Gaza: Moving Forward by Pulling Back

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THE OPPORTUNITY

After four and a half years of terror and violence, the proverbial stars seem to be aligned for a new push for peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Unlike his predecessor, the newly elected Palestinian Authority (PA) president, Mahmoud Abbas, stresses the importance of peaceful problem solving and has condemned suicide bombing (in Arabic and in English) as counterproductive. On the Israeli side, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, the onetime architect of the settlement movement, is leading the drive to evacuate all settlers from Gaza and the northern West Bank. At Sharm-el-Sheikh earlier this year, he and Abbas committed to a cease-fire, an important step even if rejectionists on both sides are certain to try to exploit it. In Washington, meanwhile, Condoleezza Rice is as close to the commander in chief as any secretary of state has been since James Baker teamed up with George W. Bush’s father, guaranteeing that she speaks with the president’s authority.

But even under such relatively favorable conditions, it is wrong to assume that the Israelis and the Palestinians can simply return to the summer of 2000, when Washington thought that an end to the
conflict was within sight. Since then, trust between the parties has been shattered by violence, and rebuilding it will not be quick or easy. Reaching for too much too soon will turn the current opening into one more lost opportunity.

Optimists—arguing that the time is right to work out compromises on such thorny issues as the borders of a Palestinian state, the status of Jerusalem, and the rights of Palestinian refugees—want to move shortly to negotiations on a final-status agreement. Rushing to an endgame approach, however, will energize hard-liners in both camps and undermine the leadership of Abbas and Sharon. Abbas, despite his victory in the January elections, does not yet have the authority to veer from Yasir Arafat’s legacy on the conflict’s most sensitive issues. Sharon, for his part, has won domestic support for his plan to disengage from Gaza and the northern West Bank, but an overly ambitious focus would be equally damaging for him. There is no evidence that he is either willing or politically able to strike a grand deal. Any attempt to do so would lead to his ouster in Likud (to the benefit of his hard-line opponent Binyamin Netanyahu), threaten the survival of his government, and reverse the favorable political dynamic set off by pulling Israeli forces out of Gaza.

Before negotiating a final agreement—and before the United States issues its own blueprint for a final outcome—both sides need to provide tangible evidence that they are willing to compromise, thereby restoring trust and reinvigorating the peace process. Israel’s disengagement from Gaza and the northern West Bank provides the perfect opportunity for doing so, and Washington should focus its immediate energy and resources on coordinating this endeavor. A successful withdrawal will shatter old taboos, undermine extremists, embolden moderates, and facilitate further withdrawals. A failed effort, meanwhile, will condemn both the Israelis and the Palestinians to many more years of violence and despair.

**THE RISK OF OVERREACH**

There are two variants of the case for moving shortly to a final-status agreement. Those who are most optimistic believe that the United States should jettison the three-phase “road map”—a set
of mutual guidelines endorsed by the international community and meant to serve as markers on the way to a two-state solution—and fast-forward to discussions of the most sensitive issues: namely, Jerusalem, refugees, and territory. Others call for Washington to issue a blueprint for final status now, regardless of the ripeness of the Israelis and the Palestinians themselves. (Both groups note that Bush has already gone part of the way toward defining his vision of a final agreement—which is not inconsistent with that offered by President Bill Clinton.)

The premise behind these arguments is that since opportunities in the Middle East are fleeting, it is best to go for a grand deal as soon as there is an opening. (Some in Washington offer an additional rationale: that issuing a blueprint will improve the United States’ standing in the Arab world.) But in reality, such a high-risk move would be counterproductive, undermining peacemakers on both sides of the conflict as well as in Washington. And any blueprint that neglects conditions on the ground and raises expectations only to see them dashed again will trigger a new wave of violence and despair.

Opponents of Abbas will inevitably accuse him of betrayal on two key issues: refugees and Jerusalem. While campaigning, Abbas veered from Arafat’s legacy on violence and on the issue of coexistence. He refused, however, to contradict Arafat on the questions of the “right of return”—whether all Palestinian refugees should have the option of returning to Israel—and exclusive Palestinian sovereignty over holy sites in Jerusalem. The implication is that Abbas does not yet have enough strength to compromise on such sensitive issues, as would be necessary in any discussion of final status, leaving him vulnerable to attack from rejectionists.

