

LA VANGUARDIA

"For the Present: Hands Off Palestinian-Israeli Mediation"

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With Arafat weakened, Sharon as a trusted ally, and a second Bush term capable of implementing policy initiatives even before the inauguration, the constellations are aligned to introduce American-led Palestinian-Israeli mediation. There are powerful arguments why the Bush Administration or the EU should not miss this tantalizing opportunity.

Yet, inserting a full-fledged mediator or envoy at this juncture would be a mistake. It will only delay or interfere Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza and West Bank settlements. It will delay Palestinian decisions about how the Gaza Strip will be ruled after an Israeli withdrawal. An externally driven negotiating process will deny Palestinians a chance to challenge Arafat's contemporaries for influence over the Palestinian national movement.

Therefore, for the time being, rather than jump-start the negotiating process, circumspection and patience should be pursued. This should be followed with subtle engagement with funds at the ready to help Palestinian municipalities provide goods and services, and small local enterprises with low interest loans.

Indeed, the reasons are long and persuasive for engagement in Palestinian-Israeli mediation. First, there is no indication that Syria is interested in making a deal with Israel or vice-versa over the Golan Heights. If Syria does show serious interest in restarting negotiations, it should be set on the shelf. Attention should be directed only at Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and portions of the West Bank.

Second, a continuing administration has advantages over a new one coming to office. Most of the Bush Administration bureaucrats are in place, even if some at the top of the Administration will leave or switch postings. This Administration knows the Middle Eastern players intimately. Bush and Sharon are not close personally, but they are philosophically aligned vis a vis terrorism and defense of freedom. In addition, Bush has positive relationships with surrounding Arab states who are critical in support of Palestinian-Israeli agreements.

Third, the Administration's plan for a two state solution is in place

without the need to sell the idea to the Arab world, the EU, Israelis, American supporters of Israel, the international community, or the UN. He and Sharon agree that negotiations should not commence until terrorism stops, until there is reform in the PA, and, essentially, not until Arafat is gone. The Administration has outlined its preferences for a negotiated settlement in the Sharon-Bush exchange of letters in April 2004 which includes border modifications to the 1967 borders.

Fourth, Bush has no domestic constraints. With a majority in the Congress, he can move forward with relative ease in obtaining funds to cement Israeli withdrawals and collect assistance for Palestinian economic development and municipal assistance.

Fifth, there is potential benefit to fulfill broader American goals in the Middle East. Making progress on the Palestinian-Israeli track will have a beneficial impact on Arab/Muslim attitudes toward the United States, though it certainly will not reduce greatly anti-Bush sentiment. Further, driving Palestinian political reform undergirds the broader Administration objective to foster freedom, liberty, if not democracy, to the Middle East after Afghanistan and Iraq. Stimulating free enterprise and aiding Palestinian reform voices is consonant with the Bush Administration's broader democracy initiative for the Middle East.

If the arguments are so persuasive to start negotiations today, why should the U.S. stay on the side-lines and let the Israelis continue to withdraw from Gaza unilaterally? Why not urge post-Arafat Palestinian leadership to join in high level negotiations where the final status issues of Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, Israeli withdrawals, and prerogatives of the Palestinian state are negotiated?

Engagement of a special or high-profile Middle East envoy from any source inevitably focuses attention on the mediator. When that happens, expectations are raised and disappointments exaggerated, and progress usually stymied.

Second, nothing should be done to interfere or delay Sharon's intentions to withdraw unilaterally from Gaza. Israeli domestic politics are such that Sharon has a window of opportunity for perhaps the next twelve months to make that happen. Sharon should be given the opportunity to do what he has promised.

No single Palestinian leader can replace Arafat, have the moral authority to sign an interim agreement, and succeed in marketing it to the Palestinian people. Thus, waiting for a suitable negotiating partner after Arafat's passing will be an exercise in futility. Presently, the Palestinian domestic scene is in a tizzy about who should direct the movement and

what coalitions or collective leadership will evolve. Waiting to negotiate with might be termed a Palestinian national unity government is another prescription for delay.

Jumping into the negotiating fray immediately will assign to Abu Ala and Abu Mazen and others who returned with Arafat from Tunis in 1993, added legitimacy to run the national movement. The former is the present Palestinian Prime Minister and the latter his immediate predecessor in posts that Arafat intentionally weakened and controlled. If offered, they will take the negotiating mantle that is placed upon them by any outsider and use it to legitimize their leadership. They both may be worthy successors, but external interference on how domestic politics shakes out should be avoided. A high profile mediation effort at this juncture will frustrate younger Palestinian reformers who see Arafat's demise, as a chance to challenge in democratic elections his peers in shaping and controlling the national movement's future.

Palestinian succession should take its natural course. External mediation will interrupt indigenous simmering. Outsiders should not identify a Palestinian Allawi nor give Palestinians an excuse to deflect attention toward broader issues. For more than a hundred years, outsiders and autocratic Palestinian leaders singularly controlled Palestinian policies. Staying away now gives Palestinians a chance to sort out who should represent their interests and how power should be shared.

By next spring and summer, Israel should be on its way out of Gaza and the Palestinians should have held or scheduled municipal and national elections. That will be time enough for external mediation to consider whether it is yet time to engage Palestinians and Israelis. But not now.

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