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Taking Advantage of a Middle Eastern Moment: The Need for an Active American Role

While the world remains riveted on Iraq, there is a small glimmer of hope between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Prime Minister Sharon's intention to withdraw from the Gaza Strip has created an opening. To be sure, the prime minister must still find the way to overcome internal opposition to implement his decision, and given the opposition within his party and his own lack of a majority within the Knesset, this won't be easy. But his determination to implement his initiative, the fact that 70% of the Israeli public supports the disengagement plan, and the readiness of the Labor party to join a national unity government all suggest that Prime Minister Sharon will in time succeed in implementing his decision to withdraw from Gaza. In any case, it is clear from discussions I had recently in Egypt, the West Bank, and Gaza that the Palestinians and Egyptians are convinced that Israel is going to leave Gaza.

Palestinians see both the opportunity and the danger in the Sharon initiative. They understand that once Israel is out of Gaza they can no longer blame failings on the Israelis and must be able to govern themselves. They must be responsible. Here is the chance to have good governance, and to demonstrate to the world that Palestinians are ready for statehood.

The danger for the Palestinians is that their current fragmentation will be exacerbated after the Israelis withdraw, with heightened competition and even conflict, to see who can emerge dominant in Gaza. Yasir Arafat does not make the task any easier. He will certainly try to frustrate Palestinian efforts to forge internal understandings if he cannot look like the liberator of Gaza. Arafat's likely opposition will make the Egyptian task that much more difficult.

For its part, Egypt tends to see Gaza more through the prism of danger than opportunity. The last thing Egypt wants is to have Gaza, sitting as it does on Egypt's border, either devolve into chaos or become dominated by Hamas. Stability in Egypt will not be served by either possibility. To avoid any such eventuality, Egypt is now determined to work with the Israelis and Palestinians.

Ironically, the Sharon decision to leave Gaza has led Egypt to assume the role previously played by the United States. It is now Egypt that is seeking to coordinate Israel's withdrawal and the parallel assumption of responsibilities by the Palestinian Authority. It is now Egypt that is seeking to address Israeli security concerns to ensure that the withdrawal will be complete. And it is now Egypt that is trying to reorganize, restructure, and train Palestinian security forces and empower the Palestinian prime minister.

Can Egypt succeed? It will not be easy. With both the Israelis and Palestinians, there will be difficult challenges that must be resolved. In Israel, Ariel Sharon may have made his decision to withdraw completely but he cannot ignore the concerns of the IDF, particularly at a time when his own party is resisting the withdrawal. Even before the first-ever killing of Israelis by a Qassem rocket in the Negev city of Sderot two weeks ago, the Israeli military worried about the smuggling of qualitatively more destructive weapons (Katyusha rockets, shoulder-fired surface to air missiles) into Gaza after Israeli withdrawal. From Gaza, Katyushas would be able to hit the port city of Ashkelon or a surface to air missile could bring down an Israeli aircraft; the IDF's concerns in this regard won't be met with slogans but with tangible, practical approaches for preventing either eventuality. That is why IDF has favored holding the Philadelphi route on the Gaza-Egyptian border, notwithstanding the Prime Minister's desire for full withdrawal. If Egypt wants the Israeli withdrawal to be complete, it will have to demonstrate to the Israeli military that it is acting to shut down the smuggling tunnels that run from its side of the border into Gaza. So far, the Israeli military leaders I spoke with remain unconvinced.

But the challenge with the Palestinians may be even more demanding. Today the Palestinian Authority in Gaza simply does not function on security matters. There are different security organizations, tied to different factions of Fatah, and with different strongmen. If that were not enough, these competing forces must also contend with Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Egypt wants to create coherence by having Arafat permit the consolidation of the security organizations into three services with a professional chain of command and separated from Fatah. Egypt wants the leaders of the new consolidated security services to come to Egypt to reach understandings on their responsibilities, how they will be fulfilled, and how Egypt will monitor their performance while also providing them support. Only after reaching such understandings would the Egyptians then send several dozen advisors to work with and monitor the new security services in Gaza.

