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Finding the Lost Peace

Dennis Ross

IN CONCLUDING my book last year, I suggested that we might find the missing peace when Yasir Arafat passed from the scene and it became possible to get beyond the dysfunction he cultivated. Little did I suspect he would die before the end of 2004. Now he is gone.

Palestinians saw, as one of his close colleagues observed, that Arafat would prefer to “destroy everything rather than let the world deal with someone else.” Another of his senior colleagues confided to me after his death that he was the “father of our chaos.” In truth, Arafat became an impediment to change not only between Palestinians and Israelis but among Palestinians as well. And judging from their change in mood after his death, Palestinians knew it. Think how ironic it is that only 45 percent of Palestinians said they were optimistic about the future before Arafat became ill, and nearly 60 percent said they were optimistic shortly after his death.

Arafat left a political system charac-

terized by corruption, ineptitude and a destructive competition among rival factions, all designed to make it difficult for anyone ever to emerge as an alternative to him. Transforming such a system would be a daunting task in the best of circumstances. And, of course, even with the Israeli decision on disengagement, four and a half years of war have not made these the best of circumstances for Palestinians.

Managing the Succession

THE CONVENTIONAL wisdom at the time of Arafat’s death maintained that Arafat was the only source of authority among Palestinians and that his departure would weaken and factionalize his Fatah movement and cause Hamas to challenge it for power. The leadership void would produce a competition for power that would likely turn violent.

I doubted the conventional wisdom—not because I questioned the existence of these factors, but because I knew Palestinians feared the eruption of violence and that this very fear would unify the factions in Fatah and make Hamas and others reluctant to challenge it—at least in the near term. In fact, there was virtually no Palestinian-on-Palestinian violence after Arafat’s death. Instead, there was a smooth transition and quick agreement on holding elections. For all Palestinians, internal violence of the sort we

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have seen in Iraq was simply unthinkable. Palestinians fear dividing and weakening themselves further, and there is a strong predisposition against it.

There is no guarantee that intra-Palestinian violence will never occur; indeed, there have been many incidents of such violence, but the fear of civil war is deeply rooted. Moreover, the widespread support for elections as the mechanism for peacefully managing the competition for power caused Hamas, Islamic Jihad and even the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades to reconsider turning to intra-Palestinian violence to undermine the voting.

Mahmoud Abbas—Abu Mazen—won the election to succeed Arafat, and he did so running on a clear anti-violence platform. On top of being consistently against the violence—the “militarization of the *intifada*”—Abu Mazen also tapped into the public's desire to restore normal life. Palestinians came to see in Abu Mazen someone who might be able to end the *intifada*. It had not ended the occupation, only cemented it. It had not ended Palestinian suffering, only extended it. It had not made life better, only produced more deprivation.

The Bir Zeit University exit polls taken on the day of the elections confirmed the desire for “normalcy.” More than 83 percent of the Palestinians who voted wanted good governance and for the Palestinian Authority to function effectively; 81.3 percent wanted the economy and jobs to be restored; 80.6 percent wanted law and order to be imposed; 76.8 percent wanted the Israeli checkpoints lifted; and more than three-quarters wanted talks with the Israelis to be resumed.

Abu Mazen was seen as the agent of change—and he received a mandate. However, the test is still to come, particularly if the new Palestinian leadership decides to crack down seriously on those who are committed to using violence against the Israelis. To be success-

ful, Abu Mazen will need to act out of character. He never craved power, and this made him appealing to the reformers—but it also calls into question whether he has the determination, tenacity and even ruthlessness that might be required to pressure different factions to change their behavior. In the past, he would walk away from the process whenever Arafat humiliated him. With Arafat gone, let us hope he will no longer consider such an option.

Assessing Abu Mazen's Strategy

ABU MAZEN has operated on the premise that Palestinians have the responsibility to provide the Israelis security. In return, the Israelis have the responsibility to provide the Palestinians freedom. On a number of occasions, he told me that Arafat had been wrong to permit the violence against the Israelis. Violence, he said, would “produce nothing from the Israelis and [would] cost us dearly.” He was, of course, right, but how did he intend to end the violence?

His answer has been co-optation, not confrontation. He has focused on achieving an agreement among the militant factions of Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades and the popular resistance committees to stop all attacks against the Israelis. In 2003, when he was prime minister, he reasoned that the Palestinian public was weary of the violence and that the groups (and Arafat) would only ignore the popular mood at their peril. His assessment may have been correct, but it left the Israelis out of the equation. To be sure, he wanted to end all attacks as a way of getting the Israelis to lift the siege. And he believed that if there were no attacks against the Israelis, they would have no reason to maintain the checkpoints and attack or arrest the militants.

