

HESITANT HEGEMON: THE UNITED STATES AND THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN IMPASSE

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Current statements of U.S. policy toward Arab-Israeli issues make ritual reference to President George W. Bush's Rose Garden statement of June 24, 2002; it has become the scriptural source of subsequent policy declarations. In this statement, Bush made a clean break with previous U.S. policy:

My vision is two states, living side by side in peace and security. There is simply no way to achieve that peace until all parties fight terror. Yet, at this critical moment, if all parties will break with the past and set out on a new path, we can overcome the darkness with the light of hope. Peace requires a new and different Palestinian leadership, so that a Palestinian state can be born.

I call on the Palestinian people to elect new leaders, leaders not compromised by terror. I call upon them to build a practicing democracy, based on tolerance and liberty. If the Palestinian people actively pursue these goals, America and the rest of the world will actively support their efforts. If the Palestinian people meet these goals, they will be able to reach agreement with Israel and Egypt and Jordan on security and other arrangements for independence.

And when the Palestinian people have new leaders, new institutions and new security arrangements with their neighbors, the United States of America will support the creation of a Palestinian state whose borders and certain aspects of its sovereignty will be provisional until resolved as part of a final settlement in the Middle East.¹

President Bush also called on Israel to withdraw to the positions held on September 28, 2000, prior to the onset of the *Aqsa intifada*, "as we make progress toward security," and said that Israeli settlement activity in the occupied territories

¹ U.S. Department of State, "President Bush Calls for New Palestinian Leadership," Washington, DC, June 24, 2002, <http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/11408.htm>.

should stop. But it was his admonition to the Palestinians that broke new ground. The support of a Palestinian state, though fairly recent, was not new. In his address to the United Nations General Assembly on November 10, 2001, Bush had announced that the U.S. government was “working toward a day when two states, Israel and Palestine, live peacefully together within secure and recognized borders as called for by the Security Council resolutions.”² A week later, Secretary of State Colin Powell had endorsed officially the “two-state” formula for resolution of the conflict and called openly for establishment of a Palestinian state.³ Support for Palestinian statehood had been further affirmed by U.S. support for United Nations Security Council Resolution 1397, of March 12, 2002, which proclaimed “a vision of a region where two States, Israel and Palestine, live side by side within secure and recognized borders.”⁴ What was new in the Rose Garden statement was the open call for new leadership in the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the apparent end to U.S. diplomatic efforts of conflict resolution through the existing Palestinian leadership.

In late 2001 and early 2002 the Bush administration was reeling from the trauma of September 11, 2001. Everything was viewed through the prism of the war against terrorism, and in this light it was enough for the President and his advisors that PA leaders “are encouraging, not opposing, terrorism.”⁵ But the disillusionment with PA President Yasir Arafat also stemmed from the repeated U.S. failures in efforts to secure a cease-fire and in Arafat’s failure to stop the violent attacks by extremists of Hamas,

2 U.S. White House, “President Bush Speaks to United Nations,” New York, November 10, 2001, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011110-3.html>.

3 Secretary of State Colin L. Powell, “United States Position on Terrorists and Peace in the Middle East,” Louisville, Kentucky, November 19, 2001, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2001/6219.htm>.

4United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1397, March 12, 2002, S/RES/1397 (2002), <http://www.un.org/Docs/scres/2002/sc2002.htm>.

5 Bush, June 24, 2002.

Islamic Jihad, and Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, which had reached a new crescendo in early 2002. Whether Arafat was unable to move against these groups, or simply unwilling to do so, or both, no longer seemed particularly relevant. U.S. policymakers had concluded, as the Israeli government had proclaimed since Ariel Sharon became Prime Minister in early 2001, that whatever the precise relationship between PA leaders and the violent factions, there would be no basic change until Arafat and his supporters were removed from center stage.

