

One Last Chance

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Articles & Testimony

A number of Israelis and Palestinians have come to me in the past few weeks seeking a way out of the ever more depressing situation in which they find themselves trapped. Each day's headlines seem to get worse.

Yesterday, Israelis retaliated for the killing of six of their soldiers at a West Bank checkpoint by attacking a number of Yasser Arafat's offices and police stations, killing at least 16 Palestinians. A spiral of escalation is developing, with no apparent end point.

The vise in which the Palestinian public is held becomes tighter, but the acts of violence don't stop. Terror is a daily occurrence, and getting worse. Israelis see little prospect of peace or security. They know there is no military answer to their Palestinian problem, but they also see no partner for peace. As they see it, Arafat could not say yes when the historic opportunity to end the conflict presented itself. He has incited too many times, winked at if not encouraged terror too many times, lied too many times. And, today, after the seizure of the arms ship *Karine A*, they wonder if he wants or is even able to bring things under control.

Palestinians believe Israelis, with their military responses, are treating them as if they were subhuman. They suffer daily from Israeli closures around their cities and villages. They believe that Israelis don't want to surrender control of the territories. They see Arafat's virtual house arrest in Ramallah as another humiliation, actually building sympathy for him and not making him less relevant to them.

But there are other Palestinian voices as well. There are those who know the intifada has been a disaster, destroying Palestinians' lives, their economy, their prospects and their hopes. They know there must be another way. While anger drives continuing support for violence in Palestinian polling, those polls also show a majority of Palestinians favoring peace.

Polls in Israel demonstrate above all else that Israelis want to be done with this problem. They don't want to occupy Palestinian communities; they want to be free of the Palestinians. But they doubt that the Palestinians are prepared to reconcile themselves to living in peace with Israel.

In this atmosphere, there is little prospect of negotiating a formal solution any time soon. But it is essential to try to reestablish a sense of possibility and hope. To do so will require both conventional and unconventional responses.

The starting point must be stopping the violence. I continue to believe that Chairman Arafat is relevant, because only the Palestinians can choose to make him irrelevant. But I also believe that he must demonstrate to Israelis and to us that he is prepared to be responsible.

For our part, pressuring him to perform without making clear there is a consequence for nonperformance has clearly not worked. By the same token, demanding that he perform in an environment in which it is nearly impossible for him to do so fails the test of a real ultimatum.

Palestinians whom I respect have told me they know what they must do at this point. They understand clearly they must make real arrests, dismantle terror organizations, collect illegal weapons and actively prevent acts of terror. They say they need Israel to stop the targeted killings and ease the siege of the Palestinian public for 10 days so they have a climate in which they can begin to take these steps.

Will they do what they say? I am not sure. And I can't say that Israel would not run a risk by acceding to the 10-day request. But I know that it does not have security today and won't have it 10 days from now if its posture remains unchanged.

I also know that giving the Palestinians 10 days might change nothing. That is why I would make it clear there is a consequence for giving the Palestinian leadership -- for giving Arafat -- one last chance.

The requirements for performance should be clear, and we should tell the Egyptians, Saudis, Jordanians and our European allies that we have persuaded the Israelis to stop their attacks for this 10-day period; that Arafat must perform and that if he does not we will suspend relations with him. Suspension is not termination. It can be lifted with performance. Absent that, however, we are making a statement that while we cannot pick the Palestinian leadership, we can choose not to deal with a leader who refuses to meet the minimal requirements of his responsibilities.

Apart from having the Israelis give the Palestinian Authority 10 days to prove it will do what is necessary, it is time for the Israelis to review their posture toward the Palestinian public. Israel has not just a right but also a duty to provide for the security and defense of its citizens. But there must be a way to provide for the security of Israelis without squeezing the life out of the Palestinian people. That is in Israel's interest, regardless of whether or not the Palestinian Authority performs. It is also in our interest.

There is something else we can do. We can launch a major humanitarian initiative for the Palestinian people. It would not be a substitute for a political process but a response to a situation in which more than half the Palestinian public is now living below the poverty level. For countries in the gulf region that claim to be greatly concerned about what is happening to the Palestinians, it is time to put their money where their mouths are. We could make this a joint American-Arab initiative, managed through a new mechanism to ensure that the help and investment go directly to those who need them and can use them.

Finally, it is time for unconventional approaches. With so many Israelis and Palestinians doubting there is a solution, it is time for unofficial, people-to-people efforts. Forums to have Israelis and Palestinians speak of their respective grievances might sensitize each to the pain and suffering of the other. Moreover, if, as they are telling me, there are Israelis and Palestinians who believe they could outline a fair solution, let them do so. Let Israelis see that there are Palestinians willing to work with them and make difficult concessions that respond to Israeli needs. Let Palestinians see that there are Israelis who are prepared to end Israeli control of their lives. Let them demonstrate that peaceful coexistence is not an illusion. Let them show there is another way. Let them prove there is a reason to step back from the abyss. ❖

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