

Directions at the Crossroads

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If there was ever a moment to end the ongoing war between Israelis and Palestinians and return to the path of peace making, this is it. In Israel, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has established a new baseline for the Likud Party, speaking of the need to end the occupation of 3.5 million Palestinians and to divide the land with them. Mahmoud Abbas, the first ever Palestinian prime minister, speaks of the folly of the Intifada and his determination to see Palestinians fulfill their responsibilities. And President Bush is signaling with his own foray into Middle East summitry that his administration will do its part to help the parties transform the current reality.

There should be no illusions: Peace is not about to break out. The fundamental divide on Jerusalem, borders and refugees is not about to be bridged between the two parties. But even if a resolution of the core issues is not in the offing, there is an opportunity to bring the day to day struggle that has imposed such high costs on both Palestinians and Israelis to an end.

It won't happen by itself. It won't come from exhortations or slogans. And it almost certainly won't be achieved overnight. Instead, it will result from very practical understandings between Israelis and Palestinians that change the realities on the ground and restore the basic bargain of peace making: Israelis get security, Palestinians get a genuine pathway to independence.

The value of the roadmap is that it provides a point of departure and a general direction for the restoration of that bargain. It was never designed to be a blueprint nor could it be: A blueprint must be agreed on by the parties. The map thus far was negotiated by the U.S., the Russians, the European Union, and the U.N., none of whom are responsible for carrying out a single Palestinian or Israeli obligation.

Inevitably, both Israelis and Palestinians will seek to refine what the roadmap calls for, particularly given their differing interpretations of its every provision. In the tedious and difficult diplomacy that will be required to sustain a renewed peace process, the U.S. will have to play a leading role.

I say this not simply because the Israeli and Palestinian expectations are so different about what the other will need to do to comply with the roadmap, but also because of the obstacles that will continue to make any peace process difficult. Hamas and Islamic Jihad will not meekly acquiesce in their disarmament. To make matters worse, Yasir Arafat will see Prime Minister Abbas's success as his failure. He will seek to block Mr. Abbas's ability to deliver on

the Palestinian responsibilities on security just as he will seek to preserve at least the image that nothing can be done without him. And for good measure, Israel will understandably find it difficult to relax controls on Palestinian life which is what Mr. Abbas needs to build his authority if terror attacks against Israelis continue.

So the obstacles are real. But so is the desire on both sides to restore a more normal life. Our involvement with both sides now as they work out practical arrangements on the ground can help them reach necessary understandings and foster the accountability that will be essential to sustaining and building on those understandings.

Having made this potential process a possibility, what must President Bush do in the coming week to launch it effectively? First, his representatives must work closely with Prime Ministers Sharon and Abbas to make sure there are agreements on the initial steps each will take -- Palestinians on incitement and on security in Gaza and parts of the West Bank and Israelis on lifting checkpoints in Gaza and dismantling unauthorized settler outposts in the West Bank -- that can be blessed by the president at the summit in Aqaba.

Second, Mr. Bush can, with the G-8 partners, gain support for a rapid infusion of assistance into the Palestinian areas so the new Palestinian government will be able to show its constituents how life will get better. Mr. Bush can also make clear that we will not work with those who continue to have high level meetings with Arafat particularly because he uses those meetings to demonstrate his continuing international weight and to remind those who must carry out the will of the new Palestinian government of the folly of implementing that which he opposes.

Third, the president needs the Egyptian, Jordanian, and Saudi leaders in Sharm al Sheikh to provide an umbrella of legitimacy for a Palestinian crackdown on those who use terror to subvert the possibilities of peaceful coexistence with Israel. Given the terror attacks in Saudi Arabia and Morocco, and their desire for us to play a more active role in the peace process, there may never be a better moment for these leaders to issue a broad declaration that makes clear that no cause can be served by terror, and that those who use terror now are enemies of the Palestinian cause. As Mahmoud Abbas said, terror takes a just cause -- the Palestinian cause -- and "destroys it." A public embrace by Arab leaders can show that he has Arab support for what he must do with those who are not willing to forsake violence and terror.

Finally, with the Israeli and Palestinian prime ministers, the president will want to be able to announce agreement on some initial steps to be taken by both sides. But he should also use the summit as a public platform to have each side address the fears and doubts of the other, while committing themselves to his vision of two states and the goals of the roadmap. Prime Minister Abbas can say that terror is wrong and will not be tolerated and that he recognizes that there must be coexistence with the Jewish state of Israel. Prime Minister Sharon can say that he recognizes there is only a political solution to this conflict and that an independent Palestinian state is a necessary part of that solution. And President Bush can say that he won't rest until his vision of two states is achieved, but that there will be no Palestinian state born of violence -- only negotiations can lead to a solution that fulfills the needs and aspirations of Palestinians and Israelis alike.

All this may be a tall order, but President Bush, having proven himself in warfare, appears to recognize that the current moment won't last. Now is the time to work to restore hope between Israelis and Palestinians. ❖

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