However, Abu Mazen failed to take

into account how Israel would react to what it perceived as Hamas rebuilding itself, developing new capabilities for attacks and preparing the ground for renewed terror inside Israel. In Israeli eyes Hamas was only holding back on attacks while using the time of the 2003 *hudna* (truce) to prepare for the resumption of terror at a time of its choosing. As it saw Hamas planning new attacks and actually testing more effective Qassam rockets, Israel did not wait. It began to make arrests that resulted in shoot-outs with wanted members of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Shortly thereafter, the ceasefire of 2003 gave way to suicide bombings.

In 2005 Abu Mazen has clearly needed a new approach. The lesson from 2003 is that no ceasefire will endure if it is not clearly understood by the two sides the same way. Much like with the Israeli plan to withdraw from Gaza, the ceasefire might be a unilateral Palestinian decision, but it must be implemented mutually. Unilateral decisions leave far too much scope for misunderstanding and disappointment and, in the case of a ceasefire, too much room for feeling betrayed.

No ceasefire can work if both sides fail to have exactly the same understanding of what is permitted and not permitted. While there have been some understandings between Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Abu Mazen—notably on the Israelis stopping targeted killings in return for calm—the basic outlines of the ceasefire remain vague. The Israeli decision to withdraw from Gaza and a small part of the West Bank has given both sides an incentive to preserve the ceasefire, but it remains fragile, with Islamic Jihad, in particular, firing mortars and Qassam rockets in Gaza and ambushing several Israelis in the West Bank—and the Israelis declaring that their restraint will not be applied any longer to Islamic Jihad.

It is important to remember that Abu

Mazen sought the ceasefire because he did not feel able to confront groups like Hamas, Islamic Jihad and others, and because he knew that nothing could change without an end to the violence. His plan was to produce calm and an improved daily reality for the Palestinian public. The longer the calm prevailed, the more time he would have to build respect for the law and professional security forces. With enough time, Abu Mazen could succeed in having reliable security forces, an environment supported by the Palestinian public and the ability to deal with those groups that violate the law. In other words, the theory of Abu Mazen's approach has been to create a rule of law; anyone who violates it will have to pay the price. He has in mind a Palestinian rubric under which to justify forceful actions against those who carry out acts of terror and violence against the Israelis.

To create such a rubric, Abu Mazen also sought to embed the groups in a genuine political process. In fact, when he concluded an understanding with the groups on preserving *tahdiya* (calm) for a year, part of the agreement provided for the groups to participate in the elections. Abu Mazen wants the groups to be politicized. He wants them to be part of the political system so that they are also bound by the limits of the system. Once they are part of the Legislative Council, they will observe the laws that it adopts—or so his theory goes.

It may work, but it ultimately depends upon being willing at a certain moment to confront those who are not willing to play by the rules. Historically, those who have rejected peaceful coexistence and used violence to prevent it have not been delegitimized or confronted. Arafat did crack down on Hamas and Islamic Jihad in 1996 after four bombings in nine days created a crisis in Israel, bringing him under enormous pressure from the United States to take action lest there be no further peace process. But

the arrests proved temporary, and he did not delegitimize the perpetrators in order to maintain the possibility of using them for his own benefit in the future.

Whether Abu Mazen is prepared, systematically, not episodically, to crack down on militants remains to be seen. But it is also clear that much of what he assumed has not materialized. First, he has found it far harder than he realized to transform the security organizations into professional forces. Last December, Mohamed Dahlan, the former head of preventive security in Gaza, told me it would take six months to build a professional security capability and a clear chain of command among the security organizations. Yet, as of summer 2005, and despite Abu Mazen's replacing the senior commanders of the forces and reducing on paper the number of different forces from 13 to three, very little has changed on the ground. The forces resemble rival cliques with arms more than capable and disciplined professionals. While there are many serious and professional officers among the different services who know what is required, the political will to foster a real chain of command, the confidence of knowing orders given will be obeyed, and the certainty that reinforcements will be there if one force gets into a firefight are all lacking, so much so that even reimposing law and order among Palestinians has not happened to date—not to mention that when Islamic Jihad has violated the ceasefire on a number of occasions, it has paid no price.