On the Israeli side, jumping to final status would undermine positive short-term dynamics. The Gaza disengagement plan has created a right-wing opposition to Sharon. If the United States or the international community were to present a blueprint for final status and press Israel to accept it, there is little doubt that Sharon’s government would collapse and his disengagement plan would be thwarted. Sharon, a vociferous critic of the 2000 Camp David talks and the Clinton parameters for a final peace agreement, might have to come out against Washington. If forced to confront controversial issues

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when distrust of Palestinian intentions still runs high, he could lose the broad support of the public and his national unity government. From Washington’s perspective, meanwhile, presenting a U.S.-backed blueprint for final status before calm and confidence have been restored on the ground would be counterproductive on several fronts. The experience of 2000 demonstrates that for any agreement to succeed, Arab states must give vocal support to it so that the Palestinian leader will have the political cover he needs to compromise on questions central to Palestinian identity. Since Arab governments have been unwilling to do this, it is preferable to focus on practical steps, especially a successful disengagement from Gaza.

The Bush administration has already used language to guide the next steps in the peace process. President Bush is the first U.S. leader to have articulated support for a solution with two states, Israel and Palestine, and he has emphasized the importance of a Palestinian state being independent and contiguous. In a June 24, 2002, speech he declared:

> Ultimately, Israelis and Palestinians must address the core issues that divide them if there is to be a real peace, resolving all claims and ending the conflict between them. This means that the Israeli occupation that began in 1967 will be ended through a settlement negotiated between the parties, based on UN Resolutions 242 and 338, with Israeli withdrawal to secure and recognized borders.

Palestinians and Arabs positively interpreted this reference to 1967 as signaling a commitment to ensuring the viability of West Bank territories in the future Palestinian state.

Instead of making a high-risk move to final status, Washington should use this moment of opportunity to facilitate confidence-building measures between the Israelis and the Palestinians. One way of signaling progress and bringing the sides closer together would be to formally activate the first phase of the road map. The road map certainly has its disadvantages. Since the Israelis and the Palestinians did not negotiate the document themselves, they do not feel a sense of ownership over the process it prescribes. But it is the only diplomatic framework broadly acceptable to both parties and backed by the international community. Recognizing that shattered trust is the legacy of the last
several years, its guidelines are rooted in gradualism but focused on the ultimate goal of guaranteeing security for the Israelis and a state for the Palestinians. Following UN Security Council Resolution 242—the document that has traditionally guided the peace process—the road map’s three-phase approach demands parallel performances, generating compromises and obligations on both sides.

The first phase of the road map calls for initial confidence-building measures. As demonstrated by the recent Palestinian elections and Abbas’ public commitment to reforming the PA and restructuring its security services, this phase is essentially being implemented already. Since his election, Abbas has talked about the road map as the way forward and—in line with the document’s initial requirements—taken some preliminary measures to eliminate incitement to violence. (These steps can be reinforced by a review of the PA educational curriculum and a crackdown on imams who use incendiary language.) Despite some reservations, Israel has expressed support for the road map’s guidelines as well. Israel’s willingness to move forward will of course be contingent on the PA’s willingness to fight terrorism, but Israel should start by honoring its commitment under the road map to remove unauthorized settlement outposts in the West Bank and curb settlement activity.

A formal activation of the first phase would demonstrate that Washington remains committed to the road map’s “performance-based approach” and to preserving the balance inherent in that idea. More important, it would show that a withdrawal from Gaza will not be an isolated step. For the Palestinians, this would provide evidence that Abbas has succeeded in ensuring U.S. involvement in the peace process—which would help prevent “Gaza first” from becoming “Gaza last.”

GET GAZA RIGHT

So far, Washington’s approach has been to provide security and economic assistance but avoid micromanaging the disengagement process. In his most recent State of the Union address, Bush announced that he would give the PA $350 million in aid. And, as announced by Secretary of State Rice, he will dispatch Lieutenant General William
“Kip” Ward to help restructure the PA’s security services and facilitate cooperation between Israel and the PA.

Apart from reactivating the road map, Washington should focus on a number of short-term tasks to facilitate a successful withdrawal from Gaza—ensuring that the Israeli pullout is complete and that Israel’s safety is not compromised in the wake of it. To this end, Washington should work to revive Israeli-Palestinian security coordination, ensure a viable cease-fire, and maintain calm on the ground by training Palestinian security personnel and working with Egypt to reconfigure the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) currently stationed in Sinai to patrol the border between Gaza and Egypt. These measures would build much-needed confidence between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

A successful revival of security coordination after several years of violence would have multiple benefits for both sides. Security is the cornerstone of coexistence, and sustained coordination would help rebuild trust between the two parties. Moreover, a better security environment would improve conditions on the ground for Palestinians by reducing the need for checkpoints. Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz has also said that Israel is willing to pull out of major West Bank cities as soon as the PA is ready to accept responsibility for controlling these areas.

