

A Delicate Dance in the Mideast

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Articles & Testimony

The recent bus bombings in Beersheba reminded Israelis that the lull in suicide attacks in Israel had less to do with the Hamas intention to conduct such acts and more to do with Israel's capability to prevent them.

Israel's presence in the West Bank, including continuing raids into cities such as Nablus and Jenin and completion of a quarter of the security barrier, have combined to make it more difficult for groups such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade to carry out acts of terror.

But as Beersheba and Israeli reprisals in Gaza remind us, the war between Israelis and Palestinians continues. That war and the struggle in Iraq should not blind us to the stirrings that are taking place among both Israelis and Palestinians and to the implications these developments should have for U.S. behavior after the Nov. 2 election.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's decision to withdraw from Gaza has created turmoil among both Israelis and Palestinians. He has produced a backlash from the settler movement in Israel, which is proving very well-organized, well-financed and not easily dismissed.

Today, Mr. Sharon has a minority government that can survive for the foreseeable future but will have difficulty when it comes to implementing his withdrawal plan or passing a budget. But his comments after the Beersheba bombings make clear he is not stymied and is determined to withdraw from Gaza. But his political options are limited. Barring his ability to forge a national unity government, Mr. Sharon may have to count on Labor's support (at least for withdrawal) from outside the government.

The only alternative for Mr. Sharon would be to call for elections -- or threaten to do so, banking on the reality that most of his Likud parliament members correctly fear that elections could cost the party seats.

Regardless, Mr. Sharon understands that having made his decision on withdrawal -- and knowing that nearly 70 percent of Israelis support him -- there is no going back.

Interestingly, Palestinians have no doubt that Israel will get out of Gaza, and that has created tremendous pressures on them. With the Israelis out, Palestinians know they must control themselves, must govern themselves, must institute a rule of law, must create accountability, must demonstrate they can be responsible.

And none of that can happen so long as Yasser Arafat is allowed to resist all efforts at reform.

The result: In the last few weeks there have been unprecedented challenges to Mr. Arafat. His security cronies, whose corruption is widely known and deeply resented, have been kidnapped and released only after having been humiliated. His prime minister, Ahmed Qureia, resigned, publicly rescinding the resignation only when Mr. Arafat apparently accepted his plans for change in security and administration.

His former protege in Gaza, Muhammad Dahlan, spoke of Mr. Arafat sitting on the corpses and devastation of Palestinians and declared Palestinians would take to the streets if there was not reform. Palestinian Legislative Council members have declared that Mr. Arafat is responsible for the anarchy and violence in the territories.

The buildup of pressure and criticism led Mr. Arafat recently to take, for him, the highly unusual step of admitting a mistake.

Does this mean that Mr. Arafat won't survive? No, he remains an icon not easily surmounted, and his instinctive ability to maneuver and play different factions against each other will keep him on the scene. But the challenges indicate that his status has diminished and reformers are increasingly assertive and won't be easily deflected. In effect, they are filling the vacuum that Mr. Arafat has allowed to emerge. And with the decision to hold municipal elections, reformers and the younger generation of Palestinian activists seek to build their own legitimacy separate from Mr. Arafat's.

A major question is whether real change among the Palestinians and an Israeli withdrawal will take place the way their proponents intend. Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Mr. Arafat (who certainly wants no one else to appear to be the liberator of Gaza) all share an interest in using violence to foster the impression that Israel will be forced out of Gaza.

Mr. Sharon will never tolerate that and is certain to inflict a withering Israeli response should there be violence as Israelis withdraw. In such circumstances, Israel will get little credit for its pullout. Worse, the environment of violence will overwhelm Palestinian reformers and set back their cause severely -- hardly the basis on which to try to get back to peacemaking.

Yet, this will be the result unless Israeli and Palestinian steps are coordinated.

Having decided that there is no Palestinian partner, Mr. Sharon understandably does not want the Palestinians to determine how Israel pulls out of Gaza. Ultimately, however, Israel cannot want a situation in which those who believe in rejection and ongoing struggle are the ones who shape the reality in Gaza during withdrawal and after. It is far better for Israel to hand off areas, including the settlements, to those Palestinians who favor reform and coexistence.

It is better for the international community, especially the European Union and Arab leaders who are seen as sympathetic by most Palestinians, to invest in the reformers and to declare publicly that they will stop their assistance if Mr. Arafat blocks reformist efforts or if others use violence to disrupt the withdrawal.

None of this will happen by itself. If Mr. Sharon does not call elections, withdrawal from Gaza will begin by March. Regardless of who is elected Nov. 2, there won't be much time to prepare for ensuring that Israeli withdrawal creates an opening for ending the war between Israelis and Palestinians and not simply a new confrontation.

Dennis Ross, counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, is author of *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace*. ❖

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