

# Give Us An Alternative

**May 10, 2002**

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President Bush and Ariel Sharon this week agreed to press on with their conservative strategy of focusing on the negotiating process in the Middle East, rather than on the goal that process is designed to achieve. They have also introduced structural change in the Palestinian Authority as a pre-condition to this aimless process.

The American approach does not seek to change reality. Instead, it aims to stop it from deteriorating. But the killing and destruction are getting worse, with each wave of confrontation more severe than the last. In the absence of radical change, the Palestinian establishment will be unable, and the Israeli establishment unwilling, to talk seriously about a settlement. On the Palestinian side, the political elite no longer enjoys the support of the public at large. Its legitimacy was based on the hope that diplomatic negotiations would achieve Israel's withdrawal from the territories it occupied in 1967. This did not happen and the Palestinian public sees the Oslo process as having led to the reoccupation of the territories and Israeli cruelty of an unprecedented kind.

To re-establish public confidence, the Palestinian political elite needs a significant Israeli withdrawal. A cosmetic withdrawal that leaves the Palestinian region carved up into 200 separate pieces will be of no use. Without Palestinian public confidence in the negotiating process, it would be too much to expect the Palestinian political elite and its security services to impose a ceasefire and prevent terror. Israel's recent military operation has left hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Palestinians desperate for revenge.

For the PA to regain legitimacy, Israel should at least withdraw to the positions it held in September 2000 before the intifada broke out. But a withdrawal of Israeli army forces alone would be meaningless because 34 new settlements would remain, established since Sharon became prime minister.

It would also be unreasonable to expect such a withdrawal from the current Israeli establishment whose central group has, for the past year, been pushing for the reconquest of the Palestinian territories and the destruction of the PA's operational capabilities. The goal was to prepare the ground for the creation of an alternative leadership that would agree to accept Israel's "generous" offer - a long-term ceasefire and a clutch of Palestinian enclaves surrounded by Israeli settlements. A significant Israeli withdrawal would, according to this view, be a victory for terrorism. But, to win a victory over terror, the Israeli establishment wants to carry out a plan that cannot be implemented. Only the international community can break this vicious circle.

What can western governments that value peace do? Present an alternative. They cannot impose peace from the outside. But they can tell the two peoples and leaderships: these are our principles for a settlement. Both peoples need a clear alternative that has broad international support. The Palestinian public must have it to restore its faith in the diplomatic process. Only then will the Palestinian leadership be able to compete with the forces which think that violence can bring an

Palestinian leadership be able to compete with the forces which think that violence can bring an end to the Israeli occupation.

The Israeli public needs this alternative no less than the Palestinians. In Israel it will serve as a catalyst, triggering debate and providing impetus to the shrunken peace camp. There has not yet been a public debate in Israel over the peace proposal issued in March by the Arab summit in Beirut. This historic initiative was swept under the rug and the Israeli establishment succeeded in selling the story that the recent military operation was a life-or-death struggle imposed on the Jewish state.

The principles of this international alternative do not have to be invented. They are contained in the declaration issued by Russia, the UN secretary general, the European Union and Colin Powell on the eve of the latter's recent visit to the Middle East. The declaration includes the main points of the Beirut summit resolution, as well as President Bush's vision, codified in a UN resolution. Without the Beirut summit's decision, President Bush's vision of an Israel and Palestine living side by side in security and peace is amorphous. Without American backing, the Beirut document lacks international force. If the United States cannot lead such a move for internal political reasons, it can certainly abstain from vetoing it.