Most important, security coordination would facilitate a successful withdrawal from Gaza. A coordinated pullout is more likely than a unilateral move by Israel to lead to a smooth transfer of authority. To avoid destabilization after the withdrawal, it is important that the PA be committed to the terms of the pullout.

Both sides have taken encouraging steps toward cooperation, showing greater sensitivity to the other side’s domestic concerns than in the past. Sharon has released several hundred prisoners and agreed to halt targeted killings of suspected terrorists and the demolition of homes belonging to the families of suicide bombers. Abbas, for his part, has sacked Palestinian security chiefs who were considered corrupt Arafat cronies and ordered his troops to disrupt arms smuggling and rocket attacks on Israel.

If there is to be a viable cease-fire, the United States must take the lead in ensuring that it takes hold and is maintained. In order to avoid ambiguity, Washington should get the terms of the cease-fire in writing.
And if the United States pressures Israel to uphold its half of the bargain, then perhaps Egypt can help Abbas secure Palestinian support as well.

Abbas must take on rejectionists with a blend of confrontation and competition. Confrontation does not have to be massive to be effective. Abbas should start with an array of important measures: closing rocket labs, arresting some key operatives, and removing certain imams who are inciting violence. He should also make clear that suicide bombing is counterproductive. Having campaigned on this issue, he has a mandate to act on it.

In addition to such measures, Abbas needs to neutralize Hamas and other militant groups with a new political and economic strategy. Two weeks after Abbas won a majority in Gaza in presidential elections, Hamas swept municipal elections there thanks to its track record of providing essential social services, from health care to education, not being delivered by the government. The PA, accordingly, must be capable of supporting both private- and public-sector groups that can replace Hamas as providers of such services. It must also show clear economic results, proving the financial benefits of nonviolence, and reduce corruption in the mainstream Fatah Party.

A key security challenge will be stopping weapons smuggling into Gaza from Sinai. The MFO deployed along the Egyptian side of the Gaza border under Washington’s leadership could work with Egypt’s newly upgraded 750-member border police. Egyptian aid is crucial, as the Egyptians know the local geography and culture. Weapons
smuggling has proved to be one of the most difficult issues surrounding the Gaza withdrawal. But the combined efforts of the Egyptian border police and the MFO could prove effective in stemming the flow of weapons. In the aftermath of the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, families living on both sides of the border built tunnels to transport illicit goods. Today, the tunnels are used to bring in weapons as well. (In order to end weapons smuggling, it will also be necessary to generate economic development, since many families depend on the smuggling of other goods for their livelihood.)

The MFO stationed in Sinai was created in 1981, when the UN refused to endorse the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty and accept observer status under the terms of the treaty. It has some 2,000 troops from 11 countries (including two U.S. battalions) operating under U.S. civilian and military leadership, with its headquarters in Rome. Its mission is to prevent a massive remilitarization of the Sinai. The general calm on the Israeli-Egyptian border that has prevailed since the peace treaty means the MFO is likely to be open to adjusting its mission.

The MFO is the most logical choice to supplement the work of Egyptian border patrols for a variety of reasons. It already has a mandate to work in the area and is familiar to all the parties involved. Senior Egyptian military officials, such as General Omar Suleiman, the head of Egyptian intelligence, say that they would welcome the MFO’s deployment on the Gaza border. Privately, both Israeli and Palestinian officials say the same. Most important, the MFO would be useful because the framework for it already exists, eliminating the need to embark on a lengthy process of creating a new force. (It took a year and a half to assemble the current MFO; every year, Egypt, Israel, and the United States each contribute $17 million for its upkeep.) Although simply diverting personnel from the MFO’s current mission may not suit the needs of the new task, its configuration could be quickly enhanced, and the parties involved could then determine if it should be legally considered an “additive” force or a separate “MFO II.”
By sole virtue of its presence, the MFO would raise the diplomatic costs to the Egyptians of failing to secure the border with Gaza. It would at the same time ease the burden on them by monitoring the access of potential infiltrators and assisting on patrols. Perhaps with the help of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, an upgraded MFO could also provide technological assistance to help deal with the tunnel problem; for example, seismic technology could detect new tunnels. Once Gaza has functioning air- and seaports, the MFO could also assist other forces (including private consultants) in providing security.

