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In a major victory for Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, the Israeli Knesset voted today to approve his Gaza withdrawal plan and vacate all settlements from the Gaza Strip and some from the West Bank by next year.

The vote, 67-45 with seven abstentions, marked the first time the Knesset has authorized the removal of any Jewish settlements. Sharon won with the help of leftist opposition parties, including Labor and Shinui. Many members of Sharon's own Likud coalition, as well as religious parties, voted against the plan.

Two powerful Likud politicians, Education Minister Limor Livnat and Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, at first threatened to abstain, but then struck a compromise deal in which a referendum vote on the pullout plan would need to be held at a later date or both would quit the government. Both then voted in favor of the plan.

"The Knesset has decided by a majority vote and the decision binds us all," Speaker Reuven Rivlin said after the vote.

Sharon said this week he would fire any minister who votes against his plan to remove all Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip and four from the northern West Bank.