

Withdrawal without Reward

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Mar 24, 2004

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Let there be any doubt, the assassination of Sheik Ahmed Yassin, the founder and spiritual leader of Hamas, is a reminder that there is a war going on between the Israelis and Palestinians. For the last three years, there has been no real process for resolving it: the road map to peace exists on paper, but not in reality. And so the conflict grinds on, with victims mounting on both sides.

For the short term, Sheik Yassin's killing on Monday in Gaza is almost certain to foster retaliation by those eager to have Israelis suffer pain as well. Already yesterday, the Israeli military said it foiled a rocket attack on Israel by militants in southern Lebanon, killing two of the militants in an air strike. Yet for the long term, the fact remains that most Palestinians prefer coexistence and not perpetual struggle and did not see Sheik Yassin and Hamas as offering an acceptable pathway to the future.

It's no secret that Israeli military officials are concerned about the dangers of having it appear as if Hamas violence is the reason for Israel's planned military withdrawal from Gaza. (That, of course, may account for the increased impulse to go after Hamas and its leaders in Gaza.) What is more remarkable is that every Palestinian I spoke with during a recent visit to the Middle East agreed, believing that Hamas would gain psychologically and practically from an Israeli withdrawal.

One would think that this shared concern would make it possible for the two sides to find common ground and coordinate the Israeli withdrawal in a way that would benefit Palestinians. Perhaps, if Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel and the Palestinian prime minister, Ahmed Qurei, ever hold their long-delayed meeting, such a process could begin. But even before the killing of Sheik Yassin, it was hard to be optimistic about the two men reaching a workable agreement.

The Israelis are convinced that Mr. Qurei is powerless; that the leader of the Palestinian Authority, Yasir Arafat, prevents him from doing anything; and that Mr. Arafat prefers chaos to stability. Unless Mr. Qurei can show Mr. Sharon that he has a plan for security and that he is poised to act on it, the Israelis will continue on their chosen path of unilateral withdrawal from Gaza and the completion of a security barrier in the West Bank.

In normal circumstances, this would be a moment for the United States to step in and serve as mediator. But the Bush administration, too, has little faith in the Palestinian Authority and has had almost no discussion with it.

Instead, the administration has chosen to consult only with Prime Minister Sharon on his unilateral initiative. At one level, this is appropriate and understandable. After all, Mr. Sharon is readying a revolutionary move: an evacuation of settlements and withdrawal from territory without any reciprocation from the Palestinians. The administration wants this move to be as far-reaching as possible, believing it will be easier for the United States to gain international support for it.

But by focusing exclusively on the Israelis, the administration encourages passivity by everyone else, including the Palestinians, Egyptians and Europeans. Instead of taking up their role and responsibilities, they sit back and wait to see what the United States develops with Israel. Worse, only Hamas is so far making plans for the day after the Israeli military withdraws from Gaza and parts of the West Bank. In discussions with both Israelis and Palestinians I heard about Hamas efforts to take credit for the withdrawal, absorb Israeli settlements and shape Palestinian governance after the Israeli departure.

This is not an argument for the United States to stop working with Israel. It is a call for the Bush administration to begin parallel talks with the Palestinians, Egyptians, Jordanians and others to ensure a particular set of outcomes when the Israeli evacuation takes place. Fundamental questions need to be raised now, including these: What steps should the Palestinian Authority take so that it, and not Hamas, assumes control of the territories and Israeli settlements? What kinds of assistance and investment would help Palestinian moderates show that they, and not extremists, are able to deliver for the Palestinian people?

The Palestinians are unlikely to put the necessary measures in place, especially given the increased turmoil from Sheik Yassin's assassination, without pressure from Arab leaders and other members of the international community to do so. There must be a collective public message that Palestinians have much to gain by acting and much to lose by avoiding any responsibility. This would have the added benefit of raising the cost to Mr. Arafat of impeding the Palestinian Authority's efforts.

But unless the United States works out parallel understandings with the Palestinians and others, any initiative will fail its essential tests: creating greater security for Israel; putting Palestinians, free of Israeli control, in a position in which they assume real responsibilities; and fostering a climate that makes peace-making possible again. If the United States doesn't take the lead now to generate the right responses, Mr. Sharon's revolutionary move may produce only a new line of confrontation for those who reject peaceful coexistence.

Dennis Ross, envoy to the Middle East in the Clinton administration, is director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

New York Times

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