Unfortunately, this has convinced the Israelis that they can take only minimal risks on security. Notwithstanding Sharon's promise at the February 8 summit meeting with Abu Mazen to withdraw from five cities on the West Bank, the Israelis, as of July, had withdrawn from only Tulkarem and Jericho—and that was done soon after the February summit. The Israelis point to the lack of any Palestinian action against a list of 495 fugitives who

were supposed to be disarmed and not permitted to travel, in return for an end to the Israeli practice of targeted killings, as one reason for the halt to Israeli withdrawals. That Israel felt the need to arrest 52 members of Islamic Jihad—including many in a sweep of Tulkarem, after it had been responsible for killing several Israelis in the West Bank in June—suggests that even if the withdrawals resume, they will have limited impact in the eyes of the Palestinian public.

And, here, of course, is a deeper problem for Abu Mazen. Palestinians had expected to see travel restrictions, at least within the West Bank, dramatically eased. They have not been. There has been some improvement, but the main checkpoints, though relaxed from time to time, still basically inhibit Palestinian movement throughout the West Bank. Again, Israelis cite the absence of Palestinian moves on security as the reason that they cannot do more to ease the restrictions on movement. The same concern has bedeviled the efforts to coordinate the Israeli disengagement with the Palestinians. The critical nexus is between security and access in Gaza. If the Israelis are not satisfied with the steps the Palestinians take on security, even with a third-party role at the passages and crossing points, there will inevitably be problems, and they will limit access into and out of Gaza. In such circumstances, it will prove difficult to improve the economic conditions within Gaza—and certainly the international community and the private sector will limit their investments in Gaza as a result.

The absence of meaningful economic improvement to date in either Gaza or the West Bank is yet another area where Abu Mazen made assumptions that have not been fulfilled. The key to his strategy of co-optation was that life would demonstrably improve, that people would go back to work and that they would have a reason to be more hopeful. The more they saw his way working, the more his

authority would grow and the higher the costs would be for Hamas and Islamic Jihad to resist his program. But since his election, there have been only marginal changes for the better, with donor assistance still largely taking the form of pledges and materializing at this stage only in meeting the recurrent costs of the administration. And certainly those who could have provided more aid more quickly, such as the Saudis, have not done so. In fact, while the Saudis have met their pledge of \$7 million a month since 2002, they have not increased it, even though their export revenues have grown \$5.5 billion a month since that time. Polls now show that nearly three-quarters of the Palestinian population believe that the economic situation is either the same or worse than when Abu Mazen became the *ra'ees* (president). If nothing else, that should be a wake-up call to the international community—reminding international leaders that the labor-intensive jobs that could improve day-to-day conditions and create a sense of hope and possibility are not materializing.

To date, Abu Mazen's personal support remains high, and this suggests that the Palestinian public still hopes he can bring about change. But support for Hamas is growing, reflected in both polling and its victories in many of the municipal elections. The appeal of Hamas is not its political agenda of an Islamic state and rejection of Israel, but its image of being non-corruptible and its ability to deliver services. By contrast, the Palestinian Authority and Fatah—which are basically one and the same—are seen as both corrupt and unable or unwilling to respond to the needs of the people. Abu Mazen must preside over the remaking of the Palestinian Authority and Fatah, revitalizing both before the elections—lest Hamas emerge as a full partner and tie his hands in anything he can do with Israel.

Ironically, Hamas has a stake in preserving the calm not only through the

Israeli withdrawal from Gaza but also through the elections. The Hamas leadership knows that the Palestinian public does not support the violence now, and they see themselves doing well in the elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council. Indeed, when Abu Mazen postponed these elections from July 2005 to January 2006, Hamas initially declared that the calm was tied to the elections. Hamas believes it can use Abu Mazen's strategy of bringing it into the political system to increasingly gain power and ultimately supplant Fatah. Thus, preserving the calm serves its interests for the time being. While the danger of Islamic Jihad or others disrupting the calm should not be underestimated, the odds are that Abu Mazen will have at least until the end of the year to begin to demonstrate that his way works and that he, Fatah and the Palestinian Authority can begin to deliver on a better life.

Disengagement, Israel and America

ABU MAZEN certainly needs outside help to succeed. However, what Israel, the United States and the international community do cannot be a substitute for what Abu Mazen and the Palestinians must do for themselves. Abu Mazen must become more decisive combating corruption, bringing the young guard of Fatah into leadership positions, supporting primaries in Fatah to foster the overhaul of a revolutionary party that seems at best irrelevant to the needs of Palestinians, and demonstrating that he is producing something tangible for the Palestinian public—something that will also require much more public outreach to explain what he has done and intends to do.

