

Bridge the Gaps in Peace Process

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The United States needs to do more to consolidate the cease-fire between Israelis and Palestinians and help coordinate a pullout from Gaza or else the current narrow window of opportunity, characterized by the leadership potential of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and the Israeli plan for disengagement from Gaza, may close.

The gap of expectations and the mistrust between the parties requires a third party to mediate and ensure that the violence will not erupt again.

The good news is that the last few months have witnessed a sharp decrease in the terrorism and violence that have gripped these two peoples over the last 4 1/2 years. This Egyptian-backed tahadiya, or cooling off, among Palestinian factions has led to a significant reduction in terrorist attacks on Israel and the considerable reduction of Israeli operational activities in the West Bank and Gaza.

There is an urgent need for the United States to consolidate and monitor the cease-fire so we will not witness a repetition of 2003, when a cease-fire unraveled in part because of a lack of precision regarding what constituted a violation.

The mandate of the U.S. security envoy, Army Lt. Gen. William E. Ward, must be broadened, allowing him not just to focus on force restructuring but also to actually work with Israelis and Palestinians on the daily substance of security cooperation -- for example, intelligence-sharing and real-time counterterrorism. It is apparent that Israelis, Palestinians and other key Arab officials have been disappointed with the limited nature of his mission.

It is still not too late.

Despite successful efforts by Palestinian old guard elements seeking to delay security reorganization, Mr. Abbas is finally moving ahead. Last week, he fired the old security chiefs and named new security officials whose mandate is to streamline the Palestinian Authority security services. These officials can also serve as interlocutors for General Ward, who, in turn, can be key in bringing them and Israeli security services together to increase systematic cooperation.

Without such actions, localized unrest could spread.

For example, gangs in southern Gaza recently declared themselves exempt from the cease-fire and fired mortar rounds for a few days. They were joined by Hamas and Islamic Jihad, all in response to Israeli accidental fire. Hamas has begun test-firing Kasseem rockets in the Mediterranean and just fired two rockets at the Israeli border town of Sderot. Its Damascus-based leader, Khaled Mashaal, was quoted recently in Egypt's Al-Ahram newspaper as saying that Hamas' adherence to the cease-fire is merely "tactical."

So long as the security situation is not stabilized, Israel's grip will not relax enough to allow Palestinian citizens to feel an improvement in daily life. Palestinians believe that roadblocks, for example, are a form of collective punishment, while Israel believes they are essential for security.

Further Israeli review of the roadblock policy would be important. Such a move would help Mr. Abbas as he faces parliamentary elections against Hamas in the months ahead.

If this was not enough, the issue of coordinating the Gaza pullout looms. Mr. Abbas has committed in principle to coordinate the pullout with Israel, but so far the bilateral meetings have not been followed up by genuine bilateral cooperation. A chaotic PA security services situation in Gaza is a recipe for renewed violence between Israelis and Palestinians in the aftermath of the withdrawal. Rejectionists, not moderates, are likely to be empowered. Outgoing Israeli military Chief of Staff Gen. Moshe Yaalon is predicting a renewal of violence before the end of the year.

Deeper U.S. involvement in security not only would be good for peacemaking, but it would also have economic dividends. The Bush administration made a significant choice by recently appointing James D. Wolfensohn, outgoing head of the World Bank, to be the economic envoy. But Mr. Wolfensohn, who has considerable experience and stature, can succeed in boosting Palestinian economic prospects only by attaining a stabilized security environment. General Ward and Mr. Wolfensohn must work together as a coordinated team.

There is no doubt that the United States cannot substitute for the parties. But it can play a greater role in working to narrow the gaps and helping the new Abbas government to stand on its feet. If this is not done, the current calm will likely prove to be illusory.

David Makovsky is a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and director of its Project on the Middle East Peace Process. He is author of the study *Engagement Through Disengagement: Gaza and the Potential for Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking*.



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