

When Is a Fence Not a Fence?

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While the ceasefire is generally holding between Palestinians and Israelis, the first phase of the roadmap is barely unfolding. Palestinians are making an effort to stem incitement and at least stop terror attacks in Gaza and parts of the West Bank. The Israelis have lifted a few checkpoints, withdrawn from Gaza and Bethlehem and may soon withdraw from two additional West Bank cities, and seem prepared to dismantle additional settler outposts. However, steps that are tough for each side -- collecting illegal arms and dismantling terrorist infrastructure for the Palestinians and pulling back the IDF and freezing settlement activity for the Israelis -- remain undone. No one has a stake in upsetting the ceasefire, but both prime ministers, Mahmoud Abbas and Ariel Sharon, came to Washington with a familiar agenda: Get the other side to perform.

This was not simply the traditional posture of keeping the onus on the other side. No, in this case, both sides feel they cannot take difficult steps without greater delivery from the other side. Mr. Sharon wants the Palestinians to show that they will confront Hamas and Islamic Jihad both -- so as to know that Israel can afford to pull back, and also to explain to his own constituency why Israel must meet its obligations under the roadmap. Mr. Abbas, whose challenge is different, must build his authority. He can only do so by showing that his way works and Arafat's does not. With that in mind, he has set his sights on changing Israeli behavior. We see this not only in his preoccupation to get the Israelis to pull back and lift checkpoints -- because this will allow normal life to resume for Palestinians -- but also in his desire to stop what he calls the "wall" that Israel is constructing in the West Bank.

With few exceptions, the wall is actually a fence. But to Palestinians, it represents a unilateral Israeli move to carve up territory that should rightfully be theirs in a Palestinian state. In his meeting with President Bush, Mr. Abbas showed a map that projected what the completed fence would look like. That map showed the fence effectively surrounding any Palestinian entity and carving it up. Small wonder that President Bush announced with Mr. Abbas in the Rose Garden that the "wall" was a "problem."

To be sure, the Israelis see the fence in very different terms. For them, it means security. The Israeli public knows that there is a fence around Gaza and in the 32 months of the Intifada, there has not been a single suicide bombing attack that came from Gaza into Israel. For most Israelis, if a fence around Gaza worked, why not also have one in the West Bank? In each place, the fence is designed to keep Palestinians out -- or at least to keep out those Palestinians

determined to come and kill Israelis.

Not all Israelis have been fence enthusiasts. Most settlers, especially those in outlying settlements, have opposed the fence. Inescapably, they see themselves being on the wrong side of the fence and understand that sooner or later that will lead to evacuation of their settlements.

To date, the Sharon government has sought to blur exactly where the fence would be. It is to be constructed in phases, and at least some plans -- those reflected in the projections that Mr. Abbas showed President Bush -- would provide for a fence not only along the western part of the Palestinian territories but also the eastern part as well in the Jordan Valley. Were this to be the case, and were the fence to take on a permanent character, Mr. Abbas would be right that a viable Palestinian state would not be a possibility.

No doubt, this is why President Bush declared the fence a problem. While the location of the fence is something to be concerned about, the concept is not. A fence would not even be a factor if it were not for the violence of the last few years. Truth be told, those responsible for the fence are Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades. Their terror produced the impulse for the fence. If violence were not a threat, the fence would not be necessary.

At this juncture, Mr. Sharon has said that he will continue to construct the fence, but will try to have it infringe less on the lives of Palestinians. He has agreed to consult with the administration as the construction proceeds. Since the fence is driven by security concerns, the administration would be well-advised to try to tie the pace of construction to the security situation and to Palestinian performance of their roadmap responsibilities.

In this connection, should the Palestinians actually begin to dismantle the terrorist capabilities, there should be a pause in the construction. Mr. Abbas has real political needs and he must show that he is producing. Clearly, the fence is taking on a mythological quality among Palestinians, and as such its construction will be used against Mr. Abbas. But we will not do him or the process a favor if we insist on stopping the fence without Palestinian performance -- something that Palestinians must see is the key to stopping the fence and achieving a truly independent state. And, here, a ceasefire alone is not sufficient to stop the fence. A ceasefire, by definition tactical, can be revoked, just as a pause in construction of the fence can be revoked.

To transform the current ceasefire and the initial confidence-building steps into a true peace-making process, both sides are going to have to make tough decisions that until now they have avoided. For Palestinians, this means taking the difficult psychological and practical step of confronting groups like Hamas that want to preserve their capability to use violence whenever it suits them. Yet, this is the ultimate answer to the fence: Remove the capability of those who will use violence, and the fence, in President Bush's words, becomes "irrelevant." Leave that capability intact, and the fence becomes inevitable. ❖

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