

Making Bush's Vision Realistic

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After much hesitation and internal debate, President Bush has changed the ground rules on American involvement in ending the conflict in the Middle East. His call for a new Palestinian leadership as well as new democratic institutions and new security measures has raised the bar for Palestinian statehood. His central message is that the Palestinians are not entitled to a state they must earn it.

Only when the Palestinians demonstrate that they can reform their government can the creation of a state be possible. The Israelis are also called on to respond to a credible Palestinian transformation by negotiating an end to the occupation.

The vision Mr. Bush outlined in his speech on Monday is forceful, but it is far more an exhortation for reform than a plan. Even as exhortation it faces significant problems. What happens, for example, if Yasir Arafat, still an important symbol for many Palestinians, is re-elected in free and fair elections early next year? How will President Bush go about making his vision of transformation a reality? Will he give the Palestinian people a way to achieve what they need to achieve? Will his statement this week have any more effect than Secretary of State Colin Powell's speech last fall or his own speech on April 4?

I hope so, but I am doubtful. The words are right, but I do not see the mechanism for connecting diplomacy to the realities on the ground. Secretary Powell has been asked by Mr. Bush to work intensively with others "on a comprehensive plan to support Palestinian reform and institution building." Who on the Palestinian side will he work with? In the period before elections and the creation of new institutions, who other than the remnants of the Palestinian Authority can Secretary Powell find to stop the violence? And make no mistake: no diplomatic effort, no reform process, no political talks will have any chance of success if the violence continues, because the day-to-day situation of terrorism and reprisals is a force that will continue to overwhelm any plan.

Acts of terror like last week's suicide bombings will continue to produce Israeli responses. No country would be passive in the face of such attacks. But the Israeli responses are inevitably placing Palestinian towns, villages and cities indeed, the whole Palestinian population under an increasingly tight siege. In such circumstances, simple movement, not to mention institutional reform, will be impossible to carry out.

Therefore, the first order of business has to be stopping the violence. The Israelis will not pull back unless they have

a reason to believe that the terror will abate. And certainly at this point they will not trust Palestinian promises.

The United States will need to take the lead. In the near term, stopping the terror means working with those Palestinians in the Palestinian Authority who still have the means to fight terror and aiding them as they act to fulfill this mission.

Since it is neither practical nor realistic to assume that such efforts are possible throughout all of the West Bank and Gaza, why not try a rolling approach to new security measures, starting in Gaza? The Palestinian security forces are basically intact in Gaza, and the Israeli presence is far less intrusive there than it is in the West Bank. With Palestinian intellectuals taking out ads in the newspapers calling for a halt to attacks against Israeli civilians, now is a good time to test whether any part of the Palestinian Authority is willing to act forcefully against Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza.

If the Palestinian security forces do act, a similar effort could begin in different parts of the West Bank. They could start by taking action, for example, in the Jericho area, the only city in the West Bank where the Israeli army currently does not have a presence. If the Palestinians perform adequately in Gaza and Jericho, the Israelis could pull back forces from those areas and eventually from other areas where Palestinian security forces act to counter terrorism.

This rolling approach could then be linked to the beginnings of a reform process in Palestinian state-building. This approach would not expose the Israelis to new threats of terror and would provide some proof of Palestinian intentions. Equally important will be the readiness of the Palestinian Authority to condemn by name and confront Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Al Aksa Martyrs Brigades and others.

Palestinian leaders allied with Mr. Arafat will claim that to confront Hamas and others they need to be able to show the people what will be gained. Mr. Bush is not likely to satisfy this counterdemand. But American support remains important to Palestinian statehood, and he has indicated that such support depends on Palestinian performance.

At the same time, it is significant that Mr. Bush reiterated his call for a politically and economically viable Palestinian state, with details to be fleshed out in future negotiations. Assuming Palestinian performance, we should insist on reciprocal Israeli moves designed to provide the Palestinians the space to develop. We should also provide financial assistance for Palestinian institutional reforms.

Of course, the Palestinians have to show the world that there will be only one authority and that independent militias with their own agendas and weapons will not be tolerated. This is the best test of whether statehood is possible in the near future.

If the Palestinians are not ready to accept this challenge, the probable outcome will be Israeli reoccupation of Palestinian areas or unilateral separation. The former is not sustainable over time, and the latter, though more likely, would be an admission that diplomatic solutions are simply unavailable for the foreseeable future. In such a circumstance, the wall that the Israelis have begun to build in the West Bank will be more than just an obstacle to terrorists; it will also dash Palestinian hopes for a viable state any time soon. ❖

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