

Deciphering the Bush-Abbas Press Conference

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Brief Analysis

President George W. Bush welcomed Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to the White House Thursday with an unprecedented shower of diplomatic, political, and financial support. Most media attention has focused on two high-profile signs of U.S. backing of Abbas -- Bush's bold characterization of his guest as a "man of courage" and the dispatch of \$50 million in direct assistance to the PA. As constructive as these messages were in bolstering the new Palestinian leader, little attention has been given to several other surprising messages Bush delivered -- both by omission and commission -- that could rebound against the administration's twin objectives of strengthening Palestinian democracy and advancing the vision of "two states living side by side in peace and security."

Opening the 1949 File

Bush's most provocative statement was his declaration to Abbas, "Changes to the 1949 Armistice lines must be mutually agreed." The administration evidently was trying to compensate Abbas for Bush's commitment to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, contained in an April 2004 letter, in which Bush wrote, "It is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final-status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949." The administration apparently wanted to provide the Palestinians with something symbolically powerful yet practically innocuous, wording that went beyond previous U.S. policy that defined the objective of the peace process as reaching a negotiated end to "the occupation that began in 1967." But what was eventually uttered was a formulation too clever by half, one that created more problems than it solved.

Both the nature and context of the president's statements to Sharon and Abbas were fundamentally different. Last year, in his letter to Sharon, Bush merely offered an observation, an analytical comment that refuted a hypothetical. It had no prescriptive content and, contrary to the exaggeration of Israeli officials and observers, did not specifically state a U.S. position on final-status issues. Conversely, in his comments to Abbas, Bush specifically committed the United States to a certain final-status position: the 1949 armistice lines are the starting point, from which any change must be mutually agreed.

This is a huge advance for the Palestinians. For years, Palestinians have wanted the United States publicly to accept the 1967 lines as the reference point for negotiations. In the arcane lexicon of Middle East diplomacy, by positing the 1949 lines as the reference point, Bush granted the Palestinians more than they had asked for and effectively

made the Palestinians a successor to the signatories of the armistice. In so doing, Bush inadvertently eroded the special status of UN Security Council Resolution 242, the central pillar of peace diplomacy since it was passed in 1967, which makes no reference to the armistice lines.

Though this was surely not the administration's intent, it should come as no surprise if Palestinians now believe that Washington has legitimized opening what is commonly called "the 1949 file" and if they therefore start to make unprecedented demands -- or demands for compensation and concession -- based on the status quo of 1949. (To recall just one aspect of the armistice, for example, the Mt. Scopus site of Hebrew University was at the time encircled by Arab forces and permitted a single convoy of supplies every two weeks.) Similarly, legitimizing the armistice as the reference point for negotiations will likely embolden those who wish to open the entire 1949 file, including the question of Palestinian refugees that resulted from that conflict. Renewed demands for Israeli concessions on the basis of UN General Assembly Resolutions 181 (on partition) and 194 (on the internationalization of Jerusalem and the rights of refugees) -- unreal as they are to the current diplomacy -- can now be expected.

A Lower Bar on Terrorism

Since the September 11 attacks, Bush has earned considerable credit for the fight against terrorism. So his public comments Thursday on this issue were especially surprising.

In his Rose Garden comments, Bush essentially gave Arab states -- critical players in the battle against terrorism -- a pass. In the context of urging them to invest in the success of a democratic Palestine, the President asked only that they "refuse to assist or harbor terrorists." That is a remarkably low threshold. Bush made no mention of Arab responsibility to take active measures to prevent incitement to terror; to delegitimize terror in its political, religious and cultural contexts; or even to fight against terrorism.

Toward the Palestinians themselves, Bush delivered a bold statement, "All who engage in terror are the enemies of a Palestinian state and must be held to account," but it was devoid of political context. Palestinian strategy specifically rejects confrontation with terrorist groups or efforts to bring their leaders or operatives to justice. On the contrary, Abbas' approach, confirmed Thursday by his foreign minister in a PBS interview, is to incorporate Islamic Jihad, Hamas, and other terrorist organizations within a big Palestinian tent. To publicly call on the PA to hold terrorists to account when there is no sign that such an accounting is in the offing only erodes U.S. credibility. Bush's spokesman, Scott McClellan, had to find numerous formulations to avoid telling the White House press corps whether Bush would like Abbas to shut down Hamas. That confirmed that the administration knows Abbas has no such intention.

On the specific question of Hamas' political role, Bush reaffirmed the group's designation as a terrorist organization but said nothing about whether Hamas' electoral gains in coming legislative elections would affect U.S. policy. Here, Bush missed a prime opportunity to explain to Palestinian voters before legislative elections that their votes will determine whether Washington continues to work for a two-state solution or, in the event Hamas emerges strengthened or even victorious, whether the administration will alter or even suspend its diplomatic efforts. Given that Washington is unlikely to exert much energy to help establish an Islamist Palestine, it is much wiser to warn Palestinians now about the potential repercussions of support for Hamas rather than waiting to shift gears after an election, when a change in U.S. policy will appear hypocritical.

Silent Messages

On at least two critical issues, neither Bush nor his spokesman corrected positions enunciated by Abbas that run counter to the Roadmap to Middle East peace. First, Abbas claimed that "stopping [the construction of Israel's security barrier] is one of the requirements of the Roadmap." Second, Abbas demanded that after Israel's withdrawal from Gaza this summer, the two parties "must then immediately move to permanent-status negotiations." In reality,

the Roadmap says nothing about Israel's security barrier, but it says quite a bit about the two phases of unilateral and bilateral steps that must be completed before final-status negotiations can be convened. Another key position that Bush opted not to reaffirm publicly while Abbas was in town was the importance of Gaza as a test for Palestinian governance and the impact the legacy of the Gaza handover will have on the future course of the peace process.

Conclusion

The Bush administration, appropriately enough, sees itself invested in Abbas' success; his election on a platform of nonviolence validated Bush's principled ostracism of Yasser Arafat and the wisdom of Washington's demand for Palestinian democratic reform. But now that the United States is back in the thick of peace diplomacy, the administration's policy stances should be as principled and wise as those earlier positions were, and senior officials' public utterances should match whatever private messages they send. The Arab-Israeli conflict has a special lexicon, borne of a diplomatic history built up over two generations; U.S. leaders should take special care with every word they utter or do not utter. On her upcoming visit to the region, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will have an opportunity to clarify what was said -- and not said -- in Washington last week.

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