This bleak assessment of the PA under Arafat was not limited to the hawkish Bush and Sharon cliques; it was shared, at least privately, by almost all leaders and envoys who had at one time or another been involved in Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic combat.⁶ Palestinians have also been very critical of Arafat's leadership and the widespread corruption and lack of democracy within the PA-ruled areas. In a June, 2003, poll, 84 percent of Palestinian respondents said that there was corruption in PA institutions.⁷

By tying renewed Arab-Israeli diplomacy to "regime change" among the Palestinians, the Bush administration was essentially putting it on the back burner. For one thing, Bush's advisors were already thinking of "regime change" in other target states that claimed a higher priority in the war on terror. Open calls for a change of government in other states are still somewhat presumptuous by existing standards, but in the Palestinian case (unlike Iraq) it became clear that there was no operational dimension to the delegitimization of the PA. Palestinians were exhorted to get their own

⁶ See, for example, the view of former special envoy Dennis Ross, who probably had more contact with Arafat than any other U.S. diplomat (Ross, "Yasir Arafat," *Foreign Policy*, July-August, 2002, pp. 18-26).

⁷ Palestine Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR), Poll No. 8, June 19-22, 2003, <http://www.pcpsr.org/surveys/polls/2003/p8a.html>.

house in order, with the vision of a Palestinian state brandished as inducement to do so. In the meantime, the United States could afford to direct its attention elsewhere, which it proceeded to do. In his January, 2004 State of the Union address, to take one small index of inattention, Bush made not a single reference to Arab-Israeli issues (except for including Jerusalem in the list of cities hit by terrorism).

Israel and the United States were claiming, in essence, that the situation had reverted to the pre-1993 quandary that had stymied diplomatic progress for decades: the lack of a credible Palestinian negotiating partner. Furthermore, there was indeed strong evidence that Arafat was not, or was no longer, a credible negotiating partner – even if one approached the matter from a pro-Palestinian stance. In fact, the usual riposte to this argument is not a defense of Arafat, but a claim that the present government of Israel is at least as unlikely as the current PA to make the necessary concessions for a negotiated two-state solution that would meet the minimal needs and rights of both sides. And just to complicate matters, there are good grounds for concluding that this is also the case.

One need not recapitulate Ariel Sharon's career as "godfather of the settlements" in order to establish his credentials as a territorial maximalist. While some recent statements have dropped tantalizing hints of a willingness to evacuate some isolated settlements at some future time under some as-yet-unstated conditions, this falls far short of the minimal territorial concessions that any Palestinian leadership could accept. Many observers share Henry Siegman's blunt assessment of Sharon's intentions: "Sharon's assurances that he is committed to the launching of a peace process once Palestinian terrorism is vanquished is a lie intended to gain time for securing the

irreversibility of the settlement enterprise.”⁸ In all fairness, the most tenable conclusion is that no comprehensive settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will take place without changes of government on both sides.

That having been said, it is easier to envision the emergence of a more moderate Israeli government than a more moderate Palestinian leadership. The most visible alternative to Arafat in the current Palestinian scene is not a more moderate leadership, but the combined forces of Islamic militant groups who have been drawing the support of over 30 percent of the public in recent polls – putting them ahead of Fatah.⁹ On the other hand, the Sharon government is significantly more hawkish than the Israeli public as a whole. This helps to explain why Sharon has moved verbally in a moderate direction, but should Israeli opinion recede yet further from the hawkish peak it reached in the 2003 elections – in response, say, to a meaningful reduction in violence – Sharon would face a dilemma. If he continued to move to the center, he would face the likely defection of the National Union and the National Religious Party from his coalition, forcing him to turn to the Labor party to maintain his majority. If he did not moderate his position, he would face the possible defection of the centrist Shinui party and even members of his own Likud, and in that case it would be unlikely that he could hold a majority together until the next scheduled elections in early 2007.

In other words, as a functioning democracy Israel possesses the mechanisms for a relatively smooth and rapid moderate response to dramatic moderation on the Palestinian side. But Palestinians lack such a mechanism, and this is where attention

8 Siegman, “Sharon’s Phony War,” *New York Review of Books*, 50 (No. 20, December 18, 2003), <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/16831>.

