

Disengagement and Diplomacy

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In-Depth Reports

Jonathan Davidson: The European approach to the Middle East peace process is conditioned by a multitude of factors. I will highlight three of them. First, Europe has a deep and longstanding historical relationship with the Middle East. Second, we are neighbors, particularly since the European Union (EU) expanded to twenty-five members. When Turkey joins the EU, as I am convinced it will in some years, we will be that much closer to contiguous borders with a number of Middle Eastern countries. Third, the EU has a very close relationship with the United States on a broad range of issues. On all of the major issues that confront the world, and particularly the strategic crises and challenges we face in the Middle East, the EU works in partnership with the United States. Because of the first two factors, some differences of substance and nuance arise between the European and U.S. approaches. Yet, because Europe regards its relationship with the United States as among its most important priorities, we find common interests and complementarities in our approach to Middle Eastern issues.

The EU has welcomed Israel's initiative for withdrawal from Gaza. It stands ready to contribute in a substantive and practical way to making the withdrawal a success. Europe sees it as an initiative that can lead to new opportunities to get the peace process rolling again. As the EU has pointed out, however, such progress can occur only if the withdrawal plan meets a number of considerations. The withdrawal must be complete and full; settlers should not simply be resettled in the West Bank. The transfer should be an orderly one, with steps taken to ensure the smooth handover of infrastructure. Israel must facilitate the role of the international community in supporting Gaza's transition. That requires an Israeli commitment to ensuring that services such as water and electricity are maintained. Israel must support whatever entity assumes responsibility for the various elements of the new order in Gaza.

The EU believes disengagement should be part of the Quartet's Roadmap to Israeli-Palestinian peace, as Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has said it can be. The EU insists that terrorist attacks from Gaza must cease. Before Prime Minister Sharon announced the disengagement plan, the EU enunciated its policy toward the process in more categorical terms than it had in previous statements. The EU noted that it would not recognize changes to the pre-1967 borders unless they are negotiated and agreed between the parties. That is not a major change of position, but it was stated in more explicit terms than in the past. After Sharon promulgated his plan and met with President George W. Bush, the EU issued a statement reiterating that it would not recognize changes to the pre-1967 borders that are not negotiated between the parties. It also drew attention to the fact that final-status issues, including refugees and borders, are to be negotiated by the parties. The EU statement was clearly more of a diplomatic frown than a diplomatic smile. It noted that President Bush shares these principles, and that Bush himself stated that final-status issues are to be negotiated by the parties.

One might say, "Well, there go the Europeans being negative and not particularly constructive." Let me describe, then, how the European contribution to this process is not only constructive but indispensable. Assuming that disengagement takes place, the role of the international community in Gaza will be essential. There will be a humanitarian crisis of enormous proportions. Reconstruction will have to take place to make the territory viable. A system of governance must be established. The process of Palestinian reform has to proceed rapidly and

successfully. Massive amounts of international aid will be required.

The EU is the principal player in many of these areas, particularly in fostering and promoting Palestinian reform. Brussels has worked to foster reform of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and to create institutions that are viable interlocutors -- and that could be viable administrators of the Palestinian territories in a two-state solution. In terms of funding, Europe looks to the proposed World Bank trust fund as the vehicle for underwriting the substantial reconstruction that will need to take place.

In recent months, many have wondered what has happened to the Quartet. Is it asleep? Is it dead? Recently, the Quartet has not been the vital player in the peace process that it was in the past. With its most recent meeting in New York, however, the Quartet has again become the center of gravity in this issue. The peace process can move forward if the international community supports disengagement and whatever renewed peace efforts flow from it. Without the international community working together in this way, however, progress will be very difficult indeed.

Europe has never doubted America's unique and indispensable role as the leader in negotiating -- and mediating, when required -- the peace process in the Middle East. Europe has never sought to displace the United States from that role. The European policy is to offer complementarity and support by bringing its substantial political, economic, and diplomatic resources to the table. The EU seeks to play that role in partnership with the United States.

In terms of modernization in the wider Middle East -- that is, reforming governments and societies -- Europe is on the same page as the United States. Both sides of the Atlantic see modernization and reform as a strategic challenge for the peoples of the Middle East, for Europeans, and for Americans. We share a common interest in helping reformist elements in Middle Eastern countries achieve whatever modernization they can. The EU sees reform as a necessity independent of the equally important need for a comprehensive settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Both are indispensable to progress in the region.

