

# Sharon-Bush Plan Isn't the Last Word

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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In diplomacy, there are times when process and substance take on equal importance. Ideas that might be acceptable, or at least tolerable, if presented one way become wholly unacceptable when presented another way.

That may help explain some of the backlash against President Bush's announcement Wednesday that the U.S. would endorse Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's unilateral plans for the West Bank and Gaza Strip. By failing to include the Palestinians in the discussions, Bush clearly ruffled feathers.

But did he dramatically transform Washington's positions on peace, as the Palestinians are now saying? Did he surrender the United States' traditional role as an honest broker by tilting overwhelmingly to the Israeli side? Did he close off the possibility of future Israeli-Palestinian negotiations by determining the outcome in advance?

I think not. A closer look at what Bush actually committed to suggests that the U.S. is neither precluding future negotiations nor determining their outcome.

In his letter to Sharon, while explaining that Israel should not have to fully withdraw to the 1949 armistice lines but should be allowed instead to maintain sovereignty over several Jewish "population centers" in the West Bank, the president stated clearly that "any final status agreement will only be achieved on the basis of mutually agreed changes that reflect these realities." That means that although the U.S. may have an opinion on the subject, there can be no final borders drawn without Palestinian approval. Palestinians will be free to insist on arrangements, including territorial compensation, to make a final agreement acceptable to them.

Similarly, Bush expressed his belief that a "just, fair and realistic" solution would require refugees to be settled in a future Palestinian state rather than in Israel -- but he never suggested that there should not be negotiations on the subject. His statement, which frankly reflects a reality that many people on both sides already acknowledge privately, is simply an American judgment on the direction those talks should take. In that sense, it is similar to Bush's earlier call for an independent Palestinian state -- not American policy prior to this administration -- which reflected his belief that there would be no solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict without the creation of such a state.

So if there's still plenty of room for negotiation, why are the Palestinians so angry? Simply put, the Palestinians feel

they've been excluded from the process.

And they're right. The U.S.-Israeli letters were worked out without any parallel talks with the Palestinians. Such discussions -- focusing on how the Palestinians could take advantage of Sharon's plan to evacuate the Gaza settlements -- could have tempered their response. Palestinians might still have had concerns, but at least their leaders could have pointed to their own discussions with the administration and explained that they would be seeking clarifications and assurances that Palestinian aspirations could still be achieved through negotiations.

That would have made it easier to move forward from here. Building on the Sharon initiative is critical. For the last three years, we have been locked in a frozen situation of warfare between Israelis and Palestinians. There has been no peace process, only a dialogue of violence. The Sharon initiative at least creates the possibility for unfreezing the situation. By withdrawing from Gaza and evacuating settlements there, and in some cases in the West Bank, an opening is created for Palestinians to assume control in the areas from which Israel departs.

Either Americans can help shape this new reality in a way that strengthens Palestinians who believe in peaceful coexistence, or we can stand aside, let the Israelis throw the keys over the fence and hope for the best after the withdrawal. If that happens, we may find that Hamas gains in strength, taking credit for the Israeli withdrawal -- a confirmation that violence pays off.

Surely, if there is to be any hope of ending the conflict, that must not happen. In the months ahead, those Palestinians who don't seek a radical Islamist future must rise to the challenge, assuming responsibility for security and good government, and working -- with our help -- to ensure that Israel's withdrawal helps their position. The stakes now are very high for all of us.

Dennis Ross, director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, is a former U.S. envoy to the Middle East. ❖

Los Angeles Times

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