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A Year of Opportunity in the Middle East

Events at the end of 2004 conspired to create a fresh opportunity to transform the Israeli-Palestinian relationship away from confrontation toward negotiation and to revive the defunct peace process in 2005 after more than four years of fighting. Both sides are fatigued, seeking a way out after suffering more than 1,000 Israeli and 3,000 Palestinian casualties, along with economic hardships and devastated morale. The death of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat on November 11 removed a major obstacle to diplomacy. With Arafat's passing, Israel also lost its main argument—or excuse—for avoiding negotiations, namely, that it had “no Palestinian partner.” Arafat's elected successor, Mahmoud Abbas (also known as Abu Mazen), is a moderate who called the intifada, or armed uprising against Israel that began in September 2000, “a mistake” even when Arafat was still alive.¹ Abbas is an old acquaintance of Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon, and the two leaders have pledged to work together. The string of Palestinian elections in 2005—local, presidential, and later parliamentary—could modernize the Palestinian political structure and legitimize the post-Arafat leadership.

Sharon's disengagement plan to withdraw Israeli settlements and forces from the Gaza Strip and the northern West Bank, slated to begin in the summer of 2005, is also a key step in the new regional dynamics. Approved by the Knesset in October 2004, Sharon's readiness to dismantle parts of the settlement enterprise—formerly his life's creation—perhaps to the detriment of his political position, is a turning point and a crucial precedent. The planned pace of Israel's disengagement pushes the peace process into a yet higher gear, rather than starting it from scratch, and gives the new Palestinian leadership time to consolidate power. Following Arafat's demise, Israel is

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prepared to coordinate its pullout with the Palestinian Authority rather than go it alone.

Furthermore, President George W. Bush's reelection spares the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a U.S. presidential transition and its inevitable policy review period. During his first term, Bush committed the United States to Palestinian statehood and authored the "road map," a globally accepted framework to resolve the conflict. The road map envisaged a gradual, three-staged process: reforming Palestinian institutions while halting Palestinian

terrorist attacks and Israeli settlement expansion; creating a Palestinian state "within interim borders"; and moving from there to negotiating a final-status deal. It was meant to appeal to both sides, by giving the Palestinians their desired "end of occupation" while reassuring Sharon that every step forward must be preceded with the completion of the previous stage. Although Sharon accepted the plan only grudgingly, a successful

The new Palestinian leaders will still have to abide by Arafat's guidelines.

Abbas takeover and Gaza withdrawal are expected to revitalize it.

Finally, the regional atmosphere vis-à-vis both Israel and the Palestinian Authority has also markedly improved. Egypt, which initially had been highly critical of Sharon, now praises his peace efforts and seeks to assist his withdrawal from Gaza. Even hard-liner Syria wants to join in, as demonstrated by its proposal to renew peace talks with Israel and its invitation to Abbas for an official visit—an offer consistently denied to Arafat.

These developments notwithstanding, one should keep in mind that the previous peace process also started with great hopes that were eventually crushed by violence, hatred, and despair. Thus far, no substantive changes have occurred, only painless symbolic moves. If Israelis and Palestinians fail to address the difficult issues, retreating instead to their habitual unrelenting rhetoric and mutual bloodshed, the new window of opportunity may close. Indeed, Abbas's election has been followed by a fresh round of terror from Gaza. Prodded by Israeli threats and U.S. pressure, Abbas came to Gaza, convinced Hamas to hold its fire, and ordered a deployment of Palestinian Authority security forces—an inconceivable action under Arafat. Given the level of mistrust and the wide gaps between the two sides' positions, expecting total resolution of the conflict this year appears unrealistic. A more feasible goal could be the creation of an independent Palestinian state in Gaza and most of the West Bank, following an Israeli withdrawal and the removal of Jewish settlements. Future negotiations could then tackle the toughest problems of the status of Jerusalem and of Palestinian refugees,

en route to a complete and lasting resolution, but these appear to be beyond the current political horizon.

A Strategic Stalemate

The second Palestinian intifada broke out in late September 2000 following the failure of the Camp David peace talks and quickly developed into an all-out war of attrition. The violence peaked in 2002, when Palestinians launched a wave of attacks against Israel: suicide bombings on buses and in cafes, homemade rockets, and random shootings. The Israelis favored air assassinations, mass arrests of terrorist operatives, establishing a dense network of roadblocks and closures, and demolishing the houses of suicide bombers' families. Furthermore, under Sharon's direction, Israel reoccupied major West Bank cities and placed Arafat under house arrest at his headquarters in Ramallah.

