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Israel, Palestine, and the United States

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Diplomat Dennis Ross says we are in a “race against time in the Mideast” (*Washington Post*, 5/28/05). There’s a race because recent significant changes in the relations between Israel and the Palestinians have opened new opportunities for either positive or negative decisions.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who was elected in a democratic election last January, has replaced the late Yasser Arafat as Palestinian leader. Abbas believes in “secular governance, the rule of law, nonviolence and coexistence with Israel,” says Ross. There are so many positive things about Abbas’ emergence as leader that President Bush welcomed him to the White House on May 26 and promised cooperation, encouragement, and \$50 million directly to the Palestinian Authority to help with economic and political development in the Palestinian territories. This July, the Palestinians are supposed to go to the polls again; this time to elect members of the Palestinian Legislative Council.

On the Israeli side, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is now trying to complete a process of withdrawing Israeli settlers from about 1,800 homes in the Palestinian territory of the Gaza strip, a move that could open new possibilities for Palestinian self-government and greater independence in that part of their territory. Moreover, for most of the time since Abbas has been president of the Palestinian Authority, Israel has been relatively free of violent attacks from Palestinian suicide bombers and other uses of violence.

With these positive developments, should we expect anything less than continuing progress toward a final settlement of the half-century conflict that has continued in that region since the founding of the State of Israel in 1948?

In fact, Ross and many others are concerned that if constructive decisions are not made fairly quickly, this moment of opportunity will be gone, leading to an even greater crisis. And many of the decisions that need to be made are by the leaders of countries outside that region, most importantly, the United States.

Although the situation is highly complex, the critical needs of the hour, according to Aaron David Miller, can be summarized this way: “Palestinians need a settlements freeze [by Israel] and a pathway to permanent-status negotiations; Israelis need a comprehensive end to Palestinian terrorism, violence and incitement” (*Washington Post*, 5/23/05). Behind what appears to be constructive developments, in other words, are very critical problems that have not yet been resolved. When President Bush welcomed Abbas to the White House, for example, he not only promised cooperation and \$50 million, but he also stressed that Israel must halt new settlement activities and not allow its building of a security fence to “prejudice final-status negotiations with regard to Gaza, the West Bank and Jerusalem.” That is just what Abbas wanted to hear. But President Bush has made similar statements in the past while doing little or nothing to pressure Israel to stop building its fence on Palestinian land or to halt the building of new settlements.

In March, for example, Israel confirmed its plans to build at least 6,500 more homes for Israelis within Palestinian territory east of Jerusalem, threatening to encircle Jerusalem altogether and make direct Palestinian access to East Jerusalem nearly impossible. (Palestinians claim East Jerusalem as their rightful capital.). So Sharon may succeed in moving illegal Israeli settlers from 1,800 homes in Gaza while he moves ahead with the addition of 6,500 new homes in what is even more precious Palestinian territory. This decision undermines the likelihood of final-status negotiations and Abbas’ ability to restrain Palestinian militants who see the injustice on Israel’s side. Is President Bush serious about helping Abbas build real democracy in Palestine, as Bush insists must happen, or is he simply helping Israel buy time so it can complete its take-over of whatever land it wants?

If Israel wants a comprehensive end to Palestinian terrorism and violence, then one might imagine that both Bush and Sharon should be doing everything possible to help Abbas secure firm leadership through the democratic processes he is trying to develop. But this is where time is of the essence as Ross urges. Since Abbas was elected, all too little positive evidence of economic and political progress has been seen by the Palestinian people. Unemployment is high, jobs are scarce, and Israel’s military controls much of the territory as well as the checkpoints that allow people to move between home and work. Last December, says Ross, a group of donor nations pledged \$1.2 billion to the Palestinians for development, but, as of the end of May, less than 10 percent of that had been delivered. President Bush’s promise of \$50 million is a positive step, but it offers only a very small boost. If Abbas cannot show that his support of democratic institutions and peaceful negotiations with Israel will benefit his people, he has little chance of coopting those who are intent on using violence against Israel.

The question that cannot be avoided, then, is whether Miller is correct in thinking that what the Palestinians and Israelis *need* is what they and the Americans really *want*. If what both sides need is what they want, and if the United States wants to facilitate the meeting of needs on both sides, then negotiations and continuing positive, peaceful developments on both sides should be relatively easy to promote. But what if Israelis want peace *as well as* the take-over of as much Palestinian land as they want? And what if the Palestinians need a freeze of Israeli settlements but do not want to negotiate to a genuine two-state conclusion or an interim end to violent attacks against Israelis? And

what if the Bush administration wants to support Israel's aims more than the Palestinian aims, even to the point where the movement toward democracy under Abbas in Palestine is undermined and collapses? As Abbas said to Bush at the White House, "democracy is like a coin . . . [and] on the other side of the coin is freedom." Under Israeli occupation, he told Bush, Palestinians "lack freedom" and that "will weaken the democratic march" (*Washington Post*, 5/27/05).

It was discouraging, then, to learn that after Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's trip to the Middle East in late June, the subsequent summit between Sharon and Abbas ended in acrimony and without positive outcomes (*Washington Post*, 6/22/05).

Not all Jews in the United States are encouraging Bush to pursue a two-state solution, and millions of evangelical Christians are adamant in wanting Israel to do whatever it needs to do in its own interests to fulfill biblical prophecies as they interpret them. Ted Haggard, president of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), told Sharon on a recent visit that "the official policy" of NAE "is to support the state of Israel come hell or high water. We are staunch supporters. We believe that you were chosen by God to lead the people of Israel in this difficult period. We fully support you, because we believe it is God's will" (Herb Keinon, "Sharon Meets 'Jews for Jesus' Follower," *Israel.jpost.com*, 5/10/2005). Few Americans are advocates of Palestinian rights and evenhanded treatment by the U.S. of both Israel and the Palestinians.

Time is indeed short for the United States and European countries to try to help Palestinians and Israelis reach new, positive agreements on how to live together in genuinely independent states. This is President Bush's stated policy goal and it is apparent that he needs to do more to assure the Palestinians that he wants democracy to succeed there. To do that he needs to become tougher with Israel in insisting not only on the end of new settlements in Palestinian territories but also on the pull-back of settlements near Jerusalem that threaten the possibility of any future Palestinian state.

And those of us who believe that Christian-Zionist interpretations of the Bible are not only wrong but dangerous as guides for American foreign policy in the Middle East must do everything we can to challenge the views of Haggard, Pat Robertson, Tim LaHaye, and others who hold and teach those interpretations so passionately. Two good places to start, for those who want an introduction to a non-Zionist interpretation of the Bible in relation to the history and politics of the Middle East, are the following books:

Gary M. Burge, *Whose Land? Whose Promise? What Christians Are Not Being Told about Israel and the Palestinians* (Cleveland, Oh.: The Pilgrim Press, 2003).

Colin Chapman, *Whose Promised Land? The Continuing Crisis Over Israel and Palestine* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2002).