Making disengagement work from the Palestinian perspective is essential. The Israeli decision to leave Gaza presents the Palestinians with an opportunity and a problem. If Palestinians can

show that they can govern themselves and fulfill their obligations responsibly, including on security, they will prove to the world and the Israeli public that the Gaza model is sound and should also be applied to the West Bank. If they fall into a pattern of generalized chaos or chaos in certain bounds, without fulfilling their obligations internally or externally, who in the international community—other than apologists for them—will press for responding to Palestinian aspirations in the West Bank? Palestinians must organize themselves well enough to prove they are ready for statehood, and Gaza will offer a demonstration either that Palestinians are ready or that they are not.

For his part, Ariel Sharon made a historic decision to withdraw from Gaza and a small part of the West Bank. He split his Likud Party in the process and also saw his government dissolve. He put together a national unity government with the Labor Party to implement the policy of disengagement from Gaza, but he knows that the government is unlikely to survive long after disengagement. He, too, has an interest in seeing his policy vindicated—namely, that Gaza become a functioning reality for the Palestinian Authority and not what some have dubbed “*Hamastan*.” Given his domestic challenges, Sharon has focused on carrying out the disengagement and overcoming the calls from the right wing (including right-wing rabbis) for civil disobedience, for soldiers not to carry out their orders and for Likud to unseat him as head of the party. Sharon’s problems, not Abu Mazen’s needs or making more concessions to the Palestinians, represent his preoccupations.

Many in Israel assume that Sharon, after disengagement, will turn rightward, try to re-establish his base of support within Likud, declare that Israel has taken a major step and not need to do anything else before the Palestinians take serious steps of their own. No doubt at the same

time he will press to complete the separation barrier—which Israelis see as a passive defense against suicide attacks in Israel. Not only is such a general posture politically compelling, it will also fit the emotional climate for Israelis. The disengagement will be a trauma in Israel. Even those who have neither been supportive of the settlements nor of the settlers will feel the pain of wrenching people from their homes—and the settlers have a stake in raising the emotional costs of the disengagement to try to ensure that it does not become a precedent. All this suggests that Sharon and his public will seek a pause after disengagement. Moreover, since Labor is unlikely to stay in the government for long after disengagement, and since elections in Israel are highly likely by the spring of 2006, the pause Sharon will seek will be until after the Israeli elections.

Abu Mazen and the Palestinians will have exactly the opposite impulse. He will want to show his people that there is a political pathway and prove that the Gaza disengagement is the first Israeli move on this path, not the last. Just as many Israelis assume Sharon will move rightward, many Palestinians fear Sharon is simply giving up Gaza, which he did not want, to preserve the West Bank, which he does. The Israeli settlers clearly do not buy this, but Palestinians suspect that Sharon has no interest in a peace process that would require additional withdrawals on the West Bank. They will be all the more convinced of it if Sharon carries through with finalizing the separation barrier, which Palestinians see as a land grab and one more Israeli imposition on them. Thus, while Sharon will seek a pause, Abu Mazen will seek rapid movement, and the potential for a crisis in the period after disengagement, even if the disengagement goes well, is quite high.

Moshe Ya’alon, the chief of staff of the Israeli military until June 1, predicted in his exit interviews that there would be

a third *intifada* unless the Israelis continued with additional withdrawals from the West Bank. Some Palestinians are similarly predicting a third *intifada* because of a souring mood and the expectation that a stalemate may soon resume. Will disengagement prove to be simply a prelude to a resumption of the Israeli-Palestinian war?

It need not, provided that the disengagement is managed in a way that benefits the Palestinian Authority and not Hamas and provided that a bridge is built to the future so the impending crisis afterwards is pre-empted. More than anything else, the former requires not only effective coordination between the Israelis and Palestinians, but also a plan on the part of Abu Mazen to receive the territory and the settlements in Gaza and show how they will be used to benefit the Palestinian public. While the United States cannot create the political will for the new Palestinian leadership, it certainly has needed to push both the coordination process and Abu Mazen to develop credible plans and make decisions. Notwithstanding the appointments of General William Ward and former World Bank head Jim Wolfensohn to work on Palestinian security and the economic aspects of disengagement, the U.S. effort has lacked the intensity to press either the necessary coordination between Israelis and Palestinians early enough, or Abu Mazen consistently enough, to shape the disengagement into a real platform for the future.