For the past nine years, Europe has been involved in the Barcelona Process, whereby we have partnership agreements with all the Mediterranean countries of North Africa and the Near East, including Israel. This process brings together all the countries of Europe, the Near East, and North Africa in a multilateral forum. It is the only forum where the Israeli foreign minister meets with all of his Arab counterparts. It is important, if only as a symbolic step, for all the ministers to meet together on a regular basis. It is also a process in which Europeans engage in developing political dialogue with the countries of the Middle East; in helping to support reform in the Middle East and the Mediterranean; in liberalizing trade; in developing cultural links; and in developing contractual partnerships between the twenty-five EU member nations and each country in the Barcelona Process.

We have made some progress in terms of trade liberalization but less in terms of political development. Yet, we have an important foundation -- nourished by nearly 3 billion euros per year in grants and loans -- from which we can move toward reform. That fits comfortably alongside the initiative President Bush launched in November 2003 to promote reform in the greater Middle East.

Overall, the EU is working closely with its American partner to find common language and ways to develop our complementary initiatives for wider Middle Eastern reform and modernization. Perhaps we can even find some areas in which we can work together on joint programs. We share a common strategic interest in achieving stability, peace, and prosperity for the countries of the Middle East. Hopefully, this fact will bring us closer together across the Atlantic.

David Satterfield: The Israeli-Palestinian peace process has experienced several setbacks over the past three years. We have seen rising violence; deaths on both sides; a breakdown in trust and confidence to levels unseen since the beginning of the modern peace process; an absolute sense of despair; loss of hope on both sides; and a growing feeling that the vision of a shared future between Israelis and Palestinians has been lost. To be sure, the Roadmap,

President Bush's two-state vision, and the promises of Sharm al-Shaykh and Aqaba also emerged during this period. Yet, confidence wanes among Israelis and Palestinians, among the people of the region, and among the international community that those goals can be achieved.

The members of the Quartet, together and independently, have worked to ameliorate the situation on the ground; to address the ongoing violence and terror; to address the humanitarian situation of Palestinians; and to take practical steps to make life easier for Palestinians with respect to checkpoints, roadblocks, mobility, and access. Indeed, the reform process had a vigorous and promising start under Quartet leadership. But like so many previous positive steps, the process flagged. We tried to keep it alive but had very little success in any of these areas. Something needed to change. Prime Minister Sharon looked at the situation on the ground, reflected on the above-mentioned factors, and proposed unilateral action: Israel would disengage from Gaza and portions of the northern West Bank.

Although the disengagement decision was unilateral, it came squarely within the context of American hopes for a revival of progress along the Roadmap toward the two-state vision. Disengagement may be a unilateral decision, but it will require multilateral implementation.

Prime Minister Sharon submitted his proposal to the Likud Party in a referendum but did not carry the vote. Nevertheless, he has affirmed his determination to continue with the proposal. He believes that it is critical to Israel's interests and, ultimately, to the cause of advancing peace. The United States strongly supports this proposal.

In its most recent meetings in London and New York, the Quartet reflected on the importance of continuing progress on Israel's disengagement plan. The step outlined by Prime Minister Sharon -- if properly followed through and supported by the region, the international community, the Quartet, and Palestinian actions -- would be a critical opportunity to restore progress toward peace. We have had few such opportunities in the past three and a half years.

What will be required to make Israel's plan a success? What kind of multilateral cooperation, facilitation, and support will be necessary? First and foremost, the Palestinians once again face the challenge of upholding their responsibilities to begin bringing about an end to terror and violence, which includes restoring rule of law in Gaza and the West Bank. Without realistic Palestinian efforts on security, no plan -- not the Roadmap, not the Gaza disengagement proposal, not even the two-state vision -- can come to pass. Violence must be halted. Terror must be halted.

The Palestinians are not alone. They have the assistance of the international community, reaffirmed by the Quartet. They have strong support from key regional players, including Egypt, which sees its own vital national security interests affected by what will happen in Gaza. Indeed, Egypt is a major player in this regard. Cairo has been in dialogue with the government of Israel and with the PA. That dialogue must continue.

The United States and the Quartet have been in dialogue with these parties as well. Although we are willing to help the Palestinians, the decision to move forward must be theirs. They must confront the reality that the futures of the PA and the Palestinian people alike are being destroyed by the continued violence and terror. If Gaza disengagement is to succeed, there must be no political and security vacuum in Gaza after the Israeli withdrawal. The credibility and the very structures of the PA in Gaza are virtually nil. That is not a U.S. judgment or an Israeli judgment. That is a Palestinian judgment. The United States has repeatedly reminded Prime Minister Abu Ala and other Palestinian interlocutors that, for their own sakes, they need to take actions that make their authority credible in Palestinian eyes. They have been far too passive for far too long. And here, too, the international community, countries in the region, and the Quartet all stand ready to help. There is an extraordinary reserve of international assistance available to the Palestinians if they address the issues of security and progress on reform.