When these measures failed to halt suicide attacks from the West Bank, public opinion forced the Israeli government to erect a massive barrier, the "separation fence," as the ultimate protective measure. Although the fence proved effective, Sharon overplayed his hand. The project's original design, which included many West Bank settlements on the fence's western ("Israeli") side while locking tens of thousands of Palestinians behind barbed wire to the east, caused an international outcry against a de facto annexation of land. Israel was forced to move its construction route closer to the pre-1967 border, or "Green Line," and defer construction of sensitive parts around the main settlement blocks and inside Jerusalem. Holding on to the main settlement blocks, built to widen Israel's "narrow waists" near Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, has turned into Israel's main political goal. While announcing his readiness to evacuate some of the smaller settlements, Sharon pledged to "strengthen" Israel's hold over the blocks, where the vast majority of settlers live. The proposed fence route and new construction and land confiscation programs are meant to achieve this goal.

The barrier quarrel demonstrates the relative strengths and weaknesses of the adversaries. Israel enjoys an obvious military and economic superiority, and strong U.S. support has given Israel's military freedom of action. The Palestinians lack sophisticated weapons and resources but enjoy wide international support, especially in Europe and among developing nations, as they strive for freedom from Israeli occupation. When Israel used its bulldozers to build the fence, the Palestinians turned to the UN and the International Court of Justice to stall the project.

This balance of forces turned the intifada into a strategic stalemate. Despite paying heavy human and economic tolls, both sides failed to achieve a

decisive victory and instead merely scored tactical points. Israel proved to skeptics that terror could be fought effectively and reduced to “bearable” levels by military means. After the September 11 attacks, Washington became much less tolerant of terrorism and armed struggle, enabling Israel to use unprecedented force. Yet, the Israelis failed to break the Palestinians’ will to fight—in the words of the Israeli Defense Forces’ chief of staff, to “burn their consciousness” against using terrorism.² Sharon could not dictate changes in Palestinian positions and eventually declared a retreat from Gaza.

The Palestinians, meanwhile, failed to imitate the success of Hizballah’s guerrilla war, which drove the Israeli army out of Lebanon in 2000. Having chosen to attack Israel’s rear, rather than its forces and settlements in the occupied territories, the Palestinians lost important moral ground and prompted an overwhelming Israeli response. Nevertheless, the Palestinians consolidated their international stance, gaining a consensus on their statehood and growing support for the pre-1967 Green Line as the legitimate border between Israel and Palestinian territory.

The Last Revolutionary

Until his death, Arafat personified the Palestinian struggle. Viewed alternately as a respectable statesman, a diehard revolutionary, and a hopeless terrorist, Arafat had led the Palestinians for almost four decades. After recognizing Israel, signing the Oslo accords, and forming the Palestinian Authority, Arafat was temporarily accepted as a peace partner by many Israelis. When he rejected Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak’s peace offer at Camp David in 2000, however, and subsequently supported the intifada, he returned to being an adversary. Arafat’s unique leadership style distanced him from the terrorist attacks, giving the intifada its spirit but never any specific orders.

When Sharon, Arafat’s lifelong nemesis, replaced Barak in early 2001, he focused Israeli diplomacy on isolating and delegitimizing the Palestinian leader, convincing Bush to ignore Arafat. Although Washington prevented Sharon from expelling or killing his enemy, it consented to place Arafat under house arrest and exclude him from negotiations. Yet until his last day, Arafat ridiculed Israeli and U.S. efforts to sideline him.

Arafat’s heirs must contend with the heavy burden of his legacy. They need to gain acceptance in a torn, violent society shattered by war, poverty, and crime. When negotiations are restarted, the new leaders will have to abide by Arafat’s guidelines: to establish a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza (with minor border modifications on a quid pro quo basis) with East Jerusalem as its capital and to find some solution to the “right of

return” of Palestinian refugees. Under present circumstances, no Palestinian leader will be willing, or able, to accept less in a final deal. Abbas promptly repeated this position throughout his campaign.

