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Whatever Happened to Palestine?

by April Summitt

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The war in Iraq has made most Americans quite forget about suicide bombers and plans for peace in Palestine. Even though CNN and other news networks have not been reporting on the process, Bush’s “road-map” is under heavy debate in both Israeli and Palestinian circles. Generally, the plan calls for a staged process during which both sides demonstrate peaceful and cooperative intentions as conditions for the next step. Phase one calls for the Palestinian leadership to replace Yassir Arafat with new leadership that will renounce terrorism and make strong efforts to stop the violence. The Israelis must then withdraw from Palestinian cities and freeze the building of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories. Phase two involves the establishing of a provisional Palestinian state by the end of this year. Phase three is a plan to debate and presumably solve the thorny issues of Jerusalem, borders, settlements and refugees by the end of 2005.

It sounds like a hopeful plan, but as a special...
Palestinians view Iraq as a loyal friend in the face of Israeli aggression. During each of the major wars in Palestine (1948, 1967, and 1973), Iraq came to the aid of the Palestinians. Even Saddam Hussein himself donated more than $2 million to families who lost homes during the 11-day standoff in the Jenin refugee camp last year. Many people in Jenin demonstrated their support for Saddam last month when the American military campaign began. One section of this refugee camp was recently renamed after an Iraqi suicide bomber who killed four U.S. marines at a checkpoint during the early weeks of the war. Now that Hussein is no longer in power, Americans are not chastising the Israelis for its bulldozing of their homes. Many Arabs that the U.S. seeks only to ensure the stability of Israel and cares little for the needs and security of Palestinians.

What must Bush do, then? It is encouraging that even though the media has given it little attention, Bush is apparently thinking about Palestine. Nevertheless, he has some serious challenges ahead, not the least of which are the distractions of North Korea or even Afghanistan. Ariel Sharon argues that Israel will accept the peace plan ONLY if Palestinians first prove they can end the violence. Israel also presumably in ongoing peace negotiations.

Unfortunately, however, the costs of the war against Iraq seem to outweigh the benefits to Bush’s “map for peace.” As accusations against Syria build (another historic supporter of Palestinian radicals), more and more charges will fly that Bush seeks a Middle East in which Palestinians view Iraq as a loyal friend in the face of Israeli aggression. During each of the major wars in Palestine (1948, 1967, and 1973), Iraq came to the aid of the Palestinians. Even Saddam Hussein himself donated more than $2 million to families who lost homes during the 11-day standoff in the Jenin refugee camp last year. Many people in Jenin demonstrated their support for Saddam last month when the American military campaign began. One section of this refugee camp was recently renamed after an Iraqi suicide bomber who killed four U.S. marines at a checkpoint during the early weeks of the war. Now that Hussein is no longer in power, Americans are not chastising the Israelis for its bulldozing of their homes. Many Arabs that the U.S. seeks only to ensure the stability of Israel and cares little for the needs and security of Palestinians.

What must Bush do, then? It is encouraging that even though the media has given it little attention, Bush is apparently thinking about Palestine. Nevertheless, he has some serious challenges ahead, not the least of which are the distractions of North Korea or even Afghanistan. Ariel Sharon argues that Israel will accept the peace plan ONLY if Palestinians first prove they can end the violence. Israel also continues to deny the “right of return” of Palestinians to land they owned inside Israel. Palestinians argue that without such a right, the peace-plan is a nonstarter. Israel and the United States are asking them to make all the concessions and the first moves, they argue. Why should Palestinians be the ones to promise an end to violence if Bush does not force Israel to withdraw its tanks and soldiers from West Bank cities?

Somehow, Bush has to work with both sides and convince them that the U.S. is truly an impartial broker in the process. The only way he can succeed is to demand and somehow force Israel to give something in return for Palestinian efforts (currently underway) to replace Arafat’s regime with a more moderate one. Sharon, however, is determined not to withdraw from West Bank cities or settlements until he is convinced violence will cease. Perhaps it is impossible for the United States, currently fighting one Arab regime and exchanging harsh words with another (Syria), to pose as an evenhanded broker.

As a student of Middle East history and the U.S. relationship with it, I am not so naive to presume that I have a solution. Still, it seems obvious that Bush’s approach to his various foreign policy goals often conflict and that the U.S. might need some help negotiating with Israel and Palestine. Who this fourth party should be is unclear. Let us ask the new Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, for suggestions. Sharon is always providing advice. Perhaps now we can talk to the Palestinians without appearing to support terrorists. In this post-Cold War era, it is often impossible to distinguish between villains and victims. Can the United Nations step forward with real solutions in this confusing landscape? This moment could be its final opportunity to demonstrate that the organization is capable of effective leadership in the 21st century.