No one has been more sensitive to the issue of the PA's fiscal accountability and transparency than the United States and the EU. We have both made very clear to the Palestinians that our assistance cannot continue if there is not

absolute accountability and transparency on their part. We welcome the establishment of a World Bank trust fund with clear benchmarks on security and reform and a strong auditing mechanism into which international budgetary support and assistance can be placed. This is an important step.

The tools are there. The mechanisms and processes exist today to facilitate the Gaza disengagement and to help resume progress along the Roadmap toward two states. But these processes require two critical steps. First, Israel must make and implement a decision. Second, the Palestinians must make and implement decisions of their own on security and institutional reform. Both parties will find that they have partners. Nevertheless, it is they who must make the necessary decisions. If we do not seize this opportunity, then the future will resemble the past, with more violence, more deaths, and more destruction -- not just physical destruction, but psychological destruction in terms of willingness to come back together in a negotiated process toward peace. That would be a terrible fate, and neither Israelis nor Palestinians would see their interests advanced by such an outcome.

The time to act is now. Israeli withdrawal from Gaza may be a unilateral decision, but it will require coordinated and well-supported execution and implementation.

Dennis Ross: There is a converging understanding that something has to be done, and that the unilateral disengagement plan creates an opening. It is important to realize that this is a common attitude in the United States and Europe, and perhaps among all the members of the Quartet.

The situation between Israelis and Palestinians has been catastrophic. It has been a war for the past three years, not a peace process, and the situation is at an impasse. The question now is, how can we unfreeze the situation? The prime minister of Israel has offered an initiative that could do just that. We must try to build on that unilateral initiative in a way that will establish a way station. Three years of war have produced a complete loss of faith in the idea of peace between the two sides. Hence, we cannot go from the current situation to peace in one sudden jump. In 2000, we broke the taboos on all the big issues that could never be discussed -- Jerusalem, borders, and refugees -- and we demystified what the outcome is likely to be. Yet, there is no possibility of moving from where we are to that outcome unless we completely transform the situation and reestablish hope. We cannot bring about such a transformation in one step.

Therefore, we need a way station that will produce a different reality for both sides. That reality must include what I call "two freedoms." The Israelis must have freedom from terror. They must be able to live without fear of being killed when they get on a bus or go to a theater. The Palestinians must have freedom from Israeli control so that they do not have to deal with the daily difficulties, abuse, and humiliation at checkpoints. If we do not bring about these two freedoms, we will not be able to create a way station to peace. So the challenge is to work backward from that realization, not from the ultimate outcome. How do we build on Prime Minister Sharon's initiative to create such a way station? If the only result of disengagement is an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and certain portions of the West Bank, then we will simply have new lines of confrontation. The Israelis cannot simply leave Gaza, throw the keys over the fence, and hope for the best. In that case, those Palestinians who believe in violence will be the ones who gain. It will end up being a replay of Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000. Such cannot be the result of disengagement from Gaza.

Mr. Davidson and Mr. Satterfield have both stated that we must establish a process and create coordination. I agree. I will suggest some specific ways to do so.

Mr. Davidson, you focused on the EU's potential contributions in the areas of humanitarian aid, reconstruction, and promotion of reform. I would add one more contribution: the positive political and psychological effect that Europe can have on the Palestinians. Europe's role cannot be limited to physical assistance and reform. The EU must also create an understanding among Palestinians -- who see Europeans as inherently more sympathetic to them than

others -- that Europe, like the United States, has a set of expectations about how they must perform. Europe must adopt a clear position distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate ways of pursuing statehood. Europe must tell the Palestinians, in effect, "You have a lot at stake. You can prove that you are ready for statehood. But states do not have multiple militias with their own agendas and the ability to carry out acts of violence with impunity. We are prepared to do even more for you than we have done before, but you must meet a standard that reflects your commitment to statehood." Europe must demand more than just transparent and accountable governance. There must be law and order. There must be rule of law. Palestinians must not tolerate multiple militias. Europe must demand that Palestinians, for the first time, establish a political framework that rejects violence and terror of any kind.