Alternative options are not attractive for a variety of reasons. Israel would not accept UN involvement, given the critical nature of the smuggling issue and Israel’s adversarial interactions with the international body in recent decades. A NATO force—which must operate under the consensus of its 26 member states and risks becoming politicized—could not be established quickly enough and might not be nimble enough to adjust to changing realities on the ground; a NATO role may be viable at some point, but not in the short term. A U.S.-dominated force, meanwhile, is infeasible given that the U.S. military is already overburdened; with the MFO, the bulk of the troops already comes from other governments. What is required is Washington’s leadership, not a massive number of U.S. troops.

To coordinate and implement effective border security, a consultative forum should be created for the PA, Israel, Egypt, and the MFO to discuss ongoing security concerns. Such a mechanism exists under the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, and it could be extended to cover issues relating to the Gaza border. The logical place for ongoing (and perhaps daily) consultation is Kerem Shalom, the border area adjacent to the southeast corner of Gaza (and the site of a new border crossing, designed to avert violence in the Rafah area). There is no reason why Egyptian, Israeli, Palestinian, and MFO officials should not have an “operations room” to discuss and iron out any problems that may arise. Such a move would facilitate security, ensure that affairs run smoothly, and allay suspicions on all sides. Without regular communication, misunderstandings are bound to occur.
In addition to security efforts, the United States should support programs to promote economic development in a post-withdrawal Gaza. Washington should work closely with the World Bank on infrastructure and construction projects, job creation, donor assistance, and trade facilitation through efforts such as upgrading the Karni crossing to ease travel conditions for Palestinians. Overseas Private Investment Corporation insurance could encourage further foreign investment.

Washington should do all it can to encourage Arab states to play a constructive role in the peace process. Some Arab states have begun to realize that violence in the West Bank hurts them by demonstrating their own impotence. Others, such as Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, are reeling from internal demonstrations in support of democratization, giving the United States a new source of leverage to get them behind the peace process. Tunisia, with its government under assault from Washington, recently invited Sharon to a conference in Tunis.

Arab states can first of all help delegitimize suicide bombing by making it clear that such “martyrdom” attacks are politically counterproductive, morally wrong, and only impede the creation of a Palestinian state. Such an imprimatur would make it easier for the PA to combat terror. Second, the Gulf states can help bolster the PA financially. Gulf governments have reaped tens of billions in extra oil profit over the past two years but have failed to meet even the minimal commitment of $55 million a month in aid to the PA. (World Bank officials say only $9 million a month has arrived.) In total, Arab League governments owe the PA $891.8 million. Arab governments must demonstrate that their support for the Palestinians goes beyond mere rhetoric. Significant new funds would allow the PA to reliably deliver basic services, thereby weakening Hamas. Third, Arab states should put forward an “Arab road map” to demonstrate to the Israelis that steps toward peace will result in greater regional integration and not make Israel more vulnerable. The recent return of Egypt’s and Jordan’s ambassadors to Israel is a promising step. Washington can help by pushing for the reopening of quasi-diplomatic liaison offices throughout the Middle East (they were closed in 2000) and new multilateral talks on issues such as economic development.
By working with the PA, Israel, and Egypt, as well as its fellow members of “the Quartet”—the UN, the European Union, and Russia—the United States can at least somewhat reduce the likelihood that terrorist groups will ruin the Israeli disengagement from Gaza. Members of the Quartet must use their leverage over Iran, which backs the radical groups to varying degrees. Its support of terrorism should be raised during all consultations with Iran, including the current nuclear negotiations. Abbas recently sent an envoy to Beirut and Damascus urging them not to spoil the fragile cease-fire. Syria in particular—which is now feeling the heat for its occupation of Lebanon and for housing militants—must be forced to prevent rejectionist groups from operating from its soil to disrupt the calm.

Finally, the United States should put forward a new UN resolution ratifying Israel’s Gaza withdrawal, guaranteeing that a full and complete disengagement wins not just the support of the parties, but also the support of the Security Council. Such a resolution would help guarantee that the terms of departure are upheld and would designate the PA as the authority in charge of the area from which Israel withdraws. The resolution should denounce further violence and make clear that, in the wake of the Israeli withdrawal, all militias must disband and turn their weapons in to the PA. If belligerents continue to menace Israel, Israel will have the right of self-defense in keeping with the UN Charter. Such a resolution could provide an incentive for Israel to move forward, so long as its security requirements are met.

Of course, nothing the United States—or anyone besides the Israelis and the Palestinians themselves—does can guarantee peace. But such measures can help move things forward in countless tangible ways. As the history of the conflict shows, windows of opportunity may be meaningful only when opened by the parties themselves, but unless others help keep them open, they can shut all too quickly.