

Three Hard Roads to Peace

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Apr 25, 2002

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The time has come to step back and consider our options in the Middle East. Secretary of State Colin Powell's mission unfortunately has not altered the realities on the ground. While Israeli military operations have disrupted and destroyed much of the terrorist infrastructure in the West Bank, it is only a matter of time before it is reconstituted. It was neither technologically sophisticated nor expensive, and no shortage of recruits will come forward to replace the militants killed or arrested. The challenge therefore is to fashion a political strategy to transform the respite the Israeli military has provided into a more enduring reality. Can an international conference do that?

Not likely, as both sides will create conditions for it that tie up diplomacy but change nothing on the ground. The Arabs will insist on Yasser Arafat's presence and American acceptance of the Saudi idea of full withdrawal for normalization as the basis of the conference. The Israelis will not deal with Arafat and will not accept the principle of full withdrawal as the basis on which the negotiations will take place.

As for Arafat, he will remain passive, waiting to be rescued by international intervention. In his mind, an imposed solution puts all the pressure on the Israelis and relieves him of the need to make a decision. He may outwardly acquiesce in an imposed solution but not actually accept it -- thus setting the stage for adjustments later at a point when Palestinian opposition to the solution promises to produce violence again.

What is to be done? We have three basic options at this point. First is the "bypass Arafat" option. By definition, it is a revolutionary option. Arafat is the symbol of the Palestinian movement; in circumstances in which he has been bypassed or exiled, no one is likely to step forward to take his place for fear of being labeled a traitor. To bypass Arafat, one has to demonstrate to the Palestinians, Arabs and Europeans that he is the obstacle to peace. One has to show that a credible solution exists but that he blocks it.

From the Israeli perspective, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon must demonstrate a willingness to contemplate far-reaching ideas that respond to Palestinian aspirations. A state on 50 percent of the West Bank will not be acceptable even to those Palestinians who most want to live in peace with Israel. Palestinians will have to see that with a leadership that is prepared, unlike Arafat, to fulfill its obligations and responsibilities, they can get most of the land, and dignified and fair solutions on Jerusalem and refugees. With Arafat, that is not possible.

Can Sharon adopt a revolutionary political strategy that logically flows from seeking to bypass Arafat? Can he either present or support the U.S. presentation of a solution to the conflict that would have international credibility?

If he cannot -- at this point a safe bet -- a second, more conventional, option exists: developing a timeline of mutual obligations. Only this time, in addition to security obligations, political negotiations and an agenda for the permanent-status talks would be integrated into the timeline with specific dates, and with monitoring to ensure accountability and consequences for nonperformance.

To make the political process more tangible, a Palestinian state within the 40 percent of the West Bank and the 60 percent of Gaza in which the Palestinians have at least theoretical responsibility today would be recognized on the timeline. Assuming the Palestinians fulfill their obligations, negotiations would thus take place between juridical equals. Palestinians would have a new status internationally and vis-a-vis the Israelis. They would gain politically, while Israel would gain security.

This presumes fulfillment of the obligations on each side. Sharon's incentive for accepting such a timeline, including one that would require a settlement freeze and recognition of Palestinian statehood, is twofold: It promises a gradual approach to trying to resolve the conflict, and it offers a chance to build on the respite from terror. Arafat will only accept the timeline option if he believes he will not be offered more and if he believes that Palestinians need their own respite to recover from the Israeli Defense Force operations. In such circumstances, he will point to his political gain, the improved status of the Palestinians and international pressures to go along with this option.

Notwithstanding what each might gain from the timeline option, each could reject it. Sharon, because he is determined not to deal with Arafat anymore. Arafat, because he believes that he can hold out for more and that being a victim will swing world opinion more in the Palestinians' favor. Moreover, given the obligations on security that Arafat would have to fulfill before the political negotiations or recognition could take place, the chairman may simply opt out.

The second alternative may, thus, be no more achievable than the first. If so, we are probably headed toward a third option: unilateral separation. While the current Israeli government does not support unilateral separation, a growing number of Israelis do. Those who favor this option argue for withdrawing from the settlements in Gaza and isolated settlements in the West Bank. They know that Israel cannot have a coherent defense line as long as large numbers of soldiers are required to defend small numbers of settlers. The withdrawal to a more defensible line with a fence and buffer zones is seen not as a solution to the conflict but as a way station that will make life easier for Israelis and Palestinians alike until such time as a Palestinian partner emerges that makes negotiations and peace a possibility again.

Option three represents the failure of diplomacy, not its triumph. It runs the risk of emboldening those in the Arab world who believe that violence works. Twenty months of pain will not seem too great to those who will see that it produced a partial Israeli withdrawal -- and continuing violence may produce even more. If left with option three, we may want to work with the Israelis to make the withdrawal as practical as possible and to try to broker understandings between the Palestinians and Israelis to make the arrangements more stable and enduring. We may even consider the value of an international presence to fill in as the Israelis implement separation.

Ultimately, separation may be the least bad of the available alternatives. In keeping with the truth-telling themes in President Bush's April 4 speech, the administration is going to have to face the real options before us and make its own hard decisions. ❖

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