Abu Mazen, the new Palestinian leader, lacks his former superior’s charisma and theatrical gestures. Abbas gained a moderate reputation a decade earlier when he engineered the Oslo accords. During the current war, he has repeatedly renounced violence for diplomacy. These views, coupled with his willingness to confront Arafat during a short tenure as prime minister in the summer of 2003, won Abbas the admiration of Bush and the appreciation of Israelis. Once Arafat passed, Abu Mazen quickly positioned himself atop the Palestinian hierarchy. A skilled negotiator, he was appointed as a presidential candidate by Fatah, the mainstream Palestinian movement founded by Arafat, and has worked to achieve a solid ceasefire agreement among the different factions while gaining acceptance in the Arab world.

Abbas will be a soft-spoken but tough interlocutor for the Israelis. Nevertheless, his success depends largely on Sharon. During his brief premiership, Israeli timidity over gestures such as prisoner release contributed to Abbas’s downfall. This time, the stakes are much higher for both sides. Abu Mazen’s ultimate test will be in his ability to call the host of Palestinian Authority security organs to order, put an end to anarchy in the streets, and halt the insurgents’ fire during negotiations. Even under ideal circumstances, this would be a daunting task.

Will Bush have political stamina in the face of inevitable challenges?

Sharon’s Transformation

When then-opposition leader Sharon visited Jerusalem’s Temple Mount—at the time the most contested site under negotiations—on September 28, 2000, most Israelis viewed him as a has-been, a political relic with a troubled past and little hope for a future. Nobody, not even Sharon himself, foresaw that his short archaeological tour would spark the intifada and resurrect his political career to become prime minister in just more than four months. During his long military and political career, Sharon has been a highly controversial figure, having attained a reputation for his tendency to use overwhelming force. Indeed, Israelis saw his election as the ultimate punishment for the renegade Palestinians. Israelis wanted the old warrior to crush the intifada. Most considered the campaign slogan “only Sharon will bring peace” to be a speechwriter’s trick, rather than a serious pledge.

2005 will see domestic consolidation on both sides rather than external negotiation.

As prime minister, Sharon has sought national consensus and U.S. support, the two elements that eluded him during his failed 1982 war in Lebanon. At that time, Sharon had sought to transform the Middle East by driving Arafat's forces away from Lebanon and installing a friendly Christian regime in Beirut. The endeavor collapsed with the assassination of Sharon's Lebanese ally, Bashir Gemayel, who was subsequently avenged by his followers in a massacre of hundreds of Palestinians near Beirut. An Israeli inquiry

commission found Sharon indirectly responsible and forced him out of his defense minister post, throwing him onto the political sidelines for many years.

His leadership style now embraces slow decisionmaking, taking the time to build domestic support and gain U.S. consent before acting. Gradually, both the Israeli public and the Bush administration have come to trust Sharon as an indispensable leader in a time of crisis. Sharon believes in and appreciates

power, caring little about ideology or his past statements and actions. Israeli analysts have debated whether Sharon seeks to become Israel's equivalent of Charles de Gaulle or Richard Nixon—a hard-liner who will eventually pull out of the West Bank and Gaza (Algeria and Vietnam in the former two cases)—or simply a stubborn old warrior who only wants to hurt the Palestinians. Sharon has played it both ways, pledging painful concessions while refusing to negotiate under fire, reoccupying the West Bank, and reinforcing some settlements.

The turning point, however, came in the autumn of 2003. Sharon was at his lowest ebb: his popularity had sunk, Bush had lost patience with him, and domestic consensus over the war had begun to crack. Nevertheless, Sharon took the initiative and proposed withdrawing all settlements and forces from the Gaza strip unilaterally. This was a major policy break. Governments from the left and the right have consistently pledged to keep all settlers in place until the final status, and Sharon himself had previously opposed any unilateral withdrawal lest it reward terrorism.

What was Sharon doing? He explains that he wanted to preempt pressures for a deeper withdrawal, perhaps from virtually all of the West Bank, and rebuild domestic consensus from behind the new line. He opted to give away Gaza, with its dense Palestinian population and minimal strategic value, for a longer and stronger hold over most of the West Bank. Coupled with his planned barrier route, Sharon and his aides argued that disengagement is not a peace plan, but an attempt to dictate a new reality—an alternative to negotiations, given the lack of a credible "partner."³ In theory, Israel had exchanged Gaza for the West Bank, or territory for time.