9 See the poll results below, p. 14.

must focus. Even at the peak of its effectiveness, the Palestinian Authority was hardly responsive to grass-roots constituencies, and after three years of pounding by Israeli forces its governing authority has been further shattered. The appointment of moderate Prime Ministers – Abu Mazen and then Abu Ala – was a futile move in a situation that in some respects borders on anarchy. The Palestinian Authority cannot reconstitute itself as a credible negotiating partner since it cannot, in the first instance, reconstitute itself as a credible authority. Waiting for the Palestinians to put their own house in order, without strong inputs from the outside, is a recipe for failure. What is needed, despite the unpopularity of the term in Washington, is nothing less than a concerted policy of nation-building.

The Key Interest: Stability

Hegemonic powers are instinctive guardians of stability, since it keeps the costs of hegemony limited and discourages challenges to the existing order. U.S. policy in regions such as the Middle East focused on stability in pre-hegemonic days as well; during the Cold War, wars and internal conflicts were the major points of entry for Soviet influence. Thus U.S. policy has remained remarkably stable over time and without regard to the administration or party in power. The top priority in the Middle East was and is the prevention of war, which threatens access to oil, imposes huge economic costs on Western economies, provides opportunities for mischief by hostile powers, and forces U.S. policymakers to make very difficult choices when Western-oriented states are arrayed against each other.

On this last point, nothing poses a sharper dilemma than an Arab-Israeli war. Committed informally (rather than by formal treaty) to the survival of the Jewish state, the United States could not afford, on the other hand, to alienate the entire Arab world. In the early years after Israel's emergence, this was expressed in a rather aloof relationship with Israel that is not always remembered today. The United States did not sell arms to Israel, extended modest foreign economic aid, and in the 1956-1957 Suez crisis brought heavy pressure on Israel to withdraw from every inch of the Sinai peninsula and the Gaza strip. Only in the early 1960s did U.S. policy move to the strategy of maintaining a deterrent to war by supplying Israel with arms to balance Soviet arms to radical Arab states, and this was in part because France was halting its arms sales to Israel. At the same time, a closer relationship with Israel, expressed in foreign aid and other spheres, was seen not only as a deterrent to war but also as a means of reassuring Israel and moderating its policies.¹⁰

This new strategy paid off in the 1970s when Egypt turned from its reliance on the Soviet Union to a U.S. orientation, in part because of the calculation that only the United States had real influence over Israel. The result was the 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty, one of the positive milestones in the history of the conflict, in which Egypt once again recovered the Sinai Peninsula and the United States played the role of a non-partial mediator while the Soviet Union watched from the sidelines. This has remained the central structure of Arab-Israeli diplomacy since, and in terms of promoting U.S. interests it has been remarkably successful. No major interstate war

¹⁰ For a carefully researched reconstruction of this historic turn in U.S. policy see Abraham Ben-Zvi, *Decade of Transition: Eisenhower, Kennedy and the Formation of the American-Israeli Alliance* (Columbia University Press, 1998), and John F. Kennedy and the Politics of Arms Sales to Israel (Cass, 2002).

has been fought since 1973, a second state-to-state peace treaty (Israel-Jordan) has been concluded, Israel and the PLO agreed for the first time on a framework for peace, and the United States has become the only outside power of consequence in the region.

The unique role of the United States is reflected in the seemingly paradoxical attitudes of Palestinian leaders. On the one hand, they denounce U.S. policy in harsh language for what they see as its unqualified support of Israel; on the other hand, the bottom line is a demand for more, not less, active U.S. participation in Arab-Israeli diplomacy. The United States, in this view, has enormous potential power over Israel because of Israeli dependence on U.S. aid, and the key to realization of Palestinian rights is convincing or compelling Washington to use this leverage forcefully (as in the Suez crisis).

During the 1990s the United States facilitated the peace process that, for the first time in the long history of the conflict, brought the authorized representatives of Israel and the Palestinians to the same table and to agreement on a "two-state" solution: a Palestinian Arab state to be established alongside Israel. Despite the collapse of the Oslo process under the weight of the second intifada beginning in late 2000, this framework is still supported by a majority on both sides. Furthermore, the negotiations at Camp David (July, 2000) and at Taba (January, 2001), while falling short of agreement, closed the gap considerably and provide a reasonable basis for projecting the provisions of a final settlement, whenever it is reached.

