

The Way Forward in the Middle East Peace Process

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Ariel Sharon and Mahmoud Abbas have now met and declared an end to ongoing hostilities. Are we about to see peace made between the Israelis and Palestinians? No, but we may finally see an end to the war that has governed the daily reality of Israel and the Palestinian Authority since 2001.

Several factors should give us hope about the possibilities for the future. First, Yasir Arafat is gone and he was an impediment to change not only between Israelis and Palestinians but among Palestinians as well. Second, Mahmoud Abbas—someone I have always known as Abu Mazen—is committed to non-violence and having the Palestinian society characterized, in his words, by “one authority, one weapon, and political pluralism.” In other words, he is for peaceful coexistence with Israel and for law and order and democracy for Palestinians—a far cry from the chaos, corruption and violence of Yasir Arafat’s regime. Third, Ariel Sharon has committed himself to withdrawing from Gaza and the northern part of the West Bank, and he now leads a national unity government with the Labor party that provides a political base to implement his plans. Fourth, Egypt and Jordan are prepared to work with the Palestinians and Israelis to help stabilize the situation, particularly as disengagement proceeds, and this may be especially helpful to Abu Mazen’s efforts. Fifth, Secretary of State Rice has signaled clearly that the Administration intends to play a more active role and that will certainly be necessary.

While the current situation offers real promise, there are formidable obstacles to consolidating the ceasefire and moving into a credible peacemaking process. Abu Mazen’s intentions are one thing. His capabilities are another. The good news is that his election has given him a mandate to reverse the Arafat legacy of chaos and violence. The Palestinian public craves a normal life and Hamas, Islamic Jihad and others understand this well. That provides Abu Mazen leverage, and he seeks to use it to produce a period of calm, employing a strategy of cooptation, not confrontation. He hopes to buy time, show his way works, preside over elections at the municipal and national levels, and impose a rule of law. Taken together, he believes, these steps will build his authority and bind Hamas and others so that if they violate the rules, the Palestinian Authority will be justified in imposing a price.

Naturally, Hamas can also see what he intends. Though it is unlikely to go along with Abu Mazen’s plans for an extended period of time, it probably will go along with the truce in the near term. But over the next few months it will

undoubtedly cite Israeli behaviors as insufficient regarding prisoner releases, ongoing settlement activity, or continuing construction of the Israeli security barrier. Moreover, the desire to take credit for Israeli withdrawal from Gaza may motivate it to carry out attacks and breach the ceasefire.

What this suggests is that we are in a race against time. The key to Abu Mazen's strategy is to show sufficient and immediate benefits from his leadership in order to raise the cost to Hamas of violating the commitment to end all attacks. In practical terms, Abu Mazen must be able to deliver quickly on increased employment and economic opportunities. Currently 40 percent of Palestinians live on less than two dollars a day in the West Bank, and 60 percent live on less than two dollars a day in Gaza. Palestinians must also regain freedom of movement in the West Bank. Every Palestinian will feel the change if they suddenly don't have to wait in long lines at Israeli checkpoints.

While Abu Mazen doesn't need to deliver soon on the core issues of Jerusalem, borders, and refugees because expectations are low and he has no mandate to adjust Arafat's uncompromising posture, he does need to show that his way offers a pathway to fulfilling Palestinian national aspirations and that issues that matter to Palestinians have not already been resolved. And here the roadmap to peace offers him an explanation. After all, it provides a three phased approach to achieving an independent, viable, and democratic Palestinian state coexisting in peace and security with the Jewish State of Israel. We are already hearing Abu Mazen emphasize that the steps taken at the Sharm el-Sheikh summit constitute part of the first phase of the roadmap.

