

# Middle East conundrum: The need to talk

True, there's an abiding sense of change in the Israeli-Palestinian relationship. But what does "a window of opportunity" actually mean? Mahmoud Abbas' Palestinian state — in virtual-

all of the West Bank and Gaza? Ariel Sharon's long-term interim plan — leaving clusters of settlements in Israel's hands? As long as Sharon and Abbas see the view from the "window" differently, all that's reasonable is a reduction of violence and management of expectations.

Here's what separates the two sides: once Gaza is left behind, Sharon wants a long-term interim arrangement that will freeze the situation on the ground. He prefers to impose this unilaterally, in consultation with the US rather than in negotiations with the Palestinians. This would postpone implementation of the American roadmap and preclude resolution of key issues — including Jerusalem and refugees — which are critical for long-term stabilisation. In the

meantime, in the West Bank, settlement activity and infrastructure development continue, especially in the southern rings around metropolitan Jerusalem.

Abbas wants to expedite the roadmap and fast-track negotiations for a permanent status agreement. His position on borders, Jerusalem and refugees reflects the consensus among Palestinians committed to a state alongside Israel. Meantime, as last weekend's event demonstrated, rogue organisations and factions can derail any progress by terrorism against Israelis.

In other words, there's a circle that can't easily be squared. The moment of truth looms six-nine months ahead, once Gaza disengagement is completed. Since, in the Israeli-Palestinian equation the absence of forward movement equals a backward slide, what can be done now to narrow the gap between the two sides?

The opportunity may lie in the conversations within Israel and Palestine that will affect the language of future negotiations between them. Until now, these conversations were never given a serious chance.

In Israel, the key is Sharon's disengagement plan. While couched in "unilateral" rhetoric, it means that for the first time in nearly 40 years, a handful of West Bank and all Gaza settlements will actually be evacuated. The mere announcement has unleashed a wrenching and long overdue internal debate over the state's future borders. Confronting the ruin of an untenable occupation could only be done by as ruthless a leader as Sharon, who created the carpet of red roofs dotting West Bank hill-tops in the first place.

But disengagement from Gaza is just the first step in this necessary, painful process. Israel's most dramatic confidence-building measure can be to tackle the warped system by which West Bank settlements have grown. A report by Assistant Attorney General Talia Sasson has just exposed the web of collusion among settlers, military and political bodies that allowed settlement expansion outside the Israeli and international legal framework. No one should underestimate the difficulty of bringing these matters to light or of evacuating three generations of settlers from their homes — but nothing is more critical for Israel's future as a democracy than a Jewish majority. And nothing will do more to assuage Palestinian concerns about Israel's long-term goals than due process on this issue.

In Palestine, the key is Yasser Arafat's death, which has created room for a leadership preoccupied with nation building rather than an armed struggle. There, the opportunity lies in honestly facing Palestinian limitations instead of blaming the Israeli occupation for them all.

Abbas can now encourage a serious conversation on what moving from violent resistance to political action really means. This includes a tough understanding that masses of Palestinian refugees will never return to their original homes in what is now Israel. Nothing will do more to assuage Israeli concerns about Palestinian long-range goals than clarity on this issue.

This new Palestinian discourse is inextricably tied to the balance of power between Fatah and Hamas. Hamas has the upper hand in public perception of integrity and consistency but is burdened by its record of terror and Islamist adherence. Fatah has international support but is hobbled by Arafat's legacy of blatant patronage and favouritism. Reform of government and the security forces will likely result in more political power for Hamas; this must be countered by reform within Fatah to hand the mantle of leadership to the younger genera-

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