

Leave the West Bank Now

By Thomas Friedman

Let's not mince words. American policy today toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is insane.

Can anyone look at what is happening -- Palestinians, gripped by a collective madness, committing suicide; and Israelis, under a leadership completely adrift, building more settlements so fanatical Jews can live in the heart of Palestinian-populated areas -- and not conclude the following: That these two nations are locked in an utterly self-destructive vicious cycle that threatens Israel's long-term viability, poisons America's image in the Middle East, undermines any hope for a Palestinian state and weakens pro-American Arab moderates. No, you can't draw any other conclusion.

Yet the Bush team, backed up by certain conservative Jewish and Christian activist groups, believes that the correct policy is to do nothing. Well, that is my definition of insane.

Israel must get out of the West Bank and Gaza Strip as soon as possible and evacuate most of the settlements. I have long advocated this, but it is now an urgent necessity. Otherwise, the Jewish state is in peril. Ideally, this withdrawal should be negotiated along the Clinton plan. But if, necessary, it should be done unilaterally. This can't happen too soon, and the United States should be forcing it.

Why? First, because the Arab-Muslim world, which for so long has been on vacation from globalization, modernization and liberalization, is realizing that vacation is over. There is not enough oil wealth anymore to cushion or employ the huge population growth happening in the region. Every Arab country is going to have to make a wrenching adjustment. Israel needs to get out of the way and reduce its nodes of friction with the Muslim world as it goes through this unstable and at times humiliating catch-up.

Second, three dangerous trends are converging around Israel. One is a massive population explosion across the Arab world. The second is the worst interpersonal violence ever between Israelis and Palestinians.

And the third is an explosion of Arab multimedia -- from Al-Jazeera to the Internet. What's happening is that this Arab media explosion is feeding the images of this Israeli-Palestinian violence to this Arab population explosion -- radicalizing it and melding in the heads of young

Arabs and Muslims the notion that the biggest threat to their future is JIA - "Jews, Israel and America."

Israel's withdrawal is not a cure-all for this. Israel will still be despised. But if it withdraws to an internationally recognized border, it will have the moral high ground, the strategic high ground and the demographic high ground to protect itself. After Israel withdrew from Lebanon, the Hezbollah militia, on the other side, went on hating Israel and harassing the border -- but it never tried to launch an invasion. Why? Hezbollah knew it would have no legitimacy - in the world or in Lebanon - for breaching that U.N. approved border. And if it tried, Israel would be able to use its full military weight to retaliate. Demographically speaking, if Israel does not relinquish the West Bank and Gaza, the Palestinians will soon outnumber the Jews and Israel will become either an apartheid state or a non-Jewish state.

Moreover, an Israeli withdrawal will strip the worst Arab leaders of an excuse not to reform, it will create more space for the best Arab leaders to move forward and it will give Palestinians something to protect.

In sum, Israel should withdraw from the territories, not because it is weak, but because it must remain strong; not because Israel is wrong, but because Zionism is a just cause that the occupation is undermining; not because the Arabs would warmly embrace a smaller Israel, but because a smaller Israel, in internationally recognized boundaries, will be much more defensible; not because it will eliminate Islamic or European anti-Semitism; but because it will reduce it by reducing the daily friction; not because it would mean giving into an American whim, but because nothing would strengthen America's influence in the Muslim world, help win the war of ideas and therefore better protect Israel than this.

The Bush team rightly speaks of bringing justice to Iraq. It rightly denounces Palestinian suicide madness. But it says nothing about the injustice of the Israeli land grab in the West Bank. The Bush team destroyed the Iraqi regime in three weeks and has not persuaded Israel to give up one settlement in three years. To think America can practice that sort of hypocrisy and win the war of ideas in the Arab-Muslim world is a truly dangerous fantasy.

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