Clearly, Abu Mazen needs responsiveness from the Israelis to show his way (the way of non-violence) works. And Prime Minister Sharon by agreeing to stop military operations everywhere, pull back from five cities in the West Bank, and end targeted killings is trying to do his part. But Abu Mazen's needs will exceed these initial steps and that is one reason why he emphasizes the reactivation of the roadmap. In the first phase, Israel is supposed to dismantle all the unauthorized settler outposts and freeze all settlement activity, including natural growth. At a time when Sharon is facing significant and potentially violent settler opposition to his planned withdrawal from Gaza, he is unlikely to want to add to his difficulties with the settlers by taking these steps. He is likely to justify not acting on the outposts or settlement activity by arguing that he is leapfrogging his first phase obligations and acting on Israel's third phase obligations with the Gaza withdrawal at a time when Abu Mazen is not fulfilling what the first phase of the roadmap requires from the Palestinians.

Here some of the problems certain to emerge begin to come into focus. Abu Mazen's plans call for reaching an understanding with all the Palestinian factions to stop attacks against Israelis. But in the first phase of the roadmap the Palestinian Authority is supposed to make arrests, collect illegal weapons, and dismantle the terrorist capabilities and infrastructure. Is he likely to take any of these steps against groups with whom he has just concluded understandings on a ceasefire? Obviously not—but that need not be a problem if understandings are reached with Israel on the meaning, sequence, and timing of both sides' obligations under the roadmap.

Such understandings or agreements on the roadmap won't materialize on their own. Similarly, the cessation of hostilities or the truce that has now been declared will require ongoing implementation and the removal of ambiguities. For example, do both sides have a common view of what the truce is and is not? Do they share the same understanding of what would constitute a violation? Do they agree on what will be done in the event of a violation? Do they have the same view of activities permitted under the truce—e.g., can Hamas reconstitute its capability for conducting attacks against Israelis?

What I am suggesting is that much needs to be done first to secure the truce and to build on it in a way that creates a bridge to the roadmap. The roadmap remains largely undefined with each side interpreting the other side's obligations maximally and its own obligations minimally. Nonetheless, it is an agreed framework and both sides can use it politically to justify their actions. It, too, however can't implement itself.

So what should the United States be doing? Our first concern must be on pinning down the meaning of the truce and its ground-rules, while also removing any open questions or gaps in the expectations of the two sides. Secretary Rice's appointment of General Ward is an excellent step and he needs to get with the two sides soon and have them explain to him in a three-way meeting what they have agreed on and what happens in the event of a violation.

Second, we need to make sure that our assistance—and that of others—goes into labor intensive projects that put Palestinians back to work and meet real Palestinian needs. With the British hosting an international conference on Palestinian political, security, and economic needs the first week of March, we should collectively identify tangible projects—such as massive housing construction—that could begin to materialize soon. The United States and the European Union should publicly call on the Gulf oil states (who have had tremendous windfalls in oil revenues) to come to the conference ready to invest in such projects immediately.

Third, recognizing that calm is the key to taking advantage of the current moment and building on it, we also need to coordinate closely with the British, French, and Germans, on their approach to Iran—and not only on the nuclear issue. Hizbollah is generously underwritten by Iran and it is currently the greatest threat to an enduring ceasefire. Hizbollah is actively pressing (and even offering very large financial payments to) Palestinian factions, including the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, to kill Israelis. Given the importance that the Europeans attach to promoting Israeli-Palestinian peace, it is essential for them to make this a central agenda item in their discussions with Iran and to be clear that they intend to shine a public spotlight on Iran's efforts to disrupt Israeli-Palestinian hopes for peace.

Fourth, we need to get Arab leaders to collectively endorse Abu Mazen's commitment to ending the violence. In Palestinian political terms, it would help to have an Arab umbrella of support for ending violence; it would strengthen Abu Mazen's hand and raise the cost to Hamas and others of violating the ceasefire.

Fifth, we must also begin to work with the Israelis and Palestinians to ensure coordination on the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and fleshing out the meaning of their respective obligations on the roadmap. Should we not do that, problems will soon begin to emerge as a result of different expectations on settlement activity and security obligations.

There is, as Secretary Rice has said, a very promising moment now. The challenges, however, are clear. If we act to capitalize on the moment by preserving calm, managing the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and the northern part of the West Bank, and demonstrating that non-violence and reform pay off for Palestinians, everything will become possible. If not, it will be many years before we see another opening to end this historic conflict. ❖

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