The United States, the EU, and the Quartet can be very specific in outlining what is legitimate and what is illegitimate when it comes to pursuing Palestinian aspirations. For America's part, Washington can take an active role in brokering parallel unilateral steps. When Condoleezza Rice meets with Abu Ala, the United States should be looking for a Palestinian plan that parallels what the Israelis plan to do. In this manner, the United States can begin to create coordinated unilateralism. Washington can focus on the Palestinians and ask them very clear questions: "How will you impose law and order? How will you create good governance? How will you demonstrate that you will build real institutions of statehood? How will you delegitimize the idea of carrying out acts of terror?" A plan must be readied for the day after an Israeli withdrawal, since it will be too late to create such a plan when the day after arrives. I worry that there will be a gap between the time when the unilateral initiative is adopted and when it is carried out. That gap would create a vacuum, and experience has taught us two things about Middle Eastern vacuums: they always get filled, and they never get filled by the right kinds of people. If we are going to shape what will follow Israeli disengagement, we must begin very soon. This means more than just developing an abstract plan to be carried out later. It means beginning a brokering process, right now, to try to affect what is happening on the ground. Such efforts will influence the climate in which the Israelis carry out their plan and the Palestinians take actions of their own.

The 90 percent of Palestinians who believe in reform find it difficult to act if the climate is characterized by violence. A violent situation puts them on the defensive. The United States, the EU, and the Quartet must consider ways of empowering Palestinian reformers. We must make them understand what the stakes are and what they have to lose. We must publicly sharpen the distinctions and affect the balance of forces among Palestinians. All Palestinians have to understand that there is a lot to be gained, that the whole world is watching, that there are high expectations, and that they will pay a cost if they do not deliver on those expectations. The Palestinians need to understand that, by taking action, they can demonstrate to the world that they are ready for statehood.

The United States, the EU, and other members of the international community were not in favor of Israel's West Bank fence. Yet, when the Palestinians fail to assume their security responsibilities, they leave the Israelis with only two choices: either mount a siege, which would be a disaster for everybody, or build a fence. If the fence is built appropriately, if it promotes security, if it contributes to getting Israelis out of Palestinian lives, then it could help create a way station to peace.

Currently, all parties should understand that if the Palestinians do not assume their responsibilities in the areas from which the Israelis withdraw, then the fence -- even if it is not a border -- will remain in place for a long time. That is the Palestinians' choice, and they need to be told as much by those outsiders who are trying to help. We want to affect the Palestinian calculus, but we also want to provide incentives for Palestinian reformers so that they realize that now is the time to become more assertive. We must persuade them that the outside world will be more responsive when they assert themselves. We must also coordinate with the Israelis to ensure that they are also more responsive to Palestinian reformers.

The Israeli disengagement plan is an opening, but it will close eventually. Moments of opportunity in the Middle East do not last long, and when they close things are worse off than before. So let us not miss this moment.

Davidson: I welcome Ambassador Ross's remarks about communicating clear expectations to the Palestinians. That language is entirely consonant with the EU's political approach toward the Middle East in general. The Palestinians are members of the Barcelona Process. That process has done a great deal to create political conditionality. On the strength of that foundation, Europe is poised to move ahead with two key instruments. First, the EU will soon unveil a common strategy for the Mediterranean and the Middle East. It will be built on expectations of performance in terms of democratic norms, law and order, the rule of law, transparency, and accountability in government. In return for fulfilling these expectations, countries will be offered tangible rewards in the form of access to valuable EU assistance programs.

More immediately, the EU will soon unveil the European neighborhood policy. Among the EU's twenty-five member states are new neighbors to the east -- Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova -- and in the Mediterranean. Moreover, the union's border with Russia has grown. We want to build a Europe without new dividing lines, and so we are in the process of promulgating an important set of initiatives under the European neighborhood policy. In particular, we will offer access to the European single market based on each country's performance in meeting political standards.

Robert Satloff, The Washington Institute: Recently, I read a couple of interesting phrases in two documents -- a letter from President Bush to Prime Minister Sharon and a Quartet statement -- that I have not yet seen underscored in the public debate. In Bush's letter to Sharon, the president assured the prime minister that the United States will take a leading role along with the Europeans and other international actors to ensure that the security situation in Gaza permits the disengagement plan to proceed. What sort of security role do the United States and Europe envision for the international community in Gaza?

For its part, the Quartet statement contains a reference to holding Palestinian elections. The document does not offer further definition as to whether this means city council, parliamentary, or even presidential elections. Normally, elections emerge in the context of trying to find a way to pull people further into the political process. Does the Quartet conceive these elections as a way of encouraging grassroots Palestinian participation? Or is it a backdoor method of convincing Yasser Arafat that he could return to the international spotlight through elections?

Satterfield: When the president speaks of a U.S.-led security role, he is talking about working with the Palestinians in many of the same ways that we used to, when we had a responsive Palestinian partner willing to take steps to restructure its security services under a clear and responsible authority -- something that does not exist now. The U.S. government has provided assistance to such security services in the past, but the situation on the ground has generally not permitted assistance of this sort for some time now. If the Palestinians are willing to shoulder their responsibilities in terms of restructuring these services and establishing clear lines of authority over them, then the United States remains prepared to help.