Given Sharon's weak track record of keeping promises, several months passed before he was able to convince Washington that he was sincere. Finally, on April 14, 2004, Bush gave Sharon a written assurance that Israel could keep the main settlement blocks, along with a U.S. objection to the return of Palestinian refugees to Israeli territory, in exchange for Israeli evacuation of four additional settlements in the West Bank along with the whole of Gaza. Bush also promised Sharon that he would cling to the road map and preempt other, i.e., European or Arab, peace plans.⁴

The domestic challenge proved more difficult. Sharon's proposal shattered his governing coalition and sparked a rebellion within the ruling Likud party. Although Sharon's plan lost several battles against its dissenters, it eventually attained cabinet and parliamentary approval. Sharon then invited the Labor party, led by his old friend Shimon Peres, into a new "pull-out coalition." Sharon's success helped him gain credibility from most observers. His popularity skyrocketed again, and foreign leaders now believe that he is truly determined to implement his plan. But how far will he go? Will "Gaza first" end up as "Gaza last"?

Asked once whether a final-status deal were possible, Sharon responded, "I believe we should hope."⁵ Sharon favors a "long-term interim arrangement" in which Israel retains control over about half of the West Bank, including the large settlement blocks and the "security zone" in the Jordan Rift Valley, leaving the remainder of the territory to form loosely connected parts of a Palestinian state. Sharon has promoted similar territorial ideas since the 1970s, to the Palestinians' chagrin. For them, Sharon's map is a like an apartheid-era Bantustan plan to maintain the occupation behind a different facade.

Sharon's deputy, Ehud Olmert, has suggested a deeper withdrawal from 90 percent of West Bank territory, resembling Barak's failed Camp David proposal. Sharon has neither endorsed nor rejected his loyal minister's ideas, although he rejected the possibility of a second unilateral withdrawal, declaring that any post-Gaza moves should be part of the road map, pending the cessation of Palestinian terrorism. His actions may indeed indicate the possibility of an Olmert-style map: the changed barrier route and the agreement in Bush's April 14 letter would leave only 10 percent or less of the West Bank, including the main settlement blocks, in Israeli hands.

In the short term, Sharon's main challenge is dealing with periodic outbursts of violence. Sharon should refrain from the temptation to use such outbursts as a pretext to assassinate wanted terrorists unless danger is clear

The process will reach its moment of truth in early 2006.

and present. Such reckless operations have ruined past attempts to calm the fighting and could be extremely counterproductive. At the same time, Sharon must find a delicate way to respond to Palestinian attacks while avoiding unnecessary civilian casualties.

The Bush Effect

As the dynamics of the region have changed, so has U.S. willingness to get involved under Bush. Bush's initial instinct, having watched Clinton risk his prestige to no avail, was to stay away from Arab-Israeli peacemaking. President Bill Clinton's Camp David summit was a model of failed diplomacy, as were his last-minute efforts to halt the intifada. Gradually, however, Bush came to realize that the United States could not shrug off the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. He first tried to micromanage Israel's military actions and negotiate a workable ceasefire in 2001. After failing and becoming convinced that Arafat was the villain, he turned to a more ambitious path. In a speech in June 2002, Bush presented his vision of "two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security."⁶ An important precondition was Palestinian reform and election of a new leadership untainted by terrorism. This vision then translated into the road map for peace that the international community, the Palestinian Authority, and Israel each accepted (albeit with several reservations on Sharon's part).⁷

The road map caters to the needs of both sides. For the Palestinians, it supplies a political horizon for a state of their own. Sharon, who initially disliked the plan, eventually became enamored with its performance-based principle, which demands full implementation of each stage before moving on. This principle enables Sharon to insist on a Palestinian crackdown on terrorism as a precondition to progress.

Bush has never pretended to be an honest broker, leaning obviously toward the Israeli side. He refused to meet with Arafat and accepted Sharon's argument that terrorism must end before negotiations begin, thus giving Israel the green light to crush the intifada. Although he restrained Israeli attempts to hurt Arafat and pressed Sharon to stop settlement expansion, Washington's European and Arab allies demanded more U.S. involvement and pressure on Israel. Paris, Brussels, and Cairo saw the intifada as a legitimate war against occupation and Israel's actions as brutal oppression. European and Arab governments cared less about Bush's promise of Arab democracy as a recipe for peace; rather, they paid more attention to the familiar components of the conflict—territory, Jerusalem, and refugees—and held better relations hostage to U.S. engagement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly after Bush insisted on focusing on Baghdad first.