The final Israeli proposal in these talks conceded to the Palestinian state all of the Gaza strip and 94% of the West Bank, with a land swap that would add another 3%

to the latter, totaling 97%. Both sides accepted in principle President Clinton's idea that Jewish neighborhoods in Jerusalem would be incorporated into Israel and Arab neighborhoods into the Palestinian state. On territorial issues, therefore, final agreement did not seem to be out of reach. Much progress was also made on security issues, and some progress on the refugee question.¹¹

Substantively, then, the two sides were not that far apart. Given some movement on the refugee issue and more time to resolve details, it is conceivable that final agreement might have been reached and ratified by a majority on both sides. Perhaps substantive issues are no longer the major obstacle to a peace agreement; it may be the distrust and hostility created by the current violence, and the success of extremists in exploiting these emotions, that have become the real obstacle.¹²

However, while there is considerable consensus on what a final settlement will look like, there is also growing realization that it cannot be achieved without strong outside direction. Shortly after President Bush's Rose Garden statement, former Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami and two other key Labor Party figures wrote an open letter to Bush pleading for a more active policy:

While there is unprecedented worldwide support for a solution along these lines, today there is virtually no likelihood that such a solution can be achieved through bilateral negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. . . . What is necessary is for the United States to move beyond its traditional role as a sponsor and mediator for bilateral negotiations. Today, the United States must lead the international community, with the support of moderate Arab states, to

11 Akiva Eldar, "The Moratinos Document – The Peace that nearly was at Taba," Ha'aretz, February 14, 2002.

12 There is remarkable similarity among various recent exercises in projecting or simulating an Israeli-Palestinian final agreement. Among these exercises have been that of the International Crisis Group, Middle East Endgame (<http://www.crisisweb.org/home/index.cfm?id=1666&l=1>), the Nusseibeh-Ayalon initiative (<http://www.peacelobby.org>), and the Geneva Accord reached under the joint leadership of former Israeli Justice Minister Yossi Beilin and former Palestinian Information Minister Yasir Abd-Rabbo (<http://www.mideastweb.org/geneva1.htm>).

develop in detail a solution . . . and to vigorously encourage both sides to accept this agreement.¹³

The Case for Intervention

There is, therefore, good reason to believe that an agreement acceptable to a majority on both sides is achievable, given an end to the current cycles of violence and the renewed involvement of the United States as facilitator and mediator. But getting back to negotiations has proved to be at least as difficult as the negotiations themselves. One cannot fault U.S. policymakers for lack of effort; the missions of George Mitchell, George Tenet, and Anthony Zinni all made serious efforts to find formulas that would restore some stability and allow negotiations to resume.

From these missions came several formulas, up to and including the roadmap, proposing quite reasonable and practical steps for de-escalating the hostilities. The problem did not lie in the content of these proposed measures; any serious effort to stabilize the situation would have to involve similar measures. The problem lay in the assumption – or hope? – that the parties involved were ready, willing, and able to act decisively in their own interest by adhering to the projected formulas and, when necessary, controlling their own extremists. There could be reasonable doubt about how “willing” the Israeli government actually was, especially in light of the timing of some “targeted killings” that served to trigger new attacks when the violence seemed to be subsiding. But at least such decisions came from the top and did not indicate any lack of control over Israeli forces. On the Palestinian side, in contrast, it appears

¹³ Shlomo Ben-Ami, Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, and Yuli Tamir, “A Letter to President George W. Bush,” September 9, 2002, <http://www.peacelobby.org>.

increasingly obvious that there is, in fact, no viable negotiating partner capable of playing its assigned role. This is the background for Bush's change of course in the Rose Garden statement.

