

**The Mideast's Second Chance;
Action now, Sen. Biden says, can revive the peace effort.
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<http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-biden15dec15,0,611985.story>

Last year, when the Palestinian moderate Mahmoud Abbas briefly served as prime minister, the United States, Israel and the international community failed to give him the support he badly needed, making it all too easy for Yasser Arafat to undercut him.

Now, we have a second chance. Arafat is gone and Abbas is favored to win the Palestinian presidential election next month, having made "the total cessation of violence" his highest priority.

He is currently seeking commitments from all the Palestinian factions for a cease-fire and is determined to bring the various security services under control. His recognition of Palestinian responsibility to act decisively against incitement and terrorism will give Israel what it has been lacking: a partner for peace.

But Abbas' reemergence also raises a fundamental question. Arafat had the capacity to make peace, but lacked the will. Abbas has the will, but does he have the capacity to overcome violence, corruption and the sense of victimization that are a legacy of Arafat's leadership?

Israel, the United States and the international community have a shared responsibility to help him build a capacity for peace.

Already, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is taking steps to facilitate elections and to deal directly with the Palestinian leadership. "We're ready to make painful compromises for a genuine and durable peace," he said. And I believe Sharon is sincere.

But there is more Israel must do to support Abbas -- if he demonstrates his commitment to end terrorism.

First, it should hold Palestinians to a tough but not impossible standard when it comes to violence. Sharon and Abbas agree that Syria and Iran direct many terrorist activities. The future of Israelis and Palestinians should not be handed over to radical leaders in those countries. The test for the Palestinians should be whether they make a concerted, sustained effort against terrorism. The sooner they meet the basic responsibilities of statehood, the sooner they will have a state.

Second, Israel should transfer responsibility for security to the Palestinians wherever they show they are ready to assume it, and take down checkpoints not vital to Israel's security.

Third, Israel should coordinate its disengagement from Gaza with the Palestinians. Egypt has a role to play in training Palestinian security forces and fighting arms smuggling.

Fourth, Israel must convince the Palestinians that its disengagement plan is truly "Gaza first," not "Gaza last." Sharon should reiterate his commitment to the "road map" (the initiative sponsored by the U.S., Russia, the European Union and the United Nations) directly to the Palestinian people. Sharon has taken an important symbolic step by calling for the removal of all settlements in Gaza and four more in the northern West Bank. This is an underappreciated breakthrough revealing his understanding of the demographic pressures Israel faces. If the peace process gets back on track, he should act quickly to remove unauthorized outposts and end settlement growth.

As always, the U.S. has a critical role to play in this process. We should bolster Abbas' ability to deliver tangible benefits to the Palestinian people. Hamas has supplanted the Palestinian Authority as an economic and social benefactor. It pays significant sums for school and college tuition for young Palestinians. It delivers social services to the destitute.

But Abbas must gain the means to reassert the primacy of the Palestinian Authority. We can help by funding highly visible projects -- such as building hospitals and schools -- that will help Abbas put thousands of people to work. But we can't repeat past mistakes; we must act with urgency. An international pledging conference under consideration for late spring 2005 may prove worthwhile, but Abbas can't wait that long.

President Bush deserves support for his proposal to provide a quick infusion of \$20 million to the Palestinians. But he must finally make good on his June 2003 pledge to "ride herd" on the road map by appointing a senior envoy to hold each side to its commitments.

Finally, the U.S. must demand that neighboring Arab countries take visible steps toward normalization with Israel. Jordan and Egypt should return their ambassadors to Israel. Others in the region should begin once again to meet openly with Israelis to discuss economic matters, business opportunities, water supplies, regional security, the environment and other issues of common concern. Two-thirds of Palestinians and Israelis support a two-state solution. Yet nearly the same proportion in both communities believes the other side really wants a one-state solution. Now, pragmatic leadership from the Palestinians, Israel and the U.S. can break that dynamic and restart the peace process. If second chances are rare, third chances are virtually unheard of. The time to act is now.