

# Israel Needs a Palestinian Partner

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**R**arely has the reality between Israelis and Palestinians appeared to be so bleak. Terror continues unabated. The Israeli siege of the territories is tighter than ever. And, with the U.S. preoccupied with Iraq, there is no ongoing diplomacy.

Israel faces the unpleasant reality that there is not a lot more it can do militarily against Palestinian terrorists. It has already shut down nearly all movement in the West Bank; it maintains a presence in nearly every West Bank city; and it carries out daily raids against all known and suspected Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and al Aksa Martyrs' Brigades leaders and operatives. To make the closure of the West Bank more complete, Israel has been forced to call up a limited number of reserves. No doubt, there would have been many more successful terror attacks without this Israeli posture. Unfortunately, the terror does not stop, and the lesson from the past is that it only will when Palestinians assume the responsibility of policing themselves and making clear they won't tolerate acts of terror from these groups. According to leading members of the Israeli military, including apparently the chief of staff, Israel must find a way to relieve the siege of Palestinians if that is to happen.

More than anything else, Israel requires a Palestinian partner. Mahmoud Abbas certainly seemed to be that partner. But he resigned after three months, the victim of Yasir Arafat's opposition and his inability to build his authority by showing his way -- not Arafat's -- worked. While he blamed both Israel and the U.S. for not doing enough to help him produce change on the ground for Palestinians, he reserved his most bitter denunciations for Arafat. He had hoped to circumvent Arafat using Arab and international pressure. But that too was unavailing because neither the Arabs nor the Europeans gave him the kind of backing that he needed.

Following Mr. Abbas' resignation and the suicide bombing in Haifa on Oct. 4, Arafat appointed an emergency prime minister, Ahmed Qureia. Mr. Qureia's term as emergency prime minister expired this week and he is now expected to present a new cabinet for approval to the legislative council as early as today. Ahmed Qureia, or Abu Ala as I have always known him, is no less desirous of stopping the violence and restoring normal life for Palestinians than Mahmoud Abbas. He, too, is strongly committed to living in peace with Israel, not as a favor to the Israelis but as a necessity for Palestinians. Israelis, including Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, know and respect Abu Ala, but will insist on full, not half measures, against Hamas and Islamic Jihad before responding to him -- and Arafat effectively

blocked such measures when Mr. Abbas appeared ready to take them.

Can Abu Ala succeed where Mahmoud Abbas failed? It won't be easy. Arafat will remain an impediment. Unlike Mr. Abbas, however, Abu Ala will not seek to circumvent Arafat, but to co-opt him. That is the way he has always dealt with Arafat. But to co-opt him he must deliver something to him. And, ironically, he cannot do so unless he is also able to co-opt Mr. Sharon.

What Arafat most wants right now is a "two-way" ticket. Mr. Sharon has been willing to allow him a one-way ticket -- meaning, he can leave the West Bank but not come back. Arafat wants to be free to travel and return to the West Bank and Gaza. Abu Ala knows that if he can deliver this to Arafat, he can exact a price of Arafat's support for the security steps that must be taken against Hamas and Islamic Jihad. He certainly knows he has no chance of convincing Mr. Sharon to accept the two-way ticket absent demonstrable and credible action against these groups. Even then, Mr. Sharon's instinct will militate against such a deal, in no small part because he will, in effect, be countenancing indirect dealings with Arafat.

And yet, this possibility should not be dismissed. Making peace right now is not the issue. Stopping a daily war that is imposing a terrible price on both sides is. If given a choice between doing that or having the next six months look like the last two months, Mr. Sharon may be open to a deal with Abu Ala. But the latter will need all his remarkable skill as a negotiator to convince Mr. Sharon that he will deliver not a cease-fire so the terror groups can regroup, but a blow to the very capability of Hamas and Islamic Jihad to wage terror -- and Mr. Sharon won't simply take his word for it, he will require demonstrations of this intent.

Abu Ala must also be able to persuade Arafat that this is his last best chance to preserve at least his symbolic role as Palestinian leader, pointing out that Israeli anger and desperation will at some point soon produce "removal," and not the two-way ticket he offers. And, finally, Abu Ala would be wise to keep in mind -- as all Palestinians and Israelis must -- that this is the last chance for a Palestinian prime minister. If after Mr. Abbas' failure, Abu Ala, too, can't make it, there won't be a third prime minister candidate who anyone will take seriously. No prime minister means no Palestinian reform, no Palestinian partner, no diplomacy, and no security. But it does mean that the security barrier, what the Israelis call the "fence," and the Palestinians the "wall," will be the future. Maybe that reality will give Abu Ala a chance to succeed.

Mr. Ross, director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, was special Middle East coordinator in the Clinton administration and director of the Policy Planning staff during the first Bush administration. ❖

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