

The Missing Link to Mideast Peace: Arab Pressure

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How to deal with Yasser Arafat is a serious issue, one that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and President Bush once again discussed in their meeting at the White House on Thursday. Sharon has publicly declared that he wants the U.S. to boycott Arafat because of the Palestinian leader's failure to halt suicide bombings and other terrorist attacks against Israel over the last 18 months.

All the initiatives tried up until now -- sticks, carrots and a combination of the two -- have failed because they lacked one key ingredient: the political influence of the Arab states that also have a stake in the Palestinian issue.

But these countries' leaders appear too afraid of their own populations to step forward. In a recent meeting with a visiting dignitary, Arafat was unimpressed when the visitor presented a letter from Egypt's Hosni Mubarak privately calling on Arafat to crack down on Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Arafat said he will take such a letter seriously when Mubarak says the same things publicly to his own people.

Arafat has reason not to worry. Arab leaders have rarely -- if ever -- criticized him in public since the start of the Oslo process in 1993. He is confident that these Arab leaders need him for their legitimacy more than he needs them. U.S. officials say that Mubarak was furious with Arafat for inviting Iran to gain a foothold in the eastern Mediterranean by smuggling a boatload of weapons through the Suez Canal to the Gaza Strip and that the Egyptian has barely spoken with him since. There is no sign that Arafat is concerned. He apparently does not believe that Mubarak will do anything more than stew.

Autocratic Arab regimes have convinced themselves that public criticism of Arafat will hurt them domestically. So therefore, when President Clinton put forward a plan for Israel yielding 97% of the West Bank, the Arabs would not nudge the Palestinians toward a compromise on the remaining 3%.

Yet the Arabs bear responsibility. It was the Arab League -- the group of 22 Arab states -- that created the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1964 and then crowned the PLO as the "sole legitimate representative" of the Palestinian people 10 years later. Now, 27 years later, the Arab countries must come together, with Egypt and Saudi Arabia at the core. They must publicly say that there will be no realization of Palestinian rights so long as the current Palestinian leadership stands idle as Hamas and Islamic Jihad explode any prospects for peace, or they forfeit their moral

standing on this issue.

This inaction exacts a high price from the Palestinians. Without candid advice from Arab friends, the net effect of the current violence is hundreds of dead, a ruined economy and no political achievements except vaporized support from the Israeli center and left.

In a post-Sept. 11 world, failure to combat terrorism has cost the Palestinians dearly with the Bush administration. For the first time two weeks ago, it publicly considered suspending ties with Arafat.

U.S. officials have made clear that, if Palestinians tamp down violence, the U.S. will focus on making demands on Sharon. The last five Israeli prime ministers who came to office rose and fell on one issue: the Palestinian conflict. When there is no terrorism, Israelis lean toward moderates such as Yitzhak Rabin and Ehud Barak, but when people are getting blown up, voting goes the other way, as fear gains and hope recedes.

Israelis move toward peace when they feel more secure, not when they feel more vulnerable.

Arab regimes are also losers in the current crisis. With Arafat inviting Iran into military collusion, Islamic radicalism, including anti-Americanism, would only grow at home if violence continues unabated. Peace and stability serve best. The Arab leaders are complicit in the Israeli-Palestinian impasse. They are prone to blame the United States, yet when Washington has needed their help, they have been mute and have provided no ideas of their own. If Arafat spurns an explicit public appeal by Arab leaders to end this self-destructive violence, there should be clear consequences.

The Arab leaders should work with people around Arafat and help usher in the post-Arafat period. The Arabs can no longer continue to complain from the sidelines. For the sake of the Palestinians and themselves, they need -- for a change -- to be part of the solution. ❖

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