

Making Reform a Reality

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Articles & Testimony

Amid the gloom one feels in speaking to Israelis and Palestinians these days, I discovered something interesting in a just-completed trip to the area. Both sides have been profoundly affected by the events of the past 20 months. Both have suffered. Both are angry. Both have doubts about each other. And yet both have also evolved and would accept fundamental change.

In Israel today, there is a basic consensus that peace is not possible with Yasser Arafat. But another less visible and far more surprising consensus now stretches across the political spectrum: When a real Palestinian partner emerges, one that will fulfill its obligations and accept Israel as a Jewish state, Israel will need to give up the bulk of the territories. The Clinton ideas or something very much like them are acceptable to left and right alike when Palestinians prove they are ready to live in peace with Israel, forsaking violence, terror and the right of return to Israel for refugees.

Even representatives of the settler movement acknowledged to me that the bulk of the settlers would accept the Clinton ideas -- which would provide for three small settlement blocs in the West Bank while giving the Palestinians roughly 97 percent of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. While the political establishment is not embracing such ideas at this point, the Israeli public is clearly ahead of the politicians -- provided a credible Palestinian partner is involved.

What accounts for the change in Israeli attitudes? Put simply, it is the desire to preserve the Jewish character of Israel. Israelis know that before this decade is over, more Arabs than Jews will live between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. Israel cannot hold the territories and remain both democratic and Jewish. Twenty months of intifada has crystallized this reality for Israelis: Palestinians won't settle for less than a state, but the call for a right of return has made Israelis wonder whether Palestinians are prepared to live with Israel as a Jewish state.

If they are not, Israelis will live with the conflict until such time as the Palestinians grow weary of it. But if they are, the Israelis are willing to pay the price of giving up the bulk of the land and even to contemplate drawing borders based less on the percentages of the territory to be given up and more on the logic of demographic stability for each state.

In the past, such ideas were unthinkable, certainly on the Israeli right. Paradoxically, the Israeli public is more

prepared than ever to meet Palestinian aspirations, once it becomes convinced that doing so won't spell the end of Israel. Thanks to the intifada, they are not so sure.

For their part, the Palestinians aren't sure the Israelis will ever surrender control over them or the territories. But they are raising questions about the wisdom of the intifada, and many -- especially among Fatah activists -- are saying it is time to acknowledge that there will be no right of return to Israel for refugees. On this, there is not yet a consensus. But a clear consensus exists on one thing: The Palestinians are suffering, and they know their leadership is neither responding to their plight nor offering any pathway forward. They believe the Palestinian Authority is corrupt to the core, serving Arafat's interest and cronies in preserving power but benefiting no one else.

It is no surprise that Arafat has now sought to seize the mantle of reform. He is under pressure from within; he is under pressure from Arab leaders who recognize that transforming the situation or energizing more activist American intervention on peace is not possible without proof that he will end the terror and assume his responsibilities; and he is under pressure internationally from those who will not finance reconstruction in the West Bank without transparency and accountability.

Reform can be the bridge between today's reality and the point at which Israelis see a real Palestinian partner. Reform that produces election dates and that institutes an independent judiciary, a rule of law, a single authority, an end to independent militias and one security force that operates on consistent guidelines and standards -- not Arafat's whim -- would signal a new day.

But it is important to learn the lessons of the past. Arafat will do the minimum necessary to hold on to power. He will speak of reform even while he maneuvers to avoid it. The moment can easily be lost unless international leverage is applied to ensure that reform is real. Those expected to finance reform should be allowed to develop the blueprint for it and to oversee its implementation. Money and aid should stop flowing when there is nonperformance in civil or security reforms.

Palestinians are not looking to oust Arafat. They want to create institutions that constrain his arbitrary use of power. They will need our help to succeed. They need our insistence on performance, even while they receive the necessary assistance in institution-building. They will need the Israeli government's readiness to remove the siege of the territories to make both economic and political life possible. (Another reason why the Palestinians must perform: Israel will not again subject its citizens to a Palestinian neighbor providing safe haven to those who would attack it.)

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon would like political talks to wait until the reform process is implemented. That is not realistic, because reforms won't be instantly achieved. Talks should begin soon -- either directly or indirectly through us -- but they are not going to reach fruition until Palestinians can demonstrate that their state-in-waiting will be responsible. ❖

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