Bush Enters the Middle East Fray

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On 24 June, President George Bush finally entered the fray of Middle East peace making. During his first year in office, his administration had steadfastly refused to get involved in the Palestinian-Israeli dispute, believing such personal intervention by President Clinton had famously backfired. Finally pressed by the deteriorating conditions on the ground because of the al-Aqsa uprising, and due to the need for Arab support in any campaign against Iraq, the Bush administration finally jumped in -- but not Bush himself. It was left primarily to Secretary of State Colin Powell and special envoy Gen. Anthony Zinni to engage Israel and the Palestinians. Indeed, Bush's only major statement prior to 24 June came in April when he demanded that Israel quit its military offensive in much of the West Bank. Israel's hawkish prime minister, Ariel Sharon, succeeded in ignoring Bush's demand without paying any political penalty. Badly burned by Sharon, Bush hesitated to jump in the fire again.

Thus, the most important result of President Bush's Rose Garden speech on 24 June is that it happened at all. The president has clearly put his own political capital on the line in a way that he has avoided for 18 months. Grudgingly to be sure, Bush has now committed his presidency to finding a lasting peace between Israel and Palestine.

The content of Bush's vision for peace is unsurprising; anyone who follows the conflict already knows the principles upon which that peace will be consummated: the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with borders roughly those in place before the 1967 war. This is the "land for peace" formula enshrined in U.N. Security Council resolutions 242 and 338, and what is understood by virtually all parties as the necessary end state of negotiations. Moreover, this implies a sharing of Jerusalem between the two parties and the dismantling of most Jewish settlements illegally built in the West Bank and Gaza Strip since 1967. Bush declined to speak on the thorny issue of Palestinian refugees.

The most controversial aspect of Bush's vision is his call for Palestinians to replace their leadership - read Yasir Arafat - in order for the process to move forward. Bush has made no secret of his lack of trust in Arafat, and the president was right to note the corruption and inefficiencies that plague the Palestinian Authority under Arafat. Bush was also correct to suggest that Arafat has, at the least, tacitly condoned a number of suicide bombings. However, Arab commentators were quick to note that while Bush has disqualified Arafat as an interlocutor because he has "blood on his hands", no such disqualification was made for Sharon (the author of several infamous massacres of Arabs, and a man who may yet stand trial in Europe for Milosovic- and Pinochet-like war crimes). Nor did the United States ever disqualify from negotiations former Israeli prime ministers Menachim Begin or Yitzhaq Shamir, leaders of the Irgun and Stern terrorist groups, respectively, earlier in their careers. Such commentators were also quick to point out that Arafat, like Sharon, is the democratically elected leader of his people (Arafat was elected president of the Palestinian Authority in 1995 with 87% of the vote in elections deemed free and fair by

the United States and other international monitors).

Bush and the Palestinians

Arab commentators like Jamal Khashoggi, editor of the Arab News in Saudi Arabia, believe that Bush is blaming the victims, that is, the Palestinians under occupation, rather than blaming the oppressor: "Bush just completely adopted the Israeli analysis of the situation, that it is terror forcing Israel to maintain its occupation, not that occupation is leading to terrorism." Such criticism does have some basis as Bush has put tremendous emphasis on "ending Palestinian terror" without evincing any understanding of the reasons why some Palestinians are driven to such desperate measures. One can understand without accepting or justifying such things.

In Bush's vision, Palestinians have the additional burden of undertaking their responsibilities prior to any significant Israeli moves. For Bush, Palestinians must elect a "new and different leadership" and undertake far-reaching (and necessary) reforms in the way the Palestinian government operates prior to the United States backing a provisional Palestinian state - and only then bringing pressure to bear on Israel to likewise accept Palestinian statehood and take the hard decisions to finally let go of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

While most of Bush's harshest comments were reserved for the Palestinians, Bush's speech was far from a disaster for them. A number of prominent Palestinian commentators saw some genuinely positive developments in the speech. For example, Palestinian Cabinet Secretary Ahmad Abd al-Rahman praised Bush's vision as "the first time that an American administration recognized that the only solution for this conflict is to end the occupation and to have a state live in peace beside Israel - this is an historic change in the American stand."

