

If Not Peace, Set the Stage for Possibility

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Critics may be right in dismissing the possibility that Yasser Arafat and Ariel Sharon can conclude a final peace agreement with one another. Each, however, has a unique opportunity and responsibility to break taboos and set principles that will facilitate peacemaking by his successor.

There is ample evidence to believe that peace is not possible under the current leadership.

Arafat's continuous and unrelenting support for violence -- symbolized by the revolving door of Palestinian prisons -- continues to fuel Israeli fears that his goal is not a Palestinian state in the West Bank but rather undermining Israel's very existence. There is no evidence that Arafat is more willing today to accept the generous terms -- including 97% of the West Bank and a capital in East Jerusalem -- that he spurned when presented with President Clinton's offer in December 2000. Sharon isn't likely to deliver the ultimate deal either. Sharon believes Clinton's offer gave the Palestinians too much land, which would imperil Israeli security.

However, the fact that neither Arafat nor Sharon can make the grand deal should not free them from a historical responsibility to set the stage for successors to end this conflict.

Arafat and Sharon are not merely leaders. Each has unique stature with his constituents. Arafat is the living embodiment of Palestinian nationalism. Sharon is the last of a generation of Israel's founders as well as the architect of the movement to populate ancient Jewish sites in the West Bank with Israeli settlements. Each owes history a last act.

If they cannot make peace, at least they can fashion key planks of a peace strategy. In the land-for-peace formula that has defined the solution to this conflict, Arafat must talk to his people about peace in a way that he never has, and Sharon must talk to his people about land in a way that he never has.

As it stands, Arafat tells the American media that he wants peace, but then he rallies a crowd in Ramallah with a chant of "a million martyrs marching to Jerusalem." These statements confirm Israeli cynicism about Arafat's duplicity.

Instead of addressing Americans, Arafat must tell his people something he has avoided saying: Israel and Palestine have equal moral legitimacy, and thus both deserve to be permanently safe. He must say that there are two legitimate national liberation movements -- one Palestinian and one Jewish -- that must both be accommodated

through sharing the historic lands of Israel/Palestine.

He needs to say that peace with Israel is morally right, not just a practical or temporary necessity given Israel's military strength. He needs to recognize that Jews have a rich heritage that binds them to the land, not a 20th century colonialist connection.

He needs to recognize that just as there is an important mosque in Jerusalem, there was also a temple that was the center of Jewish life for hundreds of years. This is essential for any Arafat successor needing to deal with Jerusalem.

Sharon must talk just as explicitly about sharing the land and the future of settlements. It won't be easy for the architect of the settlement movement to say that many of the 144 settlements in the West Bank that he helped build will need to be dismantled in any peace deal. But with so many settlements, there is no meaningful partition, and thus neither peace nor security. The settlements may exist only on a fraction of the West Bank and Gaza land, but the doubling of their population during the Oslo era fueled Palestinian fears of Israeli expansionism.

If Sharon publicly conceded the reality that many settlements cannot be retained in a final peace deal, then he would relieve his successor of a huge historical burden.

Domestic political constraints make these initiatives difficult for each leader to contemplate and even more costly to implement. Even so, such moves do not constitute peace itself but are key to any peace strategy that aims to restore the shattered trust between the two peoples.

One of the most important lessons learned since the start of the Oslo process in 1993 is that without a public strategy, no backroom deals between officials can long survive. Through these declarations, Arafat and Sharon can begin the long road back toward peacemaking. If these leaders cannot make peace, they owe it to all to at least make peace possible. ❖

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