

Mediating Gaza:

Dennis Ross's Plan

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Last year I gave a speech in Gaza and told my audience that the upcoming Israeli withdrawal from Gaza was both a challenge and an opportunity for the Palestinian people. A challenge because they would have to be able to govern themselves and bring order to Gaza once Israel had departed; an opportunity because if they showed the world and the Israeli public that they could govern themselves and fulfill security responsibilities, there would be a compelling argument that what was done and working in Gaza should also now be done in the West Bank. But, as I added, if you fail, even the strongest defenders of the Palestinian cause would have a hard time arguing that a failed model of violence and chaos in Gaza should also be applied to the West Bank.

Paradoxically, a Palestinian failure was never going to be an Israeli success. For those in Israel who thought unilateral disengagement was the answer to Israel's future, there was always going to be the reality that if Gaza devolved into chaos, it would be hard to build a barrier high enough to insulate Israel from it. With Qassam rockets now reaching not just the Israeli border town of Sderot but the port city of Ashkelon, the Israeli army is now back in Gaza carving out a security zone designed to deny Hamas and the others who fire the rockets the ability to strike Israeli territory.

One unmistakable lesson from the past is that the Israeli disengagement always needed to take the Palestinians into account. Agreements on security for access arrangements at all crossing points needed to be worked out prior to the Israeli withdrawal. Only in this way would commerce have flowed into and out of Gaza through Israeli crossing points where most trade with Gaza and the outside world is conducted. With Israel having confidence on the security arrangements, the Palestinian economy in Gaza could have developed and donor assistance which was slow to materialize might have enabled life to get better not worse after Israeli withdrawal.

But the Israeli withdrawal also needed to be tied to Palestinian assumption of security responsibilities -- absent a demonstrated readiness to assume these obligations in advance guaranteed that the Israeli withdrawal would amount to throwing the keys over the fence and hoping for the best in Gaza. Unfortunately, what we have seen is the worst.

Failings in Gaza and elsewhere ensured the election of a Hamas-led government. And Hamas remains more committed to "resistance" than to governing. We see it now. The Hamas-built tunnel that was used in the attack and kidnapping of Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit, took several months to build. For those who say Hamas wasn't given a chance, the tunnel itself shows that Hamas never intended to give up resistance.

And here is one other paradox in the current situation. Hamas which supposedly opposes Israeli occupation has now brought about a reoccupation of a part of Gaza. Israel may not want to be there, but cannot easily depart if rockets will again hit Israel.

So what can be done now to end the current crisis and pave the way for a more hopeful future? First, Abu Mazen, the President of the Palestinian Authority is going to have to declare in the coming weeks a state of emergency for Palestinians and the establishment of an emergency government -- with no members of Hamas or Fatah in it. He will have to say that he is assuming the responsibility to meet the acute needs of the Palestinian people. As I heard last week in conversations with countless Palestinians, the loss of donor assistance, the inability to pay salaries, the loss of governmental functions was imposing an incredible hardship and something had to be done. In such circumstances, Hamas will not want to look like it is blocking what is desperately needed by the Palestinian public. Should Fatah not be a part of the government and Abu Mazen declare that elections would be held in one year both for the legislative council and his office, no one could claim that he was pre-empting the democratic process.

Second, once such a government is established without Hamas, the international donors should put together an emergency package of assistance to permit this new government to deliver and show it is functioning and responding to needs

Third, Abu Mazen must also finally decide to put together a credible security force that is professionally led and answerable to him and the emergency government. The force must be responsible for law and order. While it won't materialize over night, such a force has always been possible if he personally invested in it and appointed a credible leader for it.

Fourth, assuming the first three steps are being adopted and implemented, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert should negotiate a package of understandings with Abu Mazen. Those understandings would include a comprehensive ceasefire, involving not just an end to the rocket fire out of Gaza but a cessation of all attacks against Israelis everywhere. In return, Israel would withdraw from Gaza, end targeted killings, stop incursions and making arrests. Cpl. Shalit would be released and some meaningful number of Palestinian prisoners would also be released in phases to ensure no violations. Should Hamas or others violate the understandings they would jeopardize the releases.

Fifth, the UN Security Council would adopt a resolution as Israel withdrew from Gaza declaring that Israel was now out of Gaza and that any rocket fire from Gaza into Israel must cease once and for all. Much like after the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, the international community needs to go on record making it clear that there is now a border between Gaza and Israel and Palestinian attacks from there are seen as illegitimate.

Sixth, the US, Saudi Arabia and others need to put pressure on Bashar Assad to make sure that the Hamas leaders in Damascus do not prevent the foregoing from emerging.

None of these steps will be easy to achieve. But one thing is for sure: absent this kind of an effort, Israel will be in Gaza for a long time to come, deterioration will be the order of the day, life will get increasingly worse for Palestinians and further Israeli withdrawals from the West Bank will not be possible.

Dennis Ross is counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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