Indeed, there was much for Palestinians to like in Bush's speech. Bush unequivocally called for the end to Israel's 35-year occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. This was a necessary and positive step, as it reminded Americans that even nine years after the historic Oslo breakthrough, Israel remained an occupying power of virtually all Palestinian lands. These are not "disputed" lands to be divvied up, they are "occupied" lands that must be given over in full to Palestinian sovereignty. Indeed, for Bush it is only through the creation of a "stable, peaceful Palestinian state" that Israel's legitimate security needs can be met. In the shorter term, Bush called for an end to Israel's settlement policy - something that has been intensified under Sharon - and for a withdrawal of Israeli troops from re-occupied urban areas in the West Bank to positions held in September 2000 - prior to the start of the current uprising. As for internal changes in the Palestinian Authority, many Palestinians tired of the corruption and creeping authoritarianism of the PA have been calling for precisely these reforms for years. If the political and administrative reforms come to pass, most Palestinians will embrace them.

Bush and the Israelis

Bush's plan was warmly accepted by most Israelis, including the Sharon government, for obvious reasons. By placing the blame for the current state of disrepair squarely on Palestinian terror, Bush appealed to strongly held Israeli views that Palestinian violence must stop before any negotiations begin. Such a sentiment, while entirely understandable in human terms, cuts against the historical grain, as virtually all anti-colonial wars were still ongoing when a political deal was cinched (be it in Algeria, Vietnam, South Africa, Ireland, or elsewhere). That the Palestinians must undertake all of the early hard steps and only then will Israel have to respond in kind likewise appealed to Israel.

Israelis across the political spectrum embraced Bush's lightly veiled call for Arafat's removal. For better or worse, Arafat has been thoroughly demonized in the Israeli popular imagination. Bush's speech led David Landau, editor of the influential Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz, to triumphantly describe Arafat as a "dead

man walking" who had just been "politically assassinated by President George W. Bush."

For most Israelis, the hard steps that Israel will eventually have to undertake in Bush's vision are well known. Opinion polls in Israel consistently show that a majority of Israelis know and accept that Israel will have to withdraw to the 1967 boundaries, that most settlements will have to be disbanded, and that a Palestinian state will be created in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Will it Work?

While the end game -- a two state solution -- is by now widely accepted, the implementation of Bush's plan will likely be problematic. For starters, Bush was short on specifics in terms of implementation, linkages and schedules. The devil is in the details, and important missing details can thwart even the best of plans. For example, who gets to decide if Palestinian reforms have gone far enough to necessitate Israeli concessions? A Sharon government would just drag its heals and refuse to ever 'certify' the reforms. If Bush himself makes that determination, will he be willing to put real pressure on a Sharon government determined to stall for time? Sharon's humiliation of Bush last April should give one pause in this regard.

Even more important, Bush is asking that Arafat and Sharon do things that go against their ideological core interests, an almost impossible undertaking. Bush is asking that Arafat step aside, make himself irrelevant. How many politicians and national leaders ever voluntarily bench themselves? Not many, and Arafat has not shown himself to be the kind of statesman to consider starting a trend. As is oft observed, there are no living former presidents in the Arab world. Being 'benched' often has more personal ramifications in the Arab world. Through thick and thin, Arafat has tenaciously clung to power, so there is no reason to believe that he will agree to Bush's demand to leave office.

As for Sharon, the constant guiding principle of his political career over the past 35 years is to assure permanent Israeli control over the West Bank -- or "Judea and Samaria" as he and other ideological hawks like to call it. Sharon has been the single most important driving force in building illegal settlements in the West Bank; he orchestrated a disastrous war against the PLO in Lebanon in 1982 largely to try to destroy the only Palestinian leadership that could prevent Israeli annexation of the West Bank; in the midst of sensitive negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians just months before he became prime minister, Sharon publicly encouraged settlers in the West Bank to grab every available hilltop as he feared Ehud Barak was about to quit the West Bank. These are not the actions of a man willing to end Israel's occupation of the West Bank and withdraw Israel's army and settlers to the 1967 border (something he repeatedly rejects in any case).

Neither Arafat in the short term nor Sharon down the road will be willing accomplices in implementing Bush's Middle East peace plan. The only real question is whether the Bush administration will stay engaged and take the necessary risks to implement a fair solution, or whether it will revert to its first year form and disengage, thereby allowing both Arafat and Sharon to kill any hope for peace and a better life for Israelis and Palestinians alike.

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