

A Race against Time in the Mideast

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Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas is in Washington for a meeting this week with President Bush. As president of the Palestinian Authority, Abbas has pursued a strategy that depends on his being able to show that his way -- the way of nonviolence -- will deliver for the Palestinian people. Exit polls at the time of his election in January indicated that Palestinians, weary of daily deprivations and loss of income, wanted a restoration of calm, freedom of movement and their jobs -- and expected that Abbas would deliver.

To be sure, the public also wanted an end to corruption and lawlessness in the Palestinian cities and administration. Here, too, there were expectations that in the aftermath of Yasser Arafat's deliberate strategy of chaos, Abbas would produce change.

Unfortunately, at this point, Abbas has been able to deliver little of what was expected. While he has made some moves against corruption -- treading carefully, given the opposition of the old guard of Fatah -- he has not been able to produce much on employment or freedom of movement. Palestinians still give him the benefit of the doubt, but they are increasingly dissatisfied with the absence of real change. One sign of this is the increasing appeal of Hamas -- an appeal that is growing not because of its Islamic agenda but because, unlike the Palestinian Authority, it is perceived as clean and capable of delivering services. Another sign of the increasing dissatisfaction are polls that indicate that more than 75 percent of Palestinians believe that there has been no change or change for the worse on the economy during Abbas's tenure.

All this should be an alarm bell for the Bush administration and the world. Abbas believes in secular governance, the rule of law, nonviolence and coexistence with Israel. If he cannot make it, if he cannot demonstrate that his way offers a future for the Palestinian people, what message does that send? Who do we think will take his place? The possibility of Hamas's winning elections, tying his hands and eventually supplanting him is not a fantasy.

Photo opportunities will not provide him much help. And while Abbas must press harder against those resisting change, including in the security area, he needs more than rhetorical encouragement -- he needs real help from the outside. Material assistance must be provided -- not just pledged. Last December, donor nations pledged \$1.2 billion to the Palestinians. Six months later, less than 10 percent of the money has materialized. And the money that has been provided -- as important as it is -- is not going to meet the urgent needs created by unemployment. Per capita income in the West Bank and Gaza was \$1,800 a year in 2000 and is down to \$1,000. Jobs are urgently needed; labor-intensive projects must be financed and launched now.

The international community acts as if a business-as-usual approach will suffice in providing the assistance that has been pledged. That could mean that by the time the money begins to appear, it will be Hamas, not the Palestinian Authority, making the calls on how it is spent. It's time for the Bush administration to make a major push to get donors to deliver. The Abbas visit should provide the catalyst for such an initiative.

While the administration's assistance request has almost worked its way through Congress, there is little prospect that money from the United States will flow to labor-intensive projects before the elections. Nonetheless, our request for \$350 million for the Palestinians gives us leverage to press the Persian Gulf oil states to do their fair share. To date they have not fulfilled their pledges, let alone pledged the additional funds they should be providing. The Bush administration needs to call publicly, not privately, for the creation of a Gulf Cooperation Council fund of \$1 billion for Palestinian development. This money should be available immediately to finance housing projects that are labor-intensive and for which there are existing Palestinian blueprints and contractors; provide the \$240 million the Palestinian Authority would like to spend on social programs to compete with Hamas; and underwrite the cost of the pensions Abbas needs to pay to those he has retired from the security organizations.

Oil revenue for the Persian Gulf oil states (excluding Iraq) has increased by \$58 billion in the past year. These countries should be more than capable of providing \$1 billion for the Palestinians. It is time for the U.S. administration to speak bluntly -- something on which it prides itself -- to the gulf states.

Beyond the money, it is essential to cement the cease-fire between Palestinians and Israelis. In the past week there have been rocket and mortar attacks against Israeli settlements in Gaza and the Israeli city of Sderot. The Israeli defense minister, Shaul Mofaz, has given instructions to "use all necessary" means to strike at those responsible. It would not take much for the current calm -- which has led to a dramatic reduction in Palestinian attacks and IDF targeted killings -- to unravel. Neither Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who is already under enormous pressure because of his decision to withdraw from Gaza, nor Abbas can afford for the current period of calm to explode.

Nothing will happen by itself; the cease fire and the security situation will not be shored up on their own nor will donor assistance for labor-intensive projects just materialize. The clock is ticking, and President Bush must seize the opportunity of the Abbas visit to make these things happen before it is too late.

The writer was director for policy planning in the State Department under President George H.W. Bush and special Middle East coordinator under President Bill Clinton. He is counselor of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of *The Missing Peace*.



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