

A Helping Hand for Middle East Bilateralism

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The recent decision by Ariel Sharon, Israeli prime minister, to bolt from the Likud party has shaken Israeli politics to its core, where Likud has dominated for 20 of the last 28 years. Now Palestinians and Israelis will be going to the polls within two months of each other in early 2006. Palestinian parliamentary elections in January and Israeli elections in March represent a thrashing out of the internal political debate in both societies, especially in light of the completion of Mr Sharon's disengagement in Gaza. Ideally, both polls would result in the re-emergence of the broad centres which collapsed in the aftermath of violence and terror in 2000-2004. Viable Palestinian and Israeli centres could engage each other in subsequent peace negotiations.

The bottom line may be revitalised political capital among Israeli and Palestinian leaders that would enhance US-led diplomacy by the spring. But if the two elections produce mandates that are not in synch with one another, prospects for US-brokered bilateralism will be frustrated and unilateralist impulses will grow. It is very possible that, if elected, Mr Sharon will continue the unilateralism he began with the Gaza pull-out. He may feel he does not need a partner for this, especially since it involves yielding most of the West Bank - including densely populated Palestinian areas. While Mr Sharon does not equate Mahmoud Abbas, Palestinian president, with Yassir Arafat who urged his people to terror attacks, he would say Mr Abbas lacks the will to take on disparate factions and build the institutions for nation-building and security reform. At almost 78, Mr Sharon is running out of time to reshape Israel's borders.

For the US, while bilateralism is preferable, there is a recognition that the Israeli psychology of unilateralism will grow if the Palestinians do not fulfil their security obligations - including those made last month to Condoleezza Rice, US secretary of state, that are supposed to safeguard against the smuggling of militants and weaponry at the Rafah crossing point in Gaza. Ms Rice thought a breakthrough on Rafah would help Mr Abbas in the January elections, but it now appears that unsuccessful security arrangements could ensure Gaza remains a hotbed for Hamas, the militant Islamist group, provoking Israeli retaliation for attacks and scaring investors. While the US will hope that Israel does not give up on Mr Abbas, not only because he is different from Arafat but because Israel should care if there is a failed Palestinian state on the other side of its security barrier, bilateralism may be jettisoned.

Therefore, for bilateralism to have any chance there must be a realisation that what occurs in the Palestinian election on January 25 will have an impact on the Israeli election on March 28. If Hamas does well in the polls it will constrain Mr Abbas in pursuing options towards peace and push Israel to the right two months later. Likud and other rightwing voters will charge that there is no partner. It might be noted that when suicide bombs have gone off, Likud has won (as shown by the elections of 1988, 1996, 2001, 2003); when bombs have not gone off, it has lost (1992, 1999).

Beyond the Rafah agreements there are a number of ways in which the international community can not only influence the elections towards bilateralism but also improve the quality of life for both Palestinians and Israelis.

The US has just named Maj Gen Keith Dayton, formerly director for operations at the Defence Intelligence Agency, as its new US security envoy. He could transform his role from adviser to the Palestinian security services to security troubleshooter who works with both Israelis and Palestinians separately and, when needed, together to maintain a ceasefire. Further, the Group of Eight leading industrialised countries have pledged Dollars 3bn in aid to the Palestinians, but little of this has arrived. Arab states have made windfall profits on oil but, as the World Bank said last week, they are providing only Dollars 87m in 2005 - nowhere near matching G8 pledges. The G8 can use its leverage with the Arab states to get better results.

Another key issue in the Palestinian election concerns disarming Hamas. It is hard to see how any state-in-waiting can exist when it does not have the monopoly over force. Amid reports of low-level contacts with European diplomats, Hamas may believe that it can have it all. Only Europe, which has its own laws in virtually all countries against a political party running with a militia, can disabuse Hamas that it will be deemed a legitimate interlocutor while the movement traffics in terror.

It would also help if Mr Abbas publicly declared to his people, as he did to President George W. Bush in Washington in October, that he will pursue disarmament legislation and implementation in the immediate wake of the election. Mr Abbas's popularity rating has remained above 60 per cent, virtually double that of Arafat's through the majority of the period from 2000 to 2004. If Mr Abbas included the disarmament of Hamas as part of his platform now he would be better placed to view it as a mandate for action.

While both Israelis and Palestinians have turned inwards as election campaigning has begun in earnest, it is important to understand the degree to which the polls are intertwined. A failure to follow the contours of the Palestinian election arena in January is bound to produce unsettling surprises in the Israeli balloting in March.

The writer is a senior fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy

This article was written before MrSharon fell ill last night



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