The international community has offered to provide assistance in the past as well. The United Kingdom is currently engaged with the Palestinians on this issue. Other parties within the EU have unique expertise (e.g., in training and equipping police) which could be mobilized again. The political commitment to take these steps certainly exists. Within the region, Jordan and Egypt once participated in training a reformed, restructured Palestinian security force. Egypt stands ready to do so again, and in a much more robust fashion, by providing training and advisors in Gaza as Israeli disengagement unfolds. This is a very important step, and Israel has recognized it as critical. All of these types of cooperation and assistance are available to the Palestinians, but they all require the Palestinians to move forward in the long-stalled process of restructuring their security services and establishing clear lines of responsible, competent authority.

The reference to elections in the Quartet statement was deliberately vague. The Quartet believes in the importance of generating grassroots Palestinian political participation and support for creating a different kind of PA and a different kind of Palestinian Legislative Council. Many Palestinians have told the Quartet that the mere act of talking about elections is important from the standpoint of mobilizing Palestinian moderates and encouraging Palestinians to adopt a role in the process of reform. No one can say at what pace any such electoral process would move. That depends on circumstances on the ground. The security situation that will determine how quickly elections can unfold is very much in Palestinian hands. But it is valuable for the Quartet to hold out the prospect of a well-prepared electoral process. Such a prospect is not a backdoor for Arafat to return to the spotlight.

Davidson: I agree with everything that Mr. Satterfield just said. I would add that we have talked about these issues for many months, even years, within the Quartet framework and bilaterally.

On the question of security support, we are not talking about a security force. We are talking about supporting police and other institutions that maintain law and order. That is an area in which the EU has a particularly valuable contribution to make. We have a very strong record of providing training and logistical support to local police and security services. Likewise, many look to the EU as an invaluable contributor of expertise, monitoring assistance, and training for the eventual Palestinian electoral process.

Richard Abramson, The Washington Institute: Abba Eban once said that Yasser Arafat has never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity. Assuming that he will now have to develop a plan for assuming control in Gaza, is this not just another opportunity for him to miss? If a vacuum does in fact form as a result of his inaction, who will come in and help? Is the international community willing to move in and help plan the transition if the Palestinians themselves cannot or will not do so?

Ross: When the Israelis are out of Gaza, the Palestinians will have no excuse. Arafat will no longer be able to say that the Israelis are preventing him from doing something. That, in itself, gives the Palestinians a very different stake, especially if the whole world says, "Tell us what you need. We are prepared to help you, but you have to do it. If you do not, then we will draw the conclusion that you are incapable."

Disengagement is an opportunity for the Palestinians. They have to act on it. At the same time, the international community can take several key steps of its own, especially if a consensus emerges regarding the need to focus on a common, public message. If we want Palestinian reformers to take advantage of the situation and overcome those who would block progress, we must raise the stakes and alter the Palestinian calculus as to what can be gained and what will be lost. When Sharon first announced his Gaza withdrawal plan, Arafat was very negative about it. Three weeks later, however, he suddenly changed his tune and said he would welcome it. Did he have some sort of dramatic change of heart? No. Rather, the Palestinian people said, "How can we say no to this?" Indeed, the Palestinian people themselves have the capacity to change their situation, but they must act on this opportunity. We can help to create a set of incentives and disincentives to influence them on this front.

Satterfield: The key here is not Arafat; Arafat is what he is. He does not like the Israeli plan. But he can be constrained from interfering with it if we make the incentives for alternative Palestinian leadership strong enough, and if we do so visibly and publicly enough that Arafat becomes boxed in. Remember, he was boxed in a year ago, when the office of prime minister was created over his strenuous objections. Arafat fought that measure as well, but he could not resist the overwhelming consensus of Palestinian opinion. The challenge now is to create such a consensus again. We can do so by clearly laying out what disengagement means -- what is in it for the Palestinians if they move ahead, and what is not in it for Arafat if he continues to interfere and manipulate the process in a negative fashion. Then, ultimately, Palestinians have to make the choices. But we can create a context that makes those choices much more positive, and much more constraining on Arafat, than they would be otherwise.

Barry Schweib, Associated Press: If the Egyptians are willing to help out on the ground in Gaza, what form would this assistance take? Would Cairo send trainers or troops?

Satterfield: The Egyptians are willing to play a role on their own border with Gaza, increasing their presence there to control security and prevent smuggling. They are prepared to act in cooperation with Israel and, potentially, with Palestinians and other international institut ❖

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