The breakdown of authority in Palestinian areas has reached critical dimensions. Three centers of power have emerged: the official PA leadership led by Yasser Arafat and the older generation of activists who returned from Tunis in 1994; a younger generation, mostly from the West Bank and Gaza, who are challenging the "Tunisians"; and the Islamic militant camp, which has risen in importance as the power vacuum developed.¹⁴ The return of the Israeli army to West Bank cities has contributed to the general chaos and to the perception that the traditional leadership has failed. In the most recent poll of the leading Palestinian survey research organization, support for Fatah (Arafat's base) has dropped to 25 percent while Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and independent Islamists together stood at 31 percent. Perhaps most significantly, 40 percent of the respondents described themselves as unaffiliated.¹⁵

Despite widespread disillusionment with Arafat, there is no obvious procedure by which Palestinians can replace him with more accountable and more moderate leaders as exhorted to do by Bush and his advisors. The experiment with an appointed Prime Minister demonstrated the limits of this approach. But the current deadlock does work to the advantage of the Islamic militants, who steadily gain strength as frustration increases. Without new inputs from external sources, the situation can only get worse.

There is clearly a strong case here for international intervention led by the United States. Palestinians have themselves long advocated a more active international role in

14 Graham Usher, "Facing Defeat: The Intifada Two Years On," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 32 (No. 2, Winter, 2003), 37-39.

15 PSR, Poll No. 10, December 4-9, 2003.

the West Bank and Gaza, primarily to replace Israeli occupation but also to aid in the establishment of a viable state. As a replacement for Israeli forces occupying West Bank cities, a U.S.-led international force would be far more welcome in Palestinian territory than was the U.S. invasion force in Iraq. And in terms of nation building, the task in the West Bank and Gaza would be much smaller in scale and simpler in implementation than the enormous mission that the United States has assigned to itself in Iraq.

Martin Indyk, former U.S. Ambassador to Israel, has proposed an international trusteeship along these lines.¹⁶ Acting under UN Security Council authorization and with a U.S.-led force mandated to enforce the peace, such a trusteeship would serve as the framework for new elections in which a representative and accountable Palestinian leadership could be chosen. It would also pass legal muster since the United Nations is arguably the legitimate holder of residual sovereignty in Mandatory Palestine.

The roadmap and other recent initiatives have in fact assumed an increased U.S. and international role in monitoring and enforcing any future agreements between Israel and Arab parties. It seems clear that such agreements will need the additional measure of credibility provided by third party guarantees and peacekeeping forces. The United Nations itself has overseen nation-building missions in East Timor and Kosovo, with a fair degree of success. What once appeared as a radical notion, at least in the Israel-Palestinian context, is no longer so unimaginable.

The Palestinian situation will, however, require a strong U.S. central role. It is unlikely that either Palestinians or Israelis would trust an international force that lacked

¹⁶ Indyk, "A Trusteeship for Palestine?," *Foreign Affairs*, 82 (No. 3, May/June, 2003), 51-66.

military credibility, which is unlikely without U.S. participation. Israel has resisted the idea of internationalization generally, and in political terms would likely place its confidence only in an arrangement led by the United States. In short, no other country or combination of countries could play this role.

Many of the guidelines for such a force already exist. The agreements reached between Israel and the PLO since 1993 – Oslo I, Oslo II, the Wye and Sharm el-Sheikh agreements – include detailed commitments by both sides that would serve as points of reference for an enforcement body. Despite ritual proclamations that the Oslo process is dead, none of these agreements have been renounced by either party. The first mission of an international force would therefore be simply to instill compliance with existing agreements, an action that would be totally consistent with its presumed impartial and legalistic character. In the Palestinian case, this means prevailing upon the dominant leadership to recognize that low-level violence is no longer a useful weapon in its arsenal. Apart from being a clear violation of signed agreements, it is the basic responsibility of any state to prevent attacks from its own territory or by its citizens against the territory or citizens of other states. As Palestinians aspire to statehood, they must also accept the rules obligatory on sovereign states, as do Syria and other Arab states on Israel's borders.

On the Israeli side, it should be clear that the deployment of an international force in the West Bank and Gaza, charged *inter alia* with containing Palestinian violence against Israel, would be premised on freezing all new Jewish settlement activities in these areas, including the so-called “natural growth” of existing settlements. This is essential to the viability of a Palestinian state in the remaining 22 percent of Mandatory

Palestine outside the pre-1967 armistice lines. In return, serious consideration should be given to a formal U.S. security guarantee of Israel within these lines. Since the United States has often acted as though such a guarantee existed, and has been castigated in the Arab world as though it existed, it might as well enjoy the benefits that such a step would bring in encouraging Israeli cooperation.