Naturally, Israeli leaders sided with Bush, pinning great hope on the ouster of Saddam Hussein to serve as a catalyst for regional change. Israel was freed from the threatening “eastern front” with Iraq, Syria became more isolated, and Egypt had to contend with U.S. pressure for its democratization—all positive developments for Jerusalem. Yet, these developments changed neither the military balance between Israelis and Palestinians nor Palestinian politics.

In part to assuage his European and Arab critics and improve transatlantic relations, Bush tried to launch a Clinton-style peace process shortly after the Iraq invasion and toppling of Saddam. To this end, he convened a summit in Aqaba, Jordan, in June 2003. After several weeks, however, the endeavor failed; Bush cut his losses, recalled the small U.S. monitoring team, and refrained from taking any further similar initiative. What remains to be seen is whether Bush can face the inevitable challenges the Middle East presents: to be able to demonstrate political stamina in the face of political hurdles and eruptions of violence. This time, the peace process will have a democratically elected, likeable Palestinian partner who supports the process.

Abbas's success depends largely on Sharon.

A Perfect Storm in 2005?

Arafat's demise sent a wave of hope throughout regional capitals and Washington. A few days after his reelection, Bush declared, “I believe we’ve got a great chance to establish a Palestinian state, and I intend to use the next four years to spend the capital of the United States on such a state.”⁸ Even though Bush extended the time line for Palestinian independence until 2009 (the original road map sought to end the conflict by 2005), this was the strongest U.S. commitment to Palestinian independence to date. A few weeks later, Bush discussed his peacemaking strategy during a visit to Canada, stating that “[a]chieving peace in the Holy Land is not just a matter of pressuring one side or the other on the shape of a border or the site of a settlement. This approach has been tried before, without success. As we negotiate the details of peace, we must look to the heart of the matter, which is the need for a Palestinian democracy.”⁹

In late November 2004, a senior U.S. administration official involved with Middle East policy briefed a New York think tank on Washington's post-Arafat direction, noting that the administration considered establishing Palestinian democratic institutions and fighting terrorism to be the keys to success. Touching on final-status issues, the official said that Israel could

What exactly does the loose concept of a 'viable' Palestinian state mean?

keep the settlement blocks but not other settlements; the "right of return" of Palestinian refugees contradicts the two-state solution; and Jerusalem, the toughest issue, should be saved for the last negotiating stage.¹⁰ These statements indicate that the Bush administration seeks to establish a Palestinian state while avoiding the Clinton pitfall of attempting to end the conflict. This year, U.S. diplomacy will focus on short-term goals: successful

Palestinian elections and institution building and the Israeli pullout from Gaza.

After Arafat's death, Sharon promptly announced a series of confidence-building measures vis-à-vis the Palestinian Authority, such as facilitating his enemy's funeral and Palestinian elections. More importantly, however, he proposed to coordinate the Gaza withdrawal with the Palestinians.¹¹ Sharon's goal is to avoid the potentially dangerous and po-

litically embarrassing evacuation of settlements under fire and to assure an orderly handover of the settlements' assets to the legitimate Palestinian government. Such an arrangement could spare Israel the hard-to-digest images of Hamas flags flying over ruined Israeli villages. Abu Mazen, who distanced himself from Israel and the United States during his election campaign, has asked for time to rebuild the Palestinian security apparatus before taking responsibility in Gaza.¹²

The parallel time lines of Sharon's plan and the Palestinians' electoral and reform process produce a reasonable agenda for 2005. Both involve domestic consolidation rather than external negotiation. Sharon will have to contend with settler opposition, which may turn violent. Abbas must rein in independent warlords within his Fatah movement, as well as militant opposition groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Both are interconnected: when Palestinian suicide bombers attacked a Gaza border pass on the eve of Abbas's inauguration, Sharon decided to pressure the new Palestinian leader to act against the terrorist groups, rather than slowly negotiating a ceasefire with them.

