US Must Take New Role in Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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Shlomo Ben-Ami

SADDAM HUSSEIN no doubt represents a major threat to peace and stability in the Middle East. Disarming him as well as creating the conditions for the emergence of an alternative regime in Baghdad are vital objectives. However, whether these objectives are reached through military action or, preferably, by peaceful means, the repercussions of the Iraqi situation on the region as a whole are bound to be many and serious.

Arabs feel humiliated. Notwithstanding the clear differences between the conditions of the Israeli-Palestinian situation and the Iraqi threat, Arab leaders and the "Arab Street" have always wanted to see the international community, through the UN Security Council, impose tough resolutions on Israel. And now they are being "raped," as the Arab media puts it, by America into acquiescing to precisely such a resolution against an Arab state at a time when Israel is allowed a free hand in suppressing the Palestinian Intifadah.

In a region where the leaders are mostly "pro-Western" and the masses "anti-Western" there is a serious threat of popular unrest and, if the crisis slides into war, the very survival of moderate regimes may be at stake. Saddam is not the first Arab leader to wrap his sins in the mantle of the Palestinian cause. But one does not have to embrace the cynical discourse that all the ills of the Arab world come from Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in order to accept that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a major cause of instability in the region, and a convenient platform for mass hysteria throughout the Arab and Muslim world.

Clearly, Israel has a vital interest in ending the conflict before the region declines into uncontrolled nuclear proliferation. Its interest does not contradict that of the international community.

The real test of America's leadership then is to use the solution of the Iraqi problem as the catalyst for a wider effort to build a structure of peace and security in the Middle East as a whole, lest the region declines into a chaotic postwar landscape. Peace between Israel and the Palestinians needs to be a central pillar of such an edifice of regional stability.

The Intifadah has taken the life of the peace process. All the mechanisms of peace-making went up in the fire of the bloodiest confrontation ever between Israelis and Palestinians. The parties are clearly unable to divert from the apocalyptic collision course they took. It should be clear by now that a peace agreement freely reached between the parties themselves is simply out of the question.

The broad outlines of a solution that will end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are, however, clear:

· Two states, Israel and Palestine.

· Withdrawal from territories occupied in 1967 with border adjustments and territorial swaps.

· Two capitals in Jerusalem following the formula, "what is Jewish is Israeli, and what is Arab is Palestinian."

· A solution to the problem of Palestinian refugees that is based on compensation, rehabilitation, and resettlement. There will be no specific "right of return" to the state of Israel.

· Special arrangements to reconcile Israel's security needs with the sovereignty of the Palestinian state.

· An announced and enforced end to the conflict, including all forms of terrorism, violence, incitement, and boycott.

The situation calls for assertive American leadership in building an international alliance for such an Israeli-Palestinian peace. America's need for Atlantic solidarity and European political support to legitimize a possible war in Iraq is a constellation that enhances the necessity for such an alliance. America needs to move beyond its traditional role as a sponsor and mediator for bilateral negotiations. Rather it must develop its own detailed proposal and then vigorously encourage the parties to accept and implement such an agreement.

Such an approach will not be out of tune with the will of the Israeli public. For instance, in a recent poll conducted by the Steinmetz Center for Peace Research at Tel Aviv University, some 67 percent of Israeli Jews supported an American effort to formulate a detailed peace agreement - not just a broad and hardly binding "roadmap" - and then recruit and lead an international alliance in an effort to encourage the parties into endorsing the deal.

If Israelis and Palestinians can be presented with a detailed final status agreement that would end the conflict and meet their most basic needs, it is highly likely that the two peoples will say "yes" and compel their leaders to do likewise.

The globalization of efforts in the war against terrorism and in curtailing the irresponsible behavior of rogue states is a promising reflection of an improved global order. The mobilization of international energies for conflict resolution needs to be another.

American leadership in responding to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 gained the support of much of the global community. A similar embrace of American leadership would certainly follow a resolute peace initiative aimed at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The United States must move in this direction.

Shlomo Ben-Ami *was foreign minister of Israel in the government of Ehud Barak.*