Favorable Circumstances

The Bush administration has called for regime change in the Palestinian Authority, but has been hesitant to take any bold steps designed to bring such change about. By now, however, it is abundantly clear that attempted manipulation at the margins will not displace Yasir Arafat and, more broadly, will not create an accountable and moderate Palestinian government able to conclude peace with Israel. While a majority of Palestinians may favor such an outcome, they are in no position to bring it about. A policy of simply waiting for good things to happen is, therefore, a self-defeating policy that can only benefit the militants who are gaining strength as the impasse endures. This is not simply a stagnated conflict in which the passage of time will eventually lead to battle fatigue; it is a dynamic situation in which bad things are more likely to happen than not.

There are, furthermore, a number of favorable circumstances for the energetic assertion of hegemonic stability. Taking a very broad view, the gradual disengagement of Arab states over the last two decades has reduced the remaining conflict to its historic core, and has created another constituency with an interest in stability. Two of the four contiguous states, Egypt and Jordan, have concluded peace treaties with Israel

that have stood the test of time, and have often played a constructive role in moderating Israeli-Palestinian relations. Together with other moderate Arab states that have an interest in preventing further deterioration of the situation, these countries could be of great assistance in any trusteeship or nation-building exercise for Palestinians.

Despite the remaining gaps, the acceptance of the same basic framework for resolution of the conflict by mainstream leaders and a majority of the public, on both sides, provides a platform that is not always available in such cases. Furthermore, this basic acceptability of a two-state solution has been reinforced by recent trends in opinion. In Israel, support for a Palestinian state in Asher Arian's annual survey of opinion on security issues rose from 49 percent in 2002 to 59 percent in 2003.¹⁷ In the monthly Peace Index of the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research, support for evacuating settlements in Gaza rose in December, 2003, to 50 percent by unilateral separation and another 30 percent by agreement only, totaling 80 percent; the comparable figures for "most of the West Bank settlements" were 29 percent and 37 percent, for a total of 66 percent.¹⁸

Perhaps of greater immediate relevance to the proposal for a U.S.-led international initiative, the percentage of Israelis favoring unilateral separation from the Palestinians in the near future rose in the Steinmetz poll to 59 percent.¹⁹ And in an earlier Steinmetz poll, 67 percent of the Jewish public in Israel supported a proposal that the United States formulate detailed agreements for final peace agreements with all

17 Arian, *Israeli Public Opinion on National Security 2003*, Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, October, 2003, <http://www.tau.ac.il/jcss/publications.html#memoranda>.

18 Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research, Tel Aviv University, *Peace Index*, http://www.tau.ac.il/Peace/Peace_Index.

19 *Ibid.*

parties and mobilize international support to convince the parties to accept the agreements.²⁰

As noted, Palestinian opinion has favored an increased international role in the West Bank and Gaza. There is also growing open criticism of the militarization of the intifada and decreasing support for suicide bombings and violent attacks on Israeli civilians. The most recent Palestinian poll shows 83 percent support for a mutual cease-fire, a decline from 59 percent to 48 percent on support for attacks within Israel, and a majority of 58 percent favoring a multinational force in the West Bank and Gaza.²¹

The “war on terror” being waged from Washington may have contributed to the current passivity on Arab-Israeli issues, but it has also created an international atmosphere that has put the spotlight on support of extremist elements and led some states to cooperate more fully with the United States on these issues. An international trusteeship for Palestine would provide many states with a welcome opportunity to demonstrate their credentials in this war without tying themselves to unilateral U.S. policies.

The United States thus finds itself in one of the least enviable roles that face hegemonic powers, that of the keeper of the peace, but at the same time the conditions for international intervention to break the Israeli-Palestinian impasse are much more auspicious than is usually imagined. Be that as it may, the choices are increasingly limited. The approaching anarchy in Palestine will not benefit from benign neglect; the situation will only get worse and eventually force itself on the world’s attention at a much higher cost, as it has before.

²⁰ Ibid., August, 2002.

²¹ PSR, Poll No. 10, December 4-9, 2003.