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Gaza: Gateway to Palestine or Anarchy?

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After initially reacting with caution, the Bush Administration is now taking the Israeli proposal for unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip more seriously. The initial reaction of tepid interest has gradually given way to a highly engaged conversation.

The administration's position continues to be that the road map is the official document representing US policy. With that in mind, they initially opposed a partial withdrawal from Gaza, insisted on a minimal withdrawal from "outposts" and asked to move the wall/barrier closer to the 1967 borders. While details have yet to be worked out, it seems very likely that Israel will withdraw from Gaza, probably by the end of this year.

However, some very substantial issues still need to be resolved. Which Palestinian group will claim the credit for Israel's withdrawal? Who will run Gaza following the withdrawal and provide security? Who will ensure an orderly handover of the evacuated settlements? Still more questions come to mind. What is the Palestine Authority's role in providing security if it does not communicate meaningfully with the US? What are the roles of Egypt, NATO, and multinational forces in providing security? Who is arranging for the economic package that is needed to rehabilitate and develop the Gaza Strip?

American and Israeli diplomats have crisscrossed the Atlantic in pursuit of answers to these questions. The Bush administration, while perhaps appearing otherwise, is engaged, despite the likelihood that action might not take place before the elections. So what are the responsibilities of the Palestinians? The first thing that the Palestinians can't afford is civil war and the resultant anarchy. This would suit the several extremist circles in and out of government in Israel. It would further bolster the argument that the Palestinians can't manage their affairs and cannot be trusted to take over the West Bank.

This feeds the "Gaza First and Last" option. The second situation, which must also be avoided, is an extremist takeover in Gaza by fanatics opposed to peace. This will inevitably lead to a "Gaza First and Last" outcome and will preclude any possibility of development. It will also deny Gaza access to both a seaport and an airport. The Palestinian political establishment has to take its responsibilities seriously in putting its own agenda on the table. It can begin by planning, within the framework of the road map, to administer Gaza according to

acceptable standards of law and order, with both accountability and transparency. The political, legal and civil components of their regime have to be developed expeditiously and convincingly.

Many parties will be involved in matters of security. The Palestinians must outline what they can and cannot do in this field and be ready to deliver on their promises. Coordination on matters of security has to take place in a political context. Israeli incursions into Gaza must be off the table after their departure. Palestinian civil society has to define its role early and clearly. Decisions should not be left to politicians exclusively as has been the case historically. A new relationship between society and government has to be defined early and fairly. One particular role for Palestinian civil society exists in the takeover and management of the evacuated settlements. It is possible to carve out a role for representatives of civil society and the private sector to make a significant contribution in this area.

One model to consider is to set up a 'Palestine Development Trust' that will then negotiate with all involved parties the takeover in question. Furthermore, this body would negotiate with other partners specific security arrangements for these housing projects and the particular policies that will govern the sale, management and expansion of these 'villages.' New construction, housing and development using the funds available from the acquisition, will be coordinated with the Palestinian political establishment. Foreign governments and international institutions will have to play an integral role with this trust in planning and executing the development of Gaza. This trust should be separate and distinct, and should have no relation with the rights of the refugees, including their rights for compensation. Those rights are to be part of the political dialogue.

Overall, it seems that failure of the Palestinians to be active planners and interlocutors in the unfolding events would be very costly. Waiting to see what the 'plan' offers is a dereliction of duty and a reactionary policy. Civil leaders, as much as politicians, have a role to play and they must play it.

All concerned parties must not be intimidated by the accusations that this is an Israeli trap. Whether it is a trap or not, the Palestinians must plan to manage the takeover and administration of their evacuated lands responsibly and efficiently without conceding their right to an independent viable state in the West Bank, Gaza and a capital in Jerusalem based on the UN resolutions. No long-term peace is possible without that outcome.

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