

Bush's Mideast Opportunity

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JERUSALEM -- The collapse of all the mechanisms of peacemaking between Israel and the Palestinians into waves of Islamic suicide terrorism on the one hand, and Israel's dangerously escalating military responses on the other, should convince those who have been skeptical of an international solution that a settlement, if there is to be one, will have to come internationally, not from the parties themselves.

A consensus for an international solution should be drawn from the two major, complementary peace platforms: the Saudi initiative -- normalization of relations between Israel and Arab nations in return for Israeli withdrawal from territories occupied in 1967 and the creation of a Palestinian state -- and a settlement under parameters offered by President Bill Clinton in December 2000.

If President Bush, in issuing a strong statement yesterday for a return to a process leading to a final settlement, is to be effective, he needs to build on the Clinton legacy. The Clinton parameters were the culmination of laborious effort by an honest broker, a brilliantly devised point of equilibrium between the positions of the parties at the latest stage of the negotiations. But Mr. Clinton, desperately short of time at the end of his presidency, was unable to rally the Arab governments to his enterprise and could not build an effective alliance with the Europeans and the Russians to sustain his peace deal.

It is precisely on this point that the Bush administration is positioned to perform better. America now has unquestioned leadership in the war against terror, while Arab governments are increasingly concerned about their own stability. (This concern was the main reason for the Saudi initiative.) These political developments in the wake of both the Sept. 11 attacks and the Palestinian intifada offer President Bush a golden chance to build an international alliance for peace in the Middle East that his predecessor could not put together.

However, a lesson of the peace process so far is that principles that are too broad or too vague are no longer valid. "Constructive ambiguity" has outlived its usefulness. What is needed is a package of very precise and practical elements that will have to be endorsed as the internationally accepted interpretation of United Nations Resolution 242, which calls for a settlement on the basis of Israel's withdrawal from occupied territories. An international peace conference would then oversee the negotiations between the parties on a detailed final-status agreement. This would be the shape of a viable peace platform: land for peace; territorial swaps to accommodate compact Israeli settlement blocks and the resettlement of Palestinian refugees; a practical solution to the refugee problem that -- as both the Clinton parameters and the Saudi proposal indicate -- does not assume the right of return, but requires the creation of an international fund for the resettlement and compensation of refugees; two capitals in Jerusalem, divided along ethnic lines; a nonmilitarized Palestinian state; the end of conflict and finality of

claims.

The poor record of observance of agreements in this process shows that a multinational peacekeeping force and strict mechanisms of implementation and monitoring are required. It can be argued that the Oslo accords collapsed because they lacked such mechanisms, relying instead on the desperately diminishing asset of mutual trust.

We are now in a war the Palestinians view as the last stage of their struggle for independence. The Israeli perception is that the Palestinian leadership persists in its denial of the moral legitimacy of a Jewish state. The conflict has gone back to its fundamentalist core, and no bilateral agreement can emerge from this bitter clash.

The concept of interim agreements -- in principle a reasonable means of restoring trust -- has run its course and is no longer valid. But both Israelis and Palestinians are afraid, indeed incapable, of taking a step toward a reasonable final compromise. Only the international community under assertive and resolute American leadership can coax them into crossing the chasm together in one big step.

The current war will produce no peace of the brave, but it can perhaps create the conditions for the peace of the exhausted.

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