Recalling the Roadmap

ALREADY MUCH of what could have been gained by the Palestinian Authority from the disengagement has been lost. Still, building a bridge to the future may yet salvage the situation, particularly if Wolfensohn's plan for infusing real assistance into the Palestinian Authority materializes soon.

Given the internal pressures on both sides, Abu Mazen and Sharon share a need to show that there is a pathway for the future: Abu Mazen to show that he did not permit the disengagement to let the Israelis off the hook, and Sharon to demonstrate that Israel will not be forced to rush to big decisions before it has even absorbed the trauma of the disengagement. Ironically, a bridge already exists if the United States will assume a serious role and not contract it out to others. And that bridge is the roadmap to peace.

Presently, the roadmap is a piece of paper that largely exists as slogans. Because the United States negotiated the roadmap with the European Union, the Russians and the United Nations—but not with the two parties who had to carry it out—there is not one obligation in it that is understood in the same way by the Israelis and the Palestinians. Instead, each interprets their obligations minimally and the other's maximally. But each has accepted the roadmap as a politically accepted framework.

It is time to seize on that, and for the United States to announce that it will turn the roadmap into a real plan by negotiating common understandings with the two sides on every obligation, on the sequence and on the meaning of the phases in it. This negotiation will not be easy or done quickly; indeed, it will take the kind of grinding diplomacy that the Bush Administration has avoided in the Middle East. Unfortunately, it is the only kind that can produce real understandings.

To ensure that this does not become an open-ended way of doing nothing, the administration can make clear that if the negotiations do not proceed in good faith it will offer its own definitions of the meaning of each obligation. Neither side will necessarily be able to take comfort in that. It should certainly add to the readiness to negotiate seriously—and seriously implement what is agreed upon as well. On both the negotiations and the imple-

mentation, the administration should be prepared to honestly declare who is performing and who is not.

For Sharon, who insisted that President Bush include the commitment that the United States “will do its utmost to prevent any attempt by anyone to impose any other plan [than the roadmap]” in his letter of assurance dated April 14, 2004, this should be acceptable—and in any case it will give him the ability to tell his critics that he does know what comes next. For Abu Mazen, who has constantly called for the reactivation of the roadmap, he, too, will be able to declare that there is now a clear American commitment to ensure that Gaza first will not be Gaza last.

Making it Stick

THE DISENGAGEMENT from Gaza creates the possibility of re-establishing the core bargain of peace-making—namely, security for freedom. Israelis get their security, Palestinians their freedom. Over the last four years, both sides lost their faith in this bargain: Israelis because they became convinced that Palestinians rejected Israel as a Jewish state and used terror as their instrument of rejection, and Palestinians because they saw the Israeli response to the *intifada* as proof that Israelis would never surrender control over them. But with disengagement, Palestinians will see that Israelis actually will surrender control over them, assuming they do, and Israelis will see that Palestinians will actually fulfill their obligations, assuming they do.

For that reason, disengagement can truly end the war of the last four years between the two sides and build a foundation for peace-making. But obviously,

it has to work. And just as obviously, Abu Mazen must be seen to be succeeding. His strategy has always depended on delivering the goods: life getting better, jobs being created, corruption and chaos being brought under control, freedom of movement without Israeli checkpoints being the norm, and land being turned over to the Palestinians. For this to happen, each side must do its part. Abu Mazen must be prepared to lead and not allow consensus to be defined by the lowest common denominator among the Palestinian Authority and Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Sharon must help Abu Mazen where he can, to show that a Palestinian leader who is against terror and violence and believes in secular government, the rule of law and co-existence with Israel is a partner for Israel. And President Bush must involve the United States more energetically to work with the two sides and to help ensure that meaningful assistance materializes on the ground for Palestinians from the international community—especially the Gulf oil states who have enjoyed an oil revenue windfall in the tens of billions of dollars last year alone. Helping Abu Mazen establish the economic improvements he promised will cement his authority, without which none of these recommendations are achievable.

With Arafat gone, with Abu Mazen in his place and with Ariel Sharon delivering on Israeli disengagement, there is an opportunity to transform the situation between Israelis and Palestinians. If this opportunity is lost, it will be a long time before another one presents itself. And rather than seeing prospects for peace between Israelis and Palestinians grow, we will see Abu Mazen fail, Hamas emerge and the Israeli barrier shape the future. □