

Arab Leaders Must Act

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Once again high hopes are giving way to despair in the Middle East. While the administration still speaks of progress being made between Israelis and Palestinians, it is difficult to see it. Unfortunately, the progress was always more illusionary than real. There was a cease-fire, but there was not a peace process. Neither side implemented what was called for in the first phase of the road map, with the Palestinians hoping calm would produce Israeli pullbacks and the Israelis reluctant to pull back far without some sign that groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad would be controlled, even if they were not initially disarmed.

Can the road map be salvaged now? Can Prime Minister Abbas's government be saved? The stakes are high. Should Mahmoud Abbas resign there would be no Palestinian partner -- no one to assume responsibilities, no one to build a state based on reform and the rule of law, and no one with whom to negotiate. Yasser Arafat would be happy, believing he would recoup his position. But his constant efforts to undermine Mahmoud Abbas and block any efforts to confront those who literally blew up the cease-fire have cemented his status as a revolutionary whose only cause is his personal rule, not the well-being of Palestinians.

For Abbas to survive he will have to produce, and that is harder today than it was yesterday and will be even harder tomorrow than it is today. Israeli targeted killings signal that the Israelis will act if the Palestinians do not, and yet they also create such anger among Palestinians that Abbas and his security chief find it more difficult to crack down on Hamas and Islamic Jihad -- even in Gaza, where they have the means to do so. Add to this Arafat's blocking maneuvers and Abbas looks increasingly hemmed in.

With Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage headed to the region next week, the administration will try to persuade the Israelis to give Abbas some time to take meaningful steps against the terrorist groups. But after the Jerusalem bombing, the Israelis will no longer settle for half measures. Something different and more dramatic is now necessary to prevent an inevitable escalation and to preserve diplomacy as an option.

It is time for Arab leaders to assume their responsibility. Slogans are not sufficient. Prime Minister Abbas needs the cover of Arab legitimacy to confront Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. The Israelis need to see some dramatic actions by Palestinians and Arab leaders alike to give them a reason to pause and give the Palestinians the chance to take convincing steps on security.

To that end, Arab leaders need to cross a threshold: Send a delegation of Arab foreign ministers -- to include Saud al Faisal -- to Jerusalem and Ramallah. They must meet with Prime Ministers Sharon and Abbas. While calling on the Israelis to fulfill their parts of the road map -- cease military operations, lift checkpoints, pull back from Palestinian cities, freeze settlement activity -- they must make clear that Hamas and Islamic Jihad violated the cease-fire and threatened the Palestinian cause. The actions of these organizations can no longer be tolerated, and the Palestinian Authority will have the active support and material assistance of Arab leaders in doing what the road map requires of the Palestinians -- namely, the effective targeting of terrorist groups, collection of illegal weapons, and dismantling of terrorist capability and infrastructure. There is no other way; the Arab call to action must be presented as the only way to achieve Palestinian interests.

Obviously Arafat remains a major impediment. The Arab ministers must insist that he now accept the consolidation of Palestinian security forces under Abbas; nothing less is acceptable. Rather than calling on Arafat to help -- which only feeds his desire to prove nothing can be done without him -- the ministers must make clear that their criticism of him will no longer be kept private if he prevents the consolidation.

Anyone who has worked in the Middle East will understand that Arab leaders will resist playing this role. Not a single Arab leader condemned the Jerusalem bus bombing, and to date no Arab leader has ever condemned Hamas by name. Now they will claim they cannot do so because of Israeli actions -- actions that in the Arab world make Hamas "resistance" heroic.

Certainly they will not be prepared to take these or other steps if President Bush does not now push them to do so. Does he have the leverage to do so? He does in no small part because Arab leaders believe active U.S. engagement is critical to defusing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For a president who did not rush to be involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict, he should make it clear that he remains committed to doing our part, but that we have no chance of succeeding if Hamas is going to be free to subvert the hopes for peace any time it suits that organization. If Abbas is not publicly backed now -- both in terms of legitimizing confrontation with the groups that destroyed the cease-fire and in overcoming Arafat's opposition -- there is little that we can do. Do your part, the president must tell them, and we will do ours with the Israelis. Don't do your part and diplomacy won't shape the future, but the fence the Israelis are building will.

That is the unfortunate reality. We are probably only one or two Hamas bombs away from losing diplomacy as an option for the foreseeable future. Perhaps President Bush can use that sober reality to salvage a process he thought he had launched at Aqaba. ❖

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