

Reading Between the Lines of President Bush's July 16 Address

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Jul 20, 2007

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Brief Analysis

President Bush's July 16 address on the Middle East peace process was a mix of the old and the new, offering neither an unequivocal reaffirmation of past approaches nor a thoroughly novel direction for Arab-Israeli diplomacy in the wake of Hamas's coup in Gaza.

On the one hand, Bush strongly re-emphasized the key principles of his landmark June 2002 speech, which set Palestinian internal security, rule of law, and governance reform as a critical benchmark for active American support of Palestinian statehood. On the other hand, the most important innovation in this week's speech was the shift in emphasis from the three-tiered Roadmap to Middle East peace to the speedier and more direct engagement envisioned in the pursuit of a "political horizon." Between these two approaches there is a natural tension, which the president massaged with language that was at times soothing to each of the parties.

Bush's call for an "international meeting" later this year received the most headlines from the speech. Yet a close reading suggests that this event is less likely to launch formal negotiations on the establishment of a Palestinian state than to serve as the target date by which to measure the progress of internal Palestinian Authority (PA) reform that is a necessary precondition for those negotiations. In this respect, the president's international meeting is a less ambitious, more realistic event than many commentators have suggested.

From Roadmap to Horizon

Bush's speech contained just a single, passing reference to what had been the lodestar of the administration's regional diplomacy, the Quartet-approved Roadmap to Middle East peace. Though little commented upon, the absence of significant reference to the Roadmap must be viewed as a major development. Gone is any discussion of three phases of mutual and parallel progress; gone is any reference to the idea of a Palestinian state within provisional borders. (The latter is especially ironic, given that the separation between Hamas-ruled Gaza and the Fatah-ruled West Bank makes provisionalism more likely and logical now than at any time in the past). In its place is a commitment to "intensify" efforts to sketch out a "political horizon" for a Palestinian state and, as progress is made on institutional reform, a commitment "soon [to] begin serious negotiations toward the creation of a Palestinian state" -- i.e., phase three of the Roadmap.

The fact that the Roadmap merited a single reference in a subordinate clause should be recognized as a significant achievement in favor of Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas and in support of the idea, advocated by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, that improvements in quality of life, rule of law, and the effectiveness of Palestinian governing institutions cannot substitute for the animating power of visible progress toward the political goal of statehood, i.e., the horizon.

To be sure, Bush did repeat language from the Roadmap about dismantling terrorist infrastructure and confiscating illegal weapons. But the new element injected into the speech was an endorsement of the concept of a "horizon." Precisely what such a "horizon" consists of -- Is it more than a renewed commitment to a two-state solution, which is already enshrined in U.S. presidential statements, Israeli government policy, and UN Security Council resolutions? Is it the product of negotiations? Is it defined by territory or authority? -- remains decidedly unclear.

No Answer for Gaza

Also notable for its absence from Bush's speech is any discussion of reversing Hamas's takeover of Gaza or of addressing the threat posed by that coup. The president offered a series of exhortations to Hamas -- "You must stop Gaza from being a safe haven for attacks against Israel. You must accept the legitimate Palestinian government, permit humanitarian aid in Gaza, and dismantle militias. And you must reject violence." -- but there were no implications, stated or implied, as to what Washington would do if Hamas did not change its course other than continue Gaza's isolation. And, it is useful to note, Bush did not suggest that America's security assistance to the PA was designed to help it prepare to reverse the Hamas takeover by force.

Given that the region had just witnessed the first-ever military takeover of a Sunni Arab political entity by a radical Islamist movement, one might have imagined bolder language. For example, Bush could have offered his support for whatever measures Israel (or Egypt, for that matter) may need to consider to protect against attack or infiltration from Gaza or to retaliate in the event of such attack. Also, the president could have signaled his willingness to recognize a possible decision by Israel to terminate any residual responsibilities toward Gaza it may have under international law as the occupying power, which is a lever Israel could wield effectively against Hamas.

Perhaps most importantly, Bush could have set down markers now that put Washington on record as opposing reconciliation talks between Hamas and Fatah, opposing the reconstitution of a national unity government that includes Hamas, and opposing the convening of new Palestinian elections that include Hamas participation without the total disarmament of Hamas militias and Hamas recognition of the Quartet principles of nonviolence and recognition of Israel. Without definitive statements, regional players who are already advocating various forms of Hamas-Fatah reconciliation will confuse ambiguity for acquiescence.

Role of the Arabs

Some of the most interesting language of Bush's speech concerned references to neighboring Arab states. In a fascinating passage outlining the terms of reference for the international meeting that the president said he will convene in autumn 2007, the president said he would invite "representatives from nations that support a two-state solution, reject violence, recognize Israel's right to exist, and commit to all previous agreements between the parties." While one assumes Bush would not call an international meeting merely to replicate the sort of modest neighborhood gatherings Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak periodically hosts in Sharm al-Sheikh, the only Arab countries that meet those terms today are Egypt and Jordan.

Was Bush sending a message to Saudi Arabia that its moment in the regional diplomatic sun, which reached its zenith with the abortive Mecca accords, had reached an end and that Washington would now only consider Saudi contribution positive if Riyadh meets these benchmarks? So far, White House spokesmen say no, there is no special message directed at Saudi Arabia in this passage. But reporters will be wise to revisit this language when invitations

to the "international meeting" are delivered later this year.

The second passage that has wider regional implications states, "Nations like Jordan and Egypt, which are natural gateways for Palestinian exports, should open up trade to create opportunities on both sides of the border." On the surface, this reads like a throwaway line about building economic opportunity. But upon closer scrutiny, these words contain a powerful political message about the importance of closer integration between the neighboring Arab states and the Palestinian issue.

With Egypt, Bush effectively called on Cairo to drop its insistence on keeping Rafah shut and to open up a new outlet from Gaza to the world, relieving Israel of sole burden for this thankless task. With Jordan, the president effectively called on Amman to consider new ways to build economic links with the West Bank. While this one sentence is a far cry from a strategic realignment in support of some form of "Egyptian option" or "Jordanian option" that could ease the way for resolution of the Palestinian issue, it does provide a foundation on which such options can -- and should -- be developed.

Conclusion

President Bush's speech reflected the fundamental tension between his continued commitment to core principles about the need for Palestinian internal reform as a precondition for discussion of statehood and his sense of urgency about investing in Abbas -- politically, diplomatically, financially, and militarily -- so that the West Bank does not go the way of Gaza. As summer turns to autumn, there will be increasing pressure on the White House to telescope the reform process and feed the sense of urgency with ever greater political content. As Bush hinted in the very first line of his speech, when he referred to the national debate over Iraq, pressure on the Palestinian issue will come at the precise moment when pressure on the Iraq can be expected to reach a boil. In other words, the president seems reconciled to the fact that Washington is likely to have not just a hot summer, but a hot autumn, too.

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