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Before this Mideast moment slips away

By Scott Lasensky

As Israeli and Palestinian leaders prepare to meet later this month, the most immediate challenge for the United States is to help both sides deal with their rejectionists. By embracing Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's disengagement plan and endorsing the drive by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) to bring Islamists into the political process, the United States is on the right track - but could do more.

A decade ago, when the Oslo process was faltering, the conventional wisdom was that Palestinians should use any means to confront, repress and eliminate Hamas, but that Israel should avoid a confrontation with Jewish settlers. The logic then was tragic and fatal - and has been turned on its head. The PLO has embarked on a power-sharing arrangement with Hamas, and Israel is finally saying "no" to settlers and evacuating thousands.

Why is this so important? For Palestinians, without Hamas a large segment of the public would be left on the sidelines, thus undermining the legitimacy of public institutions just when the United States is pushing for reform and democratization. Second, political participation provides an opening for moderate Islamists. Third, should Hamas' participation in the political process take hold, it could resonate positively across the Arab and Muslim world, where other Islamist movements seek a voice in politics.

Israel has also changed course. Rather than continuing to treat Jewish settlers with kid gloves, Israel is confronting these obstructionists. When Sharon evacuates settlers this summer, a critical threshold will be crossed. Removing them is important

because building settlements is incompatible with a two-state solution. Only by stopping the settlement enterprise can a viable Palestinian state emerge. Sharon's initiative is also critical because it has mobilized moderates at home like no other initiative in years.

What can the United States do? First, as the relative calm prevails, Washington needs to demonstrate more support for Abu Mazen's "big tent" approach and ensure that Israel does not undercut Palestinian moderates. During Abu Mazen's May visit to Washington, the United States signaled that it would continue to work with the PA even with Hamas holding public office. Furthermore, Washington has indicated flexibility on the question of disarmament. Disarming Hamas and other armed rejectionist groups is critical, but not practical or politically viable at present. Still, the United States could encourage Israel to take steps that strengthen the Palestinian center, especially on freedom of movement, prisoners and settlement expansion. If not, more economic aid - as Washington has promised - will do little to mobilize Palestinian moderates.

Furthermore, Washington could develop clear conditions for opening a dialogue with Palestinian Islamists, as it did with the PLO in the late 1980s. Two of the conditions, as then, should now be recognition of Israel and renunciation of terrorism. The current Israeli government's opposition to a dialogue stands in stark contrast to the burgeoning debate within Israeli society about the inevitability of dealing with Hamas.

Should Hamas return to suicide terrorism and violent rejectionism, both Israel and the PA reserve the right to respond. But it is critical that Washington's own reaction be consistent with its broader goals for the region. Advocating a heavy-handed crackdown, as in the 1990s, would only further undermine the rule of law and set back the strengthening of Palestinian public institutions.

As for Israel's new strategy vis-à-vis obstructionists, continued lockstep support from Washington will help Sharon defeat them. New, targeted financial and security assistance to Israel can send a loud, clear message. But Gaza disengagement cannot come at the expense of expanding settlements in the West Bank, which

Sharon's government continues to do. It is not enough for Washington to declare its opposition. It needs to lay down clearer, more credible red lines. After the withdrawal, Washington should explore new economic, political and security guarantees to convince Israel to adopt a settlement freeze - without which meaningful negotiations cannot resume.

Finally, after Israeli disengagement and Palestinian elections, America could mobilize moderates on both sides by laying out specific parameters for a negotiated end to the conflict - a step that Arab states, Europe and the United Nations Security Council would embrace. Some analysts caution against endorsing the outlines of a permanent settlement, saying it would only empower the militants. The problem with this argument is that urgent action is needed to preserve the prospect of a two-state solution.

Traditionalists who urge a more cautious American approach fail to appreciate how close we are to the tipping point when "two states for two peoples" becomes unworkable. Moreover, they do not recognize that without an attractive political horizon, Abu Mazen is in no position to counter Islamists, confront rebels in his own party, or escape Arafat's shadow.

A decade ago, despite unprecedented American and international support, the peacemakers were defeated by the peace-breakers. Before this moment of promise slips away, there is much more the United States can do to help both sides build momentum toward a two-state settlement of this seemingly intractable conflict.

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