitoring closely a few of the more difficult cases throughout the day and felt very proud of my people. I felt that the squad and platoon leaders were well prepared and really did not need my intervention."

The first day of evacuation went by quite peacefully. At the end of the day, all of the settlers gathered in the settlement's synagogue for one last prayer. It was a difficult sight, with evacuators and evacuees crying bitterly as one. The national hymn closed the ceremony, and everyone boarded the buses in an orderly fashion. Last-minute searches were performed before leaving the settlement.

At the end of each day, Yaron met with his commanders for a debriefing session to discuss the difficulties they had encountered during the day and the solutions they had implemented, to draw conclusions, and to prepare for the next day. Overall, it was widely agreed upon that they were meeting with less violence than expected. Although most residents had eventually agreed to be escorted out by the soldiers, there were some cases in which the troops had to enter the houses and carry out the family members one by one, four soldiers to a person at times, with the settlers screaming and sobbing.

The overall sequence by which the settlements were evacuated was based on the "small wins" principle, according to which the IDF progressed from the easy targets to the difficult ones. In a few settlements, outside Yaron's "jurisdiction," the infiltrators clashed violently

with the soldiers. The worst confrontation took place on the roof of the Kefar Darom synagogue. After hours of talks, police officers were hoisted by crane onto the roof, where they were attacked by dozens of youths. About a dozen policemen had to be hospitalized after acid was thrown at them. Police arrested dozens of teenagers.

On August 22, the last settlement, Netzarim, was evacuated. This officially marked the end of the 35-year-long presence of Israeli settlers in the Gaza Strip. The evacuation of the settlement was successfully accomplished within one week instead of the allocated three weeks. Yaron's superiors, both at the brigade and the division levels, were pleased with the performance of his battalion.

Yaron recounts a moving moment:

> "On the last day of our mission, we arrived at Elei Sinai to evacuate the last settlement. I went to Arik Harpaz's home. The stone from his daughter's memorial and the olive tree planted alongside it had spent the last few days in Arik's trailer, waiting to leave Gaza with him at any moment. Arik hugged me and commended us on the way we had acted in his personal case. I realized then that throughout the last several months, I had been preoccupied with the important role of leadership on our side—leadership at the national, Air Force, battalion, and squad levels. I had completely missed the crucial role of the leadership of the settlers. We had fought a tactical war: the evacuation of the settlers from the Gaza Strip. The IDF is stronger, and so we won the war. However, at the same time, we had been fighting a more difficult war and a more important, strategic one: making sure that the evacuation would be completed peacefully so that as a nation, we would emerge from it stronger. In this war, we both won."