

Help Abbas Succeed

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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After a week of violence that followed the Aqaba summit, most Middle East observers are pessimistic about breaking the Israeli-Palestinian stalemate. Yet after a week of extensive discussions with both sides, I believe it's possible to create a period of calm.

Among Palestinians, I found a profound desire to see the war with Israel end. The public wants to give their new prime minister, Mahmoud Abbas, a chance. More important, the activists of Yasser Arafat's Fatah, the Tanzim, who led the first intifada more than a decade ago and who have played an instrumental role in this one, believe that it's time for change. In meetings with several Tanzim leaders, I heard:

Force cannot work on Israelis or Palestinians.

A two-state solution -- one Israel, one Palestine -- is the only answer.

This moment must not be lost, not only because of the desire to resume peace talks but also because reform of the Palestinian Authority makes it necessary.

It's a mistake for Hamas to dominate the intifada.

There would not be support for a confrontation with Hamas, but the organization would not be permitted to block the current opportunity for peace.

The views of Tanzim leaders are critical. In the West Bank, in particular, they dominate the grass roots in every city. Mr. Abbas and his security minister, Mohammed Dahlan, cannot take on Hamas without Tanzim support.

The Tanzim strongly supports a dialogue with Hamas to produce a cease-fire with Israel. Apart from needing the Tanzim to fulfill its security obligations, the new Palestinian government seeks a cease-fire because it needs time to rebuild its capabilities. And President Bush at Aqaba accepted Mr. Abbas' request for time.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon might also have accepted Mr. Abbas' request for time if there had not been attacks on Israeli soldiers and settlers almost immediately after the Aqaba summit June 6. Mr. Sharon and the Israeli military were not prepared to refrain from military acts, including targeted killings, if it meant there would be attacks against Israelis and no Palestinian assumption of responsibility.

The recent violence was a grim reminder to both sides that the current opportunity easily could be lost. So direct talks between senior Palestinian and Israeli security officials resumed even before U.S. officials and Secretary of State Colin L. Powell arrived on the scene. Palestinian support for a cease-fire has not weakened, and Mr. Sharon has indicated Israel will accept it if Palestinian security forces assume responsibilities in at least part of Gaza and perhaps also in Bethlehem.

The Israeli acceptance of a cease-fire, however reluctantly, is revealing.

By definition, a cease-fire is a tactical move; it does not provide for dismantling the terrorist infrastructure as demanded by the Israelis and required by the "road map" to peace. But it reflects an understanding of reality. The Palestinian Authority needs time to rebuild its security structure and capabilities. It also needs a political context that the Palestinian public will accept when it's time to take apart the terror networks that Mr. Arafat permitted to flourish in the Palestinian territories.

Notwithstanding the desire for change on the Palestinian side, Mr. Abbas must show he can deliver. That will not prove to be easy, given several formidable obstacles.

First, he will face the continuing challenge of Hamas. Will it accept the cease-fire? And if so, for how long? In the aftermath of Israel's failed attack on Hamas senior official Abdel Aziz Rantisi, the Hamas position has hardened. It is not ruling out a cease-fire, but it is trying to bolster its position and tie Mr. Abbas' hands in terms of acting against it later.

Second, Mr. Arafat remains a serious impediment to change. While paying lip service to his "brother" Mr. Abbas, he seeks to subvert him by making competing appointments in the security apparatus, requiring the regional commanders to answer to him and not to Mr. Abbas or Mr. Dahlan and financing anti-Abbas leaflets. For Mr. Arafat, Mr. Abbas' success is his failure, proving that Mr. Arafat was the problem.

Third, the Israeli threshold of patience is very low. No senior Israeli official with whom I spoke questions Mr. Abbas' intentions. But they fear he will retreat when facing internal resistance and are convinced he will act only if he knows the Israelis will otherwise.

In such complicated circumstances, the United States will have to play a decisive role if the current moment is not to be lost. Mr. Abbas -- and our Arab partners -- must know unmistakably that granting time for developing capabilities does not mean not assuming responsibilities now. At a minimum, incitement must stop and whatever is agreed about obligations in Gaza or Bethlehem must be fulfilled.

Mr. Sharon must know that there should be no surprises; Israel has a duty to its citizens to go after "ticking bombs" if the Palestinians remain unable to do so. But there needs to be a clear understanding on what constitutes such a threat. And more than anything, there needs to be a precise choreographed set of steps that both sides will take (and not take) and on which they will be held to account.

The United States is not yet in the monitoring business. For that, there must be a clear standard of performance understood by both sides. That does not exist today, and Washington must create it.

If Mr. Abbas is to succeed, if the Tanzim are to remain committed to change and if the Israelis are to achieve their strategic objective of having a real peace partner, this is where the Bush administration must exert its efforts. ❖

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