

# It Is Not Too Late to Engage the Palestinians

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Once again, the Bush administration must prepare for the "day after". This time the preparations apply not only to Iraq, but to the Israelis and Palestinians, as Israel has declared its determination to withdraw from Gaza and part of the West Bank and George W. Bush has endorsed the disengagement plan of Ariel Sharon. While the US administration has worked out understandings with Israel on the scope of the withdrawal, nothing has been done to address how Palestinians might respond.

Palestinians are loudly rejecting what they see as American prejudice of such permanent-status issues as borders and refugees. There is, however, less prejudice than meets the eye. When it comes to borders, Mr Bush does suggest that it is unrealistic to expect that Israel will withdraw to the armistice lines of 1949, given new "realities on the ground", but he also states that "any final status agreement will only be achieved on the basis of mutually agreed changes that reflect these realities". In other words, the Palestinians must agree, and, much like with the Clinton parameters, they may do so only if there is territorial compensation for the Palestinians. Similarly, when Mr Bush says Palestinian refugees should settle in the Palestinian state rather than Israel, he is stating the obvious. Why speak of a two-state solution if Palestinian refugees can go to their state and to Israel too? That is a recipe for a one-state solution.

So why are the Palestinians so angry? Because they were excluded from the process and feel that issues that affect their fate are being decided without them. Should the administration have been talking to them about the Israeli plans for disengagement and what Palestinians and Israelis could do to unfreeze the impasse? Absolutely. Is it too late to engage the Palestinians? Absolutely not, and it is necessary.

Israel will get out of Gaza, and Palestinians will have to govern themselves. With Israel out, there will be no excuse for Palestinians not to fulfil their responsibilities.

But preparing for the day after the Israeli withdrawal cannot wait until the day after. There is a great deal of preparation that must be done with the Palestinians, and there are very clear dangers if understandings are not developed soon. Bear in mind that Mr Sharon will have the endorsement of his cabinet and the Knesset for the withdrawal by next month. Yet the current plan calls for the actual withdrawal not to be implemented before next spring, and that hiatus is almost certain to be filled by Palestinian terror and Israeli reprisals. If so, whatever good

the Israeli initiative can achieve will be overwhelmed by violence.

To forestall that possibility, the Bush administration needs to shift its posture and press for at least a token Israeli withdrawal by the summer or autumn. It must also generate international pressure to produce meaningful Palestinian responses.

At the moment, there is neither a plan nor a mechanism to get the Palestinian Authority to assume security responsibilities in the areas from which the Israelis withdraw. Quite the opposite, with Hamas now seeking understandings with Yassir Arafat's Fatah organisation on a "national plan". In return for respecting the Palestinian Authority's leadership, the uprising against the Israelis would continue. While attacks from Gaza would halt, there would be no let-up from the West Bank. Israeli withdrawal from Gaza would be treated as a victory for the intifada, and, rather than Palestinians responding positively to an unprecedented Israeli move, the violence would continue from new positions. That would guarantee continued warfare and prove to most Israelis that Palestinians seek only Israel's destruction.

That must not be the outcome of an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and the first-ever Israeli evacuation of settlements in Palestinian areas. But it will be unless an active plan lays out the obligations Palestinians must assume. It will take a common international message to the Palestinian Authority to convince Palestinians that they must act. In public, Palestinians must know that the world is waiting to see if they are up to statehood and its obligations. If so, assistance and support will be forthcoming. Such a message, especially if spearheaded by the Europeans - seen as sympathetic to the Palestinians - could alter the balance of forces in favour of those Palestinians who understand that they must fulfil their responsibilities. In private, specific steps the Palestinian Authority must take and the help needed to take them must be sorted out and linked to timelines based on performance. . Should Palestinians begin to perform, Israelis must be encouraged to take steps to strengthen those in the Palestinian Authority who believe in coexistence.

Palestinians will resist any immediate focus on their responsibilities, preferring to receive their own assurances on permanent-status issues, to offset what the US has now done with Israel. That will raise delicate questions and should not be an argument against talking to Ahmed Qurei, the Palestinian prime minister. But that cannot become an excuse to avoid preparing for the Israeli withdrawal.

Ultimately, "realities on the ground" will count more than words. In the Middle East, nothing ever implements itself. For once, we must be better prepared than the radical Islamists for dealing with "the day after".

The writer was US Middle East envoy under President Bill Clinton and is director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

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