

Lending a Helping Hand

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Ehud Olmert's first visit to Washington as Israel's prime minister may not produce dramatic announcements, but a lot will be riding on his private conversations with President Bush. Olmert will be presenting his concept of "consolidation," which, if implemented, could lead to Israel's evacuating more than 60,000 settlers from 72 settlements and giving up Israeli claims to over 90 percent of the West Bank.

Turning the concept into a plan will be no easy task. Disengagement from the West Bank would be vastly more difficult than leaving Gaza: Not only will nearly eight times the number of settlers be involved, but the withdrawal would touch the biblical heartland of the Jewish people. Olmert must get something for this. Believing that he can get nothing from the Palestinians, given the reality of a Hamas-led Palestinian Authority, Olmert will look for what Washington can provide for Israel in terms of recognition of a new border, financial help for the high costs of relocating settlers and settlements, and international acceptance of what Israel will do.

None of what the new Israeli prime minister seeks from the administration will be easy. And yet, with the right kind of statecraft, the president and secretary of state may be able to turn the Olmert concept into a historic move that makes an eventual two-state solution possible. By the same token, a passive response or an inadequate effort may spell the end of the consolidation idea, or worse, its application in a way that produces a new baseline for Israeli-Palestinian confrontation.

Questions

To prevent such an outcome, the administration needs to work along several different paths. First, before accepting that nothing is possible with the Palestinians, President Bush should tell Olmert that he is prepared to test whether negotiations could still work with the Palestinians. To that end, he would approach President Mahmoud Abbas with two tasks that would create the environment necessary for negotiations and demonstrate that Palestinians are

capable of delivering: Abbas would assume the responsibility for ending the daily rocket fire out of Gaza, and Hamas would prevent Islamic Jihad and others from carrying out attacks against Israelis, which they continue to countenance, notwithstanding their commitment to a so-called calm. If both meet these tasks, we will push for direct negotiations. If neither performs, we will announce that "consolidation" is the only game in town. (If only Abbas makes a serious effort, we will engage in parallel discussions with him. The Abbas route is a long shot, however, given his past problems in delivering security and the fact that Olmert requires fast action to prevent the dissolution of his coalition.)

Second, in order to ensure that the consolidation idea doesn't foreclose the prospects for an eventual final-status agreement, many questions will have to be answered. Will the route of the border divide Palestinians from Israelis -- the real logic of disengagement -- or divide Palestinians from Palestinians? Will the proposed route impose economic and humanitarian hardships on Palestinians, and will it allow the creation of a territorially contiguous Palestinian state in the future? Will the evacuation involve only settlers or settlers and the Israeli Defense Forces? Clearly, if Palestinians won't stop rocket fire out of Gaza, it's hard to believe they will do so in the West Bank, which is far more dangerous given its proximity to Israeli cities and communities. What is the timing and sequence of Israeli plans for evacuating, and how would violence affect their implementation? The more the administration believes it can get acceptable answers on these and other questions, the more it is likely to be able to mobilize greater international support for the Olmert idea.

Third, international reaction will also be affected by what's going on with the Palestinians. Cutting off the Hamas-led government, which remains committed to its ideology of rejection, is the right policy but can be sustainable with the donor community only if there is also a plan for preserving assistance to the Palestinian society. International donors seem poised to let Hamas off the hook if the PA moves toward collapse and the Palestinian people face a real crisis. With this in mind, the administration should develop with the Israelis and the donor community three alternative mechanisms for providing assistance to the Palestinian public: use the U.N. delivery bodies to provide humanitarian aid, broadening the definition to include healthcare, education, and environmental workers; use Abbas's office to create development and job-creating projects; and build a new nongovernmental organization structure to provide social and educational services.

All three paths require an intensive American-led effort, since nothing in the Middle East ever implements itself. If we hope to shape Olmert's concept into a path for a future that is more promising -- or at least preserves options for a different future -- the Bush administration will have to be prepared to roll up its sleeves and work on the problem.

Dennis Ross is counselor at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace*. David Makovsky, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute, is author of [Olmert's Unilateral Option: An Early Assessment \(templateC04.php?CID=240\)](#). ❖

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