

Gaza Pullout Could Boost Peacemaking

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We are at a seminal moment in the Israeli-Palestinian saga.

After years of terror and violence, there is a moment of promise. Next month, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon will evacuate 9,000 Israeli settlers from Gaza and the northern West Bank. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, after much hesitancy, is finally taking preliminary steps in the battle against Palestinian terrorists who want to blow up peace.

Much is at stake. Both leaders have put their political futures on the line. The Shin Bet security service has declared that 200 Israeli Jews want to assassinate Sharon for the "perfidy" of yielding biblical patrimony; his whole cabinet was recently outfitted with bulletproof vests; and 10,000 Israeli opponents of Gaza disengagement recently held a faceoff with Israeli police just miles from Gaza, and it is likely to get worse before it gets better.

For Israel, disengagement is one of the bigger tests of Israeli democracy since the founding of the state in 1948. It faces the question of whether a single-minded minority can thwart the decisions of a majority, approved by the parliament and the cabinet. Abbas faces his own domestic troubles.

Terror groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad routinely assault him verbally, and Hamas has clashed with the Palestinian Authority forces in the streets. Hamas and Islamic Jihad also have violated a de facto cease-fire reached in February by attacking Israelis with rockets and attempted suicide bombings. The terrorists want to demonstrate that the pullout is a result of violence, not diplomacy.

This view of the pullout dominates among Palestinians. If violence continues from Gaza after Israel leaves, it may enable extremists to hijack the idea of a two-state solution. Such thinking of "terror pays" may make Israelis wonder if withdrawal will be mistaken for weakness, and thus impair prospects for further pullbacks.

Gaza disengagement will be the prism through which to view future peacemaking. If it fails, extremists will become emboldened at the expense of moderate Palestinians. If it succeeds, the enterprise of peacemaking is likely to receive a boost.

All this makes it vital that the Arab states—which, with the exception of Egypt, have been passive amid Gaza disengagement—become more pro-active. Arab passivity is both wrong and counterproductive. If Israeli-Palestinian violence continues, they will feel the heat. There will be more pictures on Al-Jazeera of the violence and more Arab

anger directed at leaders, charging them with "impotence." It is in their interest to delegitimize Hamas efforts that undermine Abbas and peace. In short, they are a key missing link.

There are several significant steps Arab states can take at this critical juncture. They can provide political and financial cover to Abbas. The Palestinian leader gave an important speech recently in Gaza, where he declared "there is no legitimate weapon on the streets of our cities, villages, and refugee camps except for the weapons of the National Authority." This was a clear warning to Hamas and Islamic Jihad that their actions are illegal. But why should Abbas stand alone? Even Egypt, which played an important role in brokering the cease-fire among Palestinian factions and recently sought to restore the calm, has avoided saying anything that could be deemed as undermining the legitimacy of Hamas' use of arms.

Arab states should provide Abbas with a political umbrella for insisting upon one Palestinian authority, as they should endorse his frequent statements that suicide bombing undermines Palestinian national aspirations. It should be made clear that the Arab states do not condone the firing of mortar rockets at Israeli towns, nor will they endorse efforts by Hamas to seek de facto control in Gaza after Israel's departure. Furthermore, the Arab states should donate substantial portions of their oil revenue windfalls to their Palestinian brethren. Despite the fact that OPEC countries have netted a \$58-billion windfall as part of \$303 billion in revenue last year, they gave only \$107 million to the Palestinians.

Finally, it is important that Arab states provide incentives for Israel as well as Palestinians. Four Arab states—Morocco, Tunisia, Qatar, and Oman—should re-establish the semi-diplomatic ties they held with Israel before they ruptured them at the start of the terror and violence in 2000. Earlier this year, Egypt and Jordan—the two Arab states that have peace treaties with Israel—dispatched their ambassadors to Israel. The four other countries did not, however; they should now send back their envoys.

There are only a few weeks to go until disengagement begins. Arab states should not just sit back and watch as the first chance for peacemaking in five years hangs in the balance.

David Makovsky, a fellow at the Washington Institute, is the author of "Engagement Through Disengagement."



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