Middle East — If There’s a Will, There’s a Way

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The recent agreement by Palestinian militants to temporarily cease all attacks against Israel — coupled with the withdrawal of Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) from some Palestinian territories — does suggest that the roadmap is now on its way to realization.

But the plan places asymmetrical demands on the two parties, which will become more and more obvious with time. It demands a ceasefire from Palestinian militants — but does not call for cessation of hostilities by Israel. Sure, the ceasefire is to be followed by an Israeli withdrawal (already in its initial stages), but it does not put an end to assassinations by Israeli forces (which often include the killing of civilians).

If Israel continues to wage war against Hamas and other Palestinian militants, the ceasefire cannot be expected to last long. Another weak link in the roadmap is that it places the lion’s share of the burden of bringing about change on the Palestinians. They are the weakest, the most disorganized and the most insecure of all players involved.
According to the plan, the Palestinians must stop all resistance to the occupation; they must then transform themselves from a disorganized, chaotic and frustrated society to a democratic, orderly and peaceful community. Only then will Israel withdraw and dismantle some settlements — and set the stage for a final status process.

But the Palestinian Authority (PA) may be simply incapable of delivering. During the last two years, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and the Israeli army have systematically destroyed the capability of the PA to be effective. Now this same diminished PA is expected to accomplish what even the IDF has failed to fully achieve — reign in Hamas and other militants.

Moreover, the failure of the roadmap to include some mechanism by which Hamas can be co-opted in the peace process is its biggest flaw. If this is designed to start a civil war between Palestinian factions, then the prospects for peace are very dim. Saab Erakat, the leading Palestinian negotiator, has repeatedly expressed the willingness of the PA to treat Hamas and other groups as legitimate political forces, which can participate in the governance of Palestine.

As long as the roadmap excludes the Palestinian militants from the dialogue, they may conclude that they have no other option but to resume the Intifada. We know now that Israel cannot completely eliminate their capacity to launch terrorist attacks. Their means are no doubt abhorrent, but they are a force to be reckoned with. It is time to start thinking seriously about opening negotiations, separately if necessary, with them. The de-radicalization of the militants must be an important goal of any reconciliation.

The road map also does not stipulate what the incentives are for Israel and the United States to follow through: If the Palestinians give up resistance, then the whole issue will be off the front pages — and on to the back burner. The Bush Administration will then likely refocus on other issues and Israel can restart settlements. The Palestinians would once again see no progress.

Besides the strategic limits, the plan also reveals a naïve simplification of the complexity of the crisis and also a rather un-empathetic understanding of the state of the
Palestinian people.

The plan lacks a strategy to bring about genuine changes in the hearts and minds of the people before peace can be realized. One important reason why Palestinians and Israelis cannot find a way out of this tragic quagmire of violence and suffering is because of the absence of an overwhelming willingness to find a peaceful solution. Another important missing factor is the lack of determination in the United States to aggressively pursue a peaceful solution.

President Bush is often able to step back and ignore the region essentially because there isn’t enough pressure on him from U.S. society to quickly resolve this festering crisis. It is not clear what the United States will be doing during this critical period. If it continues with its coercive diplomacy in the rest of the region (think Iran and Syria), there will be negative fallout that will most certainly mobilize radicals — and undermine peacemakers.

Ultimately, the United States cannot make peace between Israel and Arabs while maintaining an actively hostile posture towards other Arab and Muslim nations. There is no such thing as piecemeal peace. The road map to peace must first work towards fostering a willingness and urgency to make peace. Unless there first is a will to peace, there can be no way to peace.

I believe that three necessary changes must occur in the mindsets of the major players before a genuinely lasting peace can be achieved. First, the United States must adopt a sincerely even-handed approach to the issue. This change in its approach must be perceptible in words and deeds. For a just and lasting solution, America must be fully aware of the plight of the Palestinians and care for their rights and aspirations just as they care about Israel. Secondly, the people of Israel must recognize Palestinians, as their moral equals.

It is only through recognition of the equal humanity of the Palestinians that Israelis will become conscious of their angst. Nobody knows and understands dispossession, pain and suffering better than the Jewish community. If only for a moment they can pause and look at Palestinians as co-humans, they will understand their plight — and will be more
willing to take risks and make sacrifices for peace\(^4\).

Who can be a more powerful ally for peace than a pro-Palestine Israel? Finally, Muslims and Arabs must advance a vision of Israel that appeals to the Jewish community at-large. So far, all they have done is demand justice for Palestine — without directly addressing the future of Israel.

Those who threaten the destruction of Israel have confessed their opposition to peace and coexistence. This position is untenable and unacceptable to all that believe in peace and justice. Justice for any nation cannot come at the expense of another nation. Nobody understands this better than the Palestinians.

It is time that Arabs and Muslims articulated a vision of the Middle East that offers an appealing future to all. Who can allay Israeli fears and insecurities more than pro-Israeli Arabs? Just as in the war on terror, the struggle for peace in the Middle East must include a concomitant effort to change the hearts and minds of the people involved. Peace resides in the hearts and thoughts of peoples — not within territorial boundaries. Before we can make space for "the other," we must let the other have a place in our hearts and our thoughts.

END NOTES


