

What Can America Do?

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Mar 16, 2002

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Israelis and Palestinians are fighting an escalating war with no end in sight. The more force is used, the less secure Israelis become. The more violence is employed as a tactic, the more pain Palestinians suffer and the less likely they are to see Israeli occupation end any time soon. There is no dialogue between the two sides today, save for a dialogue of violence and suffering.

Little is likely to change if a new factor is not introduced. If nothing else, the past year has demonstrated that, left to their own devices, the two sides cannot transform the situation except for the worse. Is Crown Prince Abdullah's idea -- Arab normalization with Israel in return for full Israeli withdrawal -- powerful enough as a new idea to make a difference? Not likely. It is significant psychologically, particularly because it offers Israelis hope that peace and acceptance in the Arab world remain a possibility. But it is disconnected from the increasingly gruesome daily reality affecting both Israelis and Palestinians. It also lacks the drama needed to give both sides reason to pause and step back.

The same might be said about the new U.N. Security Council resolution passed last week. To be sure, it creates a new baseline by calling for two states living side by side within secure and recognized borders. But understandably it lacks any mechanism to move from where we are to that outcome.

Gen. Anthony Zinni's arrival back in the region does create a focal point for dealing with the realities on the ground. Perhaps, each side having hit the other harder during the past week, both will be more open to a cease-fire now. But without some new factor, such a cease-fire will prove no more enduring than all of its predecessors.

There will be no simple or unidimensional solutions. A new initiative is required, but to have any chance of success it must deal with the violence, offer a political pathway, create consequences for those who fail to fulfill their commitments and provide enough drama to get everyone's attention and give all involved a greater stake in the outcome.

It is time for a four-part U.S. initiative. First, we would ask Israel to halt its attacks and lift the siege of the Palestinians for 10 days. Should Israel get intelligence about a planned terrorist act in this period, it would inform Palestinian security forces and the United States. If the Palestinians did not act immediately to preempt the attack, the Israelis would have the right to do so.

Second, the Palestinian Authority would act decisively and unequivocally in the 10-day period to try to prevent all acts of terror and violence against Israelis. It would also begin to fulfill Yasser Arafat's previous promises to Zinni to make real, not fake, arrests and to dismantle terror organizations.

Third, the United States would reconstitute the Committee on Verification and Monitoring mandated by the Wye River Agreement of 1998. Zinni would chair the committee and have it meet every day for the 10-day period; he would discuss the commitments each side has made, the gap between performance and commitment and the steps needed to bridge that gap. And he would be ready to announce who is fulfilling and not fulfilling his obligations. Based on the work of this committee, we should make sure our allies are prepared to join us in a common denunciation of the side not fulfilling its commitments.

Fourth, assuming the initial 10-day period brings a halt to the violence, the Israelis, Palestinians, Egyptians, Jordanians and Saudis would send representatives to Washington at the foreign minister level to work out a timeline of steps to be taken over a six-month period. This high-level meeting would break new ground for the Bush administration. Its purpose would be to cement and institutionalize the initial period of stability; to introduce the additional measures called for in the Tenet and Mitchell plans for changing the climate so negotiations could be resumed; to fix a point at which talks would resume; and to establish the agenda for the negotiations.

The new U.N. Security Council resolution -- one both Israelis and Palestinians supported -- could provide the political umbrella or broad agenda for the negotiations. To avoid haggling over a more precise agenda, the United States should propose that statehood, disengagement or separation, and security arrangements be the initial items for the negotiations. At the end of the six-month period, the president would host a follow-on meeting with leaders, not foreign ministers, to review the performance of each side and the status of the negotiations.

This, of course, assumes that the initiative has worked in the first 10 days. If it does not, we have to be prepared to announce why -- and who is responsible for its failure. Zinni is now back in the region even though the administration said he would not return until Arafat fulfilled his promises on fighting terror -- something he has not done. For that reason, the administration must be prepared to suspend relations with him if he fails in the aftermath of such an initiative.

The stakes must be clear for Arafat. He must see what he has to lose as well as what he has to gain. He must know he can gain only by performing and by sustaining that performance. He must see that having taken such an initiative, the Bush administration means what it says on positive as well as negative consequences.

To be sure, the Israelis will be taking a risk, at least in the initial period. But at this point Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has no better alternative, and his actions are shifting the international onus onto Israel. Moreover, this initiative offers Israel a sequence of steps that ensures the violence stops before political negotiations get underway. Israel would also gain direct Arab involvement in the effort, including the Saudis.

For their part, the Palestinians would gain a high-visibility process that imposes not just security demands on them but the certainty of steps such as the settlement freeze in the Mitchell report -- all under the political umbrella of a two-state outcome from the process. That can be used by Arafat, if he is willing, to explain what Palestinians have to lose if the violence does not stop now.

There are no risk-free alternatives now for Israel, the Palestinians or the United States. But the risk on the current path is unmistakable. ❖

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