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Convergence Toward Peace

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Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's inaugural visit to Washington last week has brought out, in full force, the nattering nabobs of negativism. A host of critics, from former president Jimmy Carter on the left to former CIA chief James Woolsey on the right, are protesting that Olmert's gambit to consolidate settlers behind Israel's West Bank separation barrier cannot lead to peace.

Far from withdrawing, huff the doves, Israel is scheming to unilaterally declare final borders and annex enormous tracts of land it conquered and occupied in war, perhaps as much as half the West Bank. In fact, Olmert's election oratory about unilaterally drawing final borders has already crashed against the shoals of political reality. Both the United States and the European Union have made clear that they are loath to recognize final borders imposed by Israel on the Palestinians. Olmert and associates instead increasingly talk of "interim borders" that would result from Israel moving tens of thousands of settlers from heavily populated Palestinian areas of the West Bank back to Israel and to settlement blocs near the 1967 border.

Dovish critics wrongly discount the prospect that so dramatic a reconfiguration could bring Israelis and Palestinians closer to peace. The Road Map peace plan, endorsed by the United Nations Security Council, calls for the removal of Israeli settlements and the creation of a territorially contiguous Palestinian state with provisional borders, until the parties can agree on final boundaries. Olmert's "convergence" plan, if guided wisely by the United States, can lay the foundations for a two-state solution to the conflict.

Equally misplaced are hawkish fears that the new Israeli government's West Bank strategy will replicate the post-disengagement terrorist mayhem in Gaza. Unlike Gaza, Israel does not envision surrendering control over West Bank border crossings or the Jordanian-Israeli frontier. The Palestinians must live up to security commitments before Israel will entertain wide-ranging West Bank military redeployments involving the transfer of security responsibility.

Olmert has intimated that while several settlement blocs would be further developed, Israel would do so in a way that would not jeopardize the territorial continuity of a future Palestinian state. The Bush administration should work with Israel to define a bright line between acceptable development and expansion that would undermine the hope of Palestinian moderates for a viable state. The metastasizing settlements have long occluded the emergence of a Palestinian polity next to Israel, as Olmert and Ariel Sharon before him have understood.

Doves cry that the 60,000 settlers whom Olmert may ultimately relocate will be encouraged to join "massive settlement blocs that already slice through the Palestinian West Bank," making ever dimmer any hope of territorial continuity. When Sharon proposed that Israel disengage from Gaza, removing all 9,000 settlers and all Israeli troops, detractors objected that he was planning to shift them to the West Bank settlement blocs, which would then be expanded and annexed to Israel. Yet few of the Gaza settlers have gone to the settlement blocs; most have moved back to Israel.

Further, the current settlement blocs near the 1967 line do not, for the most part, threaten Palestinian territorial integrity. They constitute 8%-10% of the West Bank, leaving more than 90% of open geography for an independent Palestine. The present path of Israel's separation barrier follows these contours.

Olmert's vision is to relocate every Israeli who currently resides east of the barrier. This jibes with his recent remark

that the Jordan Valley would serve as Israel's security border, an objective that could be served by removing the settlements but keeping Israeli troops there until they could be replaced by an American-led peacekeeping force under a future peace treaty.

The interim boundary that would emerge from Israel's eventual evacuation of settlers from more than 90% of the West Bank would extend just a few percentage points beyond President Clinton's proposed lines, discussed by Palestinian and Israeli leaders in their final round of negotiations at Taba in 2001 following the Camp David summit. Once such negotiations resume, Israel should demonstrate its willingness to move portions of the separation barrier, as Olmert has suggested it would, and offer to compensate the Palestinians with an equal land swap for settlements it wishes to incorporate into its final borders.

Critics pretend that Olmert's plan is already carved in stone. But his concept has not yet been fashioned into concrete form. Opponents tilt at straw men cobbled from election slogans, and their perfervid imaginations. Any separation program is bound to be carried out in phases over a number of years.

Israeli coalition politics may constrain the new Israeli leader from spelling out the full monty at the outset. Steps that now seem controversial to some Israelis will become more palatable if the first act goes well. Idealists, both right and left, are constitutionally disenchanted with incremental change, reminding us that the perfect is often the enemy of the good. But that may be the only kind of progress possible in Levantine quicksands.

It would be best if the separation plan were the fruit of negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians, so that Israeli territorial compromise is met with an achievable Palestinian quid pro quo. Long before Egypt and Israel imagined a peace treaty, Israel disengaged from part of the Sinai in exchange for an Egyptian non-belligerency promise, monitored by a multinational force. The same principle can inspire a Palestinian-Israeli interim arrangement, with Palestinians bolstering the current cease-fire by bringing renegade militias into a formal truce under Jordanian and Egyptian supervision.

Olmert has pledged to negotiate with the Palestinians before considering any unilateral moves. If the Israeli blueprint that flows from talks with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is acceptable to the Palestine Liberation Organization and endorsed in a Palestinian referendum, Hamas may feel compelled to cooperate in its implementation.

And should negotiations fail, Hamas may well continue to observe a cease-fire with Israel. Its ability to deliver on its central campaign promise of good governance depends on its avoiding a military confrontation with the Jewish state, and with Fatah.

Doves carp that long-term coexistence is unlikely to arise from separation along a fortified barrier scarring the landscape. But Israelis and Palestinians must crawl before they can walk. The barrier and the evacuation of Israeli settlers and checkpoints from the Palestinian heartland can help to ease tensions, prevent Palestinian suicide bombings and Israeli retaliations, and encourage a comprehensive truce — all of which can foster a more stable environment for future peace-building steps and renewed dialogue.

Olmert's critics, with the notable exception of Carter, offer no constructive ideas for leveraging the new Israeli government's determination to reverse four decades of Israeli settlement in much of the West Bank, a giant step toward disentangling Israelis and Palestinians. At worst, any borders resulting from a consolidation of settlers should be viewed as establishing a better starting point for the eventual resumption of final-status talks between the two sides. At best, settlement convergence may jumpstart a welcome new dynamic in the region.

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