

# An Elusive Opportunity

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**W**ith upcoming visits by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to see President Bush, it is a good time to take stock of the Israeli-Palestinian situation. If my recent discussions in Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Gaza are any indication, the current trends are not encouraging.

While Sharon and Abbas share a common desire for calm, they are operating on two different assumptions. Sharon believes there is little more he can do to ease freedom of movement for Palestinians absent Palestinian reorganization of their security forces and the disarming of some 500 fugitives from the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad -- fugitives who the Israelis believe are still planning attacks. Abbas, for his part, feels that he has produced calm and that now Israel must respond by lifting the checkpoints that bottle up Palestinians and their economy.

To complicate matters, both leaders are contending with fractious domestic settings. Sharon must overcome opposition from his own Likud party and its traditional settler constituency to implement his plan to withdraw settlers from Gaza and parts of the West Bank. In such circumstances, his tolerance for acts of terror against Israelis and his inclination toward making further concessions to help Abbas are low. But Abbas's situation is also difficult. He has inherited a largely inept, corrupt Palestinian Authority. His own faction, Fatah, is split between the young and old guards. The former represents a strong impulse for institutional reform; the latter seeks to hold on to positions of privilege and threatens to support exile Farouk Kaddoumi to head the PLO in place of Abbas. Abbas sees such split authority as untenable.

One other factor Abbas must contend with is Hamas, which is unified, untainted by corruption, and able to deliver services to the public. Hamas could gain a majority in July's Legislative Council elections. To prevent that outcome, Abbas must produce tangible changes so that Palestinians see that their day-to-day reality is improving -- they are going back to work, services are being provided, corruption is being fought, and they can move about more freely.

Today, little of this is happening, and without help from the outside, it is hard to see how it will be produced. What must be done? For starters, we should act as if we recognize the urgency of the moment. Opportunities for injecting meaningful help from the outside must not be squandered. In this regard, we must not only tell each leader that we expect them to take certain steps by the time of their visits but also work actively along several parallel lines to

produce them. First, on security and withdrawal, Gen. William Ward, the U.S. security coordinator, should determine what must be done to accelerate the Israeli withdrawal from towns and the lifting of checkpoints. (The Israeli answer will be "disarm the 500 fugitives," and Ward will need to see what it takes for the Palestinians to do this before Abbas's Washington meeting.)

Teamwork. Second, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice should put together a team with the European Union and the World Bank to work with Abbas to establish troubleshooters who can break through impediments to change in the Palestinian Authority and facilitate the provision of services to the public. Here again, the timeline for initial results should be the meeting in Washington.

Third, the president should call his counterparts in Europe, Japan, and the Arab world and ask them to act on their financial pledges now. The projects that are most urgent are those that are labor intensive and meet real needs. Housing is a perfect example, and there is already a model for it. The first phase of the Sheikh Zayed township in Gaza cost \$55 million, produced 736 apartments, a school, a recreation area, a mosque, and integrated water, electricity, and sewage infrastructure -- and was done from scratch by Palestinians in 30 months. Surely with \$1.2 billion in international pledges (and \$440 million from Arab leaders), three or four such projects could be immediately financed. Why not set Abbas's Washington visit as the target for contracts being let?

These steps are not the sum total of what is needed. Securing the cease-fire and building a bridge from it to the future also are necessary. But if we don't act soon, we will once again lament a lost opportunity between Israelis and Palestinians.

U.S. News and World Report

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