

COMMENTARY

After Arafat

A week after U.S. elections, President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair jointly declared their renewed commitment to invigorate the stalled Middle East peace process. The sudden illness and death of Yasser Arafat, president of the Palestinian Authority, occasioned the highly visible pledges to work diligently for a resolution of this longstanding conflict—including the creation of an independent Palestinian state. Numerous political leaders and pundits have joined with Bush and Blair,

progress and stability in Israel/Palestine will not address these sources of discontent. It would, however, remove or diminish a major, complicating factor in volatile lands.

BOLD ACTIONS, NOT proclamations, are needed. Strong U.S. leadership in the community of nations on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict could help counter widespread suspicion about U.S. motives and actions in Iraq.

There are no easy answers or simple solutions. But there are ways to move forward constructively. In addition to requiring and assisting Palestinian leaders to strengthen democratic processes, reign in extremists, and re-establish security, clear demands must be put squarely before Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Israel must stop construction of the wall of separation in the occupied West Bank even as it proceeds with the withdrawal from Gaza. A viable peace process will require that Israel mirror the process in Gaza by preparing for withdrawal from most of the West Bank settlements.

For decades, small numbers of extremists on both sides have been able too often to shape events. Security is a very real issue for both Israelis and Palestinians. A credible peace process will require a commitment of international peacekeeping forces. There are viable options. A peacekeeping force from NATO could replace the separation wall, for instance.

The status of Jerusalem remains the most challenging and explosive issue both for those who live in the region and for descendents of Abraham around the world. Thoughtful people on all sides have worked for years on realistic ways to share this sacred city. It is possible to address the security requirements, as well as spiritual and ideological needs, of all who feel a passion for this unique city. A clear commitment to a shared Jerusalem is essential.

The substantial majority of Israelis and Palestinians recognize that their future is intertwined with the other. Most deeply desire a better future for their children and grandchildren and are willing to make substantial concessions if peace and security can be achieved. With the dawn of 2005, there is a new opportunity for peace. The ways in which the United States provides leadership in the community of nations will have profound consequences for Israelis and Palestinians—and for the world. ■

An opening for peace? by Charles Kimball

expressing hope that a change in Palestinian leadership will provide an opportunity for much-needed progress in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

The commitment to make Middle East peacemaking a top priority is both wise and necessary. Now, perhaps more than ever, it is vitally important that leaders in the international community—the United States, Britain, Russia, the European Union, and the U.N. Security Council—work with Israelis, Palestinians, and neighboring Arab states to translate hopeful words into more than wishful thinking. What is at stake? What is possible? Where do we go from here?

The urgency is visible in several ways. People caught in the ongoing strife experience daily frustrations and indignities born of physical uncertainty and insecurity, economic hardship, and military occupation. The rise of extremism on both sides is a predictable response to frequently thwarted expectations and dreams of a better future. The status quo is untenable, particularly since it includes massive walls of separation, expanding settlements, and violent extremism that often targets civilians.

This is the single most destabilizing conflict regionally, even globally. The plight of Palestinians and the status of Jerusalem figure prominently into the angry rhetoric and worldview of many in predominantly Muslim lands. While Israeli and U.S. administrations too often have pursued policies worthy of sharp criticism, many religious and political leaders stoke the fires of frustration and revolutionary zeal in ways that are disproportionate to reality. But the rhetoric is taking on a life of its own in areas where perception is as important as reality.

Having worked for more than 25 years on a range of issues throughout the Middle East, I am convinced that the sources for much of the anger visible in the region is rooted in particular settings: horrific human rights abuses, unrepresentative governments, lack of political participation, economic exploitation of the majority by a ruling minority, and a range of complications rooted in colonialism. Even meaningful

MIDDLE EAST

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