Nevertheless, if the implementation of disengagement and reform go forth as planned, the process will reach its moment of truth in early 2006. The international community expects Israel at that time to move from the "Gaza-plus" pullout to the second stage of the road map: the establishment of a Palestinian state. This should involve a deep withdrawal from the West Bank, including the removal of many settlements. Given the historic, religious, and strategic importance of the West Bank to many Israelis, it would be a very tough decision. Perception of the Gaza experiment as a success,

however, would facilitate the process. Furthermore, if terrorist attacks cease, Israelis would feel even more secure in moving on to the next stage. If Palestinians notice a change in their lives through more freedom of movement, less friction with Israeli forces, and achievement of some of their political ambitions, they are also more likely to give diplomacy another chance after Israel's initial disengagement.

A crucial question remains what exactly the loose concept of a "viable" Palestinian state means. Everybody accepts the importance of this adjective, but nobody agrees about what it is. To move from partial disengagement to interim-border statehood, a better and mutually accepted definition of "viability" must be determined. Does it constitute only contiguous territory, as the Palestinians assert, or should it emphasize economic independence and open links to neighboring states, as Israel contends?

What to Do Now

A well-timed confluence of political and natural events has conspired to create a real window of opportunity for progress in the Middle East. What remains to be seen is if these three elected, politically ambitious leaders can navigate their way to take advantage of the opportunity this perfect storm presents. Although the players and even the context may be different, the recent history of the collapse of the Oslo accords and the consequent intifada should teach today's Middle East peacemakers several important lessons that remain the key to progress:

- *Avoid unrealistic expectations.* The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is deeply rooted in the national psyche of both peoples, and thus mere legalistic formulas cannot resolve it. Workable, even if less exciting, solutions are more desirable than aiming too high. The all-or-nothing approach that formed the foundation of the Camp David negotiations proved impractical, with disastrous consequences.
- *Emphasize actions more than statements.* Public diplomacy and gestures are important but should not be a substitute for performance. Israelis and Palestinians tend to avoid substantive commitments and resort to a mutual, verbal blame game. Talking peace is easy; overcoming fear, suspicion, and tackling domestic opposition are much more difficult challenges. The United States and other international players must hold both sides to their pledges, such as an Israeli freeze on settlements and a Palestinian crackdown on terrorism. External monitoring, as the road map proposes, would be a useful component of any plan for peace.

- *Respond to legitimate fears.* Both sides harbor grudges and suspicions against each other that they must overcome for the process to work. To this day, Palestinians fear that Israel seeks to divide, conquer, and humiliate them; Israelis fear that the Palestinians want to drive them into the sea through terror and demography. Even if these concerns appear exaggerated to Western observers, they appear very realistic to the concerned parties, and ignoring them risks another bloody fiasco.
- *Put the process into a wider context.* Although responsibility for the ultimate decisions lies with the Israelis and Palestinians, the international community could help by supplying security and economic assistance to the emerging Palestinian state and offering diplomatic recognition and

The all-or-nothing approach of Camp David is still impractical.

business opportunities to Israel. Recent Egyptian moves to improve border security in Gaza and European attempts to assist Palestinian reform and improve relations with Israel are positive steps in this direction. Freeing Israel from its everlasting accused position at the UN, where the “automatic” pro-Palestinian majority approves a set of anti-Israeli resolutions every year, could drive Israel to be more open toward international intervention.

There is now an opportunity to end the intifada and resume the peace process along the lines of a “Camp David-minus” or “less than final” arrangement in two stages: first, Palestinian institution building and Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and the northern West Bank in 2005; and second, further Israeli withdrawal from most of the West Bank and the establishment of a Palestinian state. As both sides appear too weak to compromise on issues that impact their national identities, such as the status of Jerusalem and Palestinian refugees, moving further ahead to final-status negotiations appears too difficult this year. Both sides need to recognize each other’s needs and concerns, overcome their own characteristic stinginess, and give each other the political time and space to build the domestic consensus toward a final-status solution, perhaps under a future leadership. Given the bitter memories of Oslo and the intifada, this is no easy task.

Sharon and Abbas trust each other, even if cautiously, and both enjoy Bush’s support. This combination is necessary for a diplomatic process to re-emerge but may be insufficient for its success. Bush needs to exert the energy and stamina that he lacked during his first term, Sharon must restrain Israeli military action and respond wisely to Palestinian violence, and Abbas has to build a strong domestic support base for a peaceful policy and rein in

the militants. The crucial leadership trials for Abbas and Sharon will be whether they are able to generate public support for the peace process and to confront their internal opposition forces. Both have indicated willingness to take the plunge; now comes the inevitable performance test.

Notes

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