It is a logical plan. While it has the support of the Palestinian Prime Minister, Ahmed Qurei, Yasir Arafat has given only grudging support to the plan—and even this under pressure from Hosni Mubarak and his intelligence chief Omar Suleiman. In truth, at this point Arafat's yes is in reality a "no". He has not reconciled himself to giving up control of the security organizations or to allowing them to fulfill their obligations. (Terje Larsen, Kofi Annan's special representative in the Middle East, has complained about these very points in a presentation to the Security Council.) Does this mean all is lost? Not necessarily, but it will require constant pressure on him from President Mubarak, including the threat of going public about Arafat's obstructionism. Arafat may have little to fear from our criticism, but should the traditional friends of the Palestinian people declare that he is blocking efforts to advance the Palestinian cause, that could have a decidedly different impact on the Chairman.

For Egypt to be willing to go public in its criticism of Arafat would represent a bold new step. In private, President Mubarak and other Arab leaders have never spared Arafat of criticism. But they have never been willing to make the same statements in public,

perhaps fearing Arafat's ability to manipulate their publics about a betrayal of the Palestinian cause. Perhaps, Egypt's stakes in what happens in Gaza may change the traditional calculus. Perhaps, it will also motivate the Egyptians to press the Jordanians, Saudis, Moroccans, Tunisians and others to join it in being prepared to go public with criticism of Arafat. Should Arab leaders act collectively, they would feel less vulnerable to Arafat's charges; on the contrary, Arafat would be the one feeling vulnerable. And this may not be such a far-fetched idea as Arab leaders are evidencing increasing frustration with Arafat.

But here there should also be no illusions. The readiness to put real pressure on Arafat to go along with the restructuring of security organizations and the assumption of meaningful security responsibilities will probably be tied to giving Arafat something. At a minimum, the Egyptians and others are likely to insist that Arafat be released from the Muqata, his virtual prison. Israel is likely to resist this, fearing Arafat's desire to return to Gaza as a hero and the need for him to pay a price for his continuing support for terror against Israelis.

While sympathetic to the Israeli concerns, I favor Arafat being released from the Muqata. He certainly hasn't earned a release, but he is using his virtual prisoner status as a symbol of humiliation not of himself, but of the Palestinian people—and that resonates, building support for him and keeping reformers on the defensive. However, I would make Arafat's release to Gaza, not release for external travel, part of a package of understandings in which Arafat would not be able to go to Gaza until the security restructuring had taken place and there was actual performance for several months.

The question remains can Egypt broker this kind of a package arrangement? Indeed, can it broker broader understandings between the Israelis and Palestinians on the timing of the steps the Israelis will take as they prepare withdrawal, the steps the Palestinians must take in response, the ways the handover of territory will be coordinated, and the specific areas where the IDF and the Palestinian security services will work together? Can it put all this together without also negotiating a comprehensive ceasefire that is not only an internal Palestinian hudna but involves the Israelis as well?

All this is an extraordinarily tall order, and the Egyptians are unlikely to succeed, much less stick with the effort, without active American support. Already the Egyptian timetable of two months for Yasir Arafat to concede on the consolidation of Palestinian security forces suggests to some Palestinians and Israelis that the Egyptians are reluctant to push too hard at a time when they believe the Administration is otherwise occupied.

I am afraid that the Egyptians may believe that the Administration will do very little before November, and while the Egyptians are prepared to take the lead, they definitely are counting on the United States for several things. First, they want an American public assurance that the Gaza withdrawal will be the first step, not the last of the process. Second, when they identify requirements for Israeli behavior (and this is likely to focus on releasing Arafat and stopping targeted killings and raids as part of a comprehensive ceasefire), they will want the Administration to press the Israelis to accept these steps.

Third, they will want us to provide the material help we promised the Palestinian security organizations during Abu Mazen's time but never delivered. And, lastly, they will want us to lead an international donor effort that produces significant assistance for Gaza to show life can get better.

I certainly favor American activism sooner rather than later. While I think Egypt has a very important role to play and am pleased by its readiness to play it, I would prefer to see the US taking the lead. American leadership with Egyptian support is ultimately more likely to be successful than Egyptian leadership with US support. Regardless, one point is very clear: the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza can be used to end the war between Israelis and Palestinians and make the resumption of a peace process possible. It can be used to create a new climate in which both Israelis and Palestinians have a chance to restore their belief again in peaceful coexistence. But the less that is done now to capitalize on this moment, the more that will need to be done later and the greater the risk that the moment will be lost. Middle East moments have a way of appearing and disappearing quickly, and, unfortunately, when they are lost, the situation is almost always worse than it was before.