Unilateralism and Its Discontents

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Jan 22, 2004

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F ew if any observers expect the Bush administration to take any meaningful steps to affect the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian war in 2004.

After all, the administration is unlikely to put any pressure on Israel in an election year, is preoccupied with Iraq, and has little faith that the Palestinian Authority can do anything so long as Yasser Arafat has veto power over any security measures. And yet, if little is done, this year will be characterized by more drift, violence, and anger by Israelis and Palestinians alike at the hopelessness of the situation.

Yet the expected lack of high visibility initiatives does not imply a lack of options. There are at least three: a limited Israel-PA deal, Palestinian regime change, and coordinated unilateralism.

A Limited Deal

The content of such a deal between Prime Ministers Ariel Sharon and Ahmed Qurei is not hard to envision. Both can agree on a comprehensive cease-fire. Palestinians agree that no Israelis can be attacked on either side of the Green Line, and the Israelis agree to stop targeted killings and arrest sweeps. Both may even be able to agree on a number of steps by the Palestinians to enforce a cease-fire and limit the ability of groups like Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the Al-Aksa Martyrs' Brigades to wage terror. Such measures might include actively preventing attacks, punishing those who would violate the cease-fire, and closing down tunnels for smuggling weapons and explosives, the Kassam rocket workshops, and bomb-making labs.

Going beyond these steps to dismantle the terrorist infrastructure, as called for in the road map, is something Qurei knows Yasser Arafat will not permit. But he is likely to believe that Arafat will accept a more limited deal that at least gives a cease-fire a chance to endure. Even for this, Abu Ala will press Sharon to lift all checkpoints, allow Arafat to travel at least within the West Bank and Gaza, and suspend work on the fence and settlement activity.

While this may be more than Sharon is willing to do, he probably can negotiate on this basis and produce understandings on a timeline for lifting checkpoints, slowing work on the fence if there is no terror, and ending the outward expansion of settlements so no additional land is taken.

Both Sharon and Qurei might accept such a limited deal, given the unilateralist alternatives neither is likely to favor.

Sharon, because he seeks Palestinian quid quo pros for any painful Israeli steps. Qurei, because he would rather be seen as the prime minister who succeeded in changing Israeli behavior and restoring normal life than one who presided over Israel's imposition of its own border. For the former, he needs a deal.

Of course, the problem for Abu Ala is one of delivery. Arafat will certainly limit the scope of what the Palestinians do on security. Hamas and Islamic Jihad see violence as serving their interests, convinced that they are gaining strength at Fatah's expense. Even if they accept a new hudna, how long will it hold? And will it be comprehensive?

For those who believe that it is worth trying to forge an understanding with Qurei because there will be no Palestinian prime ministers after him, they will accept the price of dealing indirectly with Arafat. For those who believe that Arafat will never change, the answer is not a limited deal but the expulsion of Arafat.

Palestinian Regime Change

If, as President Bush declared, a Palestinian state cannot be built on the foundation of terror and corruption, then it is clear that no Palestinian state can emerge so long as Arafat dominates the Palestinian landscape. Arafat has never sought to delegitimize terror, continuing to refer to Palestinians who carry out acts of terror as martyrs, and he remains the main roadblock to Palestinian reform. While he is determined to show that nothing can be done without him, his history demonstrates that peace is not possible with him. If he blocks all possibility of change -- whether building credible and transparent institutions or ending incitement and preventing terrorism -- why not remove him from the territories and make clear he can never return?

As in most cases, regime change may be the answer theoretically and in the long run, but it is not so simple to implement in the short run. There can be no question that Arafat's interests are not the interests of the Palestinian people. But he is an icon to them: He put them on the map; he produced international recognition for their cause; he succeeded in unifying them when no one else did; he created dignity for a people that had felt only humiliation.

For all these reasons, if he is expelled by the Israelis the response from Palestinians will be one of anger. For those who think that this will dissipate after weeks or a few months, don't be so sure. The likely response to his expulsion will be the immediate collapse of the Palestinian Authority, chaos within the territories, competition to see who can be more anti-Israeli, and the strengthening of groups like Hamas.

Perhaps Palestinians will see after a period of time that this is all self-defeating, but unless there is a believable solution available to them, not one that offers them half of the West Bank, one should not be hopeful about prospects for stability. While change must come to the Palestinians, it is they who must produce it.

Coordinated Unilateralism

Unilateralism represents a default option. If the first two options are off the table, something must still be done to meet the need to transform the current situation. One thing is for sure: the Palestinians cannot have it both ways. If they do not fulfill their security responsibilities, they leave Israel only two choices -- preserving the siege with all its checkpoints or building a security barrier and unilaterally withdrawing from part of the territory.

In truth, unilateralism need not be bad. For Israelis, it could produce security and an enduring Jewish majority. For Palestinians, it could mean a restoration of normal life, including the lifting of checkpoints and removal of Israelis from their daily lives. But this is unlikely to happen unless the unilateral steps are coordinated.

The Bush administration could devote its efforts to managing the emerging unilateralism. It could coordinate with the Israeli government on the route of the barrier, guided by the criteria of security, demography, and need for an eventual political solution to the conflict. It could coordinate with the Palestinians on assuming responsibility in the areas from which the Israelis withdraw, emphasizing that recognition of Palestinian statehood and establishment of permanent borders depend on their security effectiveness.

Ultimately, if Prime Ministers Sharon and Qurei cannot produce a limited understanding and a political pathway, the Bush administration's greatest contribution in 2004 would be to ensure a coordinated approach to unilateralism that makes an eventual peace agreement possible.

The writer served as special Middle East coordinator under president Bill Clinton and director of the State Department's policy planning office in the first Bush administration. He is currently the director of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

Jerusalem Post

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