

Over the Fence and through the Terror Woods

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Articles & Testimony

After his Tuesday meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, President Bush gave an important press conference from the Rose Garden. Bush's statement was a continuation of his fateful June 24, 2002 speech -- the last time that they stood side-by-side in the Rose Garden.

Back then, Bush called on the Palestinian people to elect "leaders not compromised by terror," leaders whom the United States could "actively support." While the speech did not mention Palestinian Authority (PA) Chairman Yasser Arafat by name, it clearly implied that the extant leadership had to go. In no time, Abu Mazen was appointed prime minister of the PA and Arafat's power began to hemorrhage. Palestinian regime change not only set the conditions for the Bush administration to deal with the PA; for the first time ever, it established a Palestinian leader who recognizes that Palestinian terrorism is the enemy of a future Palestinian state.

The catch, of course, is that Arafat continues to challenge Mazen's authority. Turn on Palestinian television and you will see Arafat's face, not Mazen's. This is partly because of payoffs from Arafat to his loyalists and partly because Mazen's pacific views are ahead of the curve.

Indeed, the rejectionist terrorist groups show no signs that they are out of the terrorism business, the one-month-old Palestinian ceasefire notwithstanding. In Gaza, Hamas is busy building new Kassam rockets capable of striking deep into Israeli territory. According to Israeli Defense Forces Chief, General Moshe Yaalon, "I will start to count the days until the outbreak of the next wave of violence."

It is this gulf between Mazen's rhetorical commitment to a two-state solution and the continued robustness of Palestinian rejectionists that Bush addressed on Tuesday.

If last summer's Rose Garden speech helped change the Palestinian leadership, the latest speech laid out how the new Palestinian leadership can help quash terrorism. The roadmap calls for "dismantling the terrorist infrastructure." But the Bush administration has until now left vague whether it would allow Mazen to strike a deal with the terrorists or demand that he tackle them head-on.

Now this question can be laid to rest. Bush flatly rejected Mazen's preferred approach to the "terrorism problem." Instead of allowing the PA to absorb the terrorist groups into a loose political confederation, Bush implored the Palestinian Authority to "undertake sustained, targeted, and effective operations to confront those engaged in terror."

To that end, Bush also called on the Arab world to participate in the peace process. Although the roadmap makes scant reference to the broader Arab-Israeli conflict -- as opposed to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict -- Bush's latest speech shows an acknowledgement that the two conflicts are in fact two sides to the same coin. Indeed, 70 percent of Hamas funding comes from the wider Arab world, especially Saudi Arabia; Syria continues to ignore U.S. requests to both close down its Damascus-based terrorist offices and crack down on the violent Lebanon-based Shiite group, Hezbollah. And Iran continues to export militant Islam, when it is not threatening Israel with its newly built Shihab-3 ballistic missile.

To ensure that Mazen and other Arab leaders are on board with reining in terrorism, Bush defined its meaning. First, terrorism "can never be justified by any cause"; terrorists are simply those who "kill innocent life" or "who would like to kill." Second, the European distinction between the political and military wings of violent rejectionist groups is unacceptable. Bush said plainly that Hamas is a "terrorist organization," even if it also has a social-welfare network.

Finally, Bush appeared to give his blessings to the idea of a security fence that would forcibly separate Palestinian-dominated lands from Israeli population centers. In recent weeks, the Bush administration has been critical about this project. But when asked in the Rose Garden about this point of contention with Israel, Bush said only that "the most effective way to fight terror is to dismantle terrorist organizations." In other words, if Mazen owns up to his roadmap obligations, building the fence will be a moot point. At the same time, Bush seemed to open the door for embracing the fence down the road, "We'll continue to discuss and to dialogue on how best to make sure that the fence sends the right signal, that not only is security important, but the ability for the Palestinians to live a normal life as well."

In sum, Bush's latest Rose Garden speech reaffirmed his rosy relationship with Sharon. And the faster the chasm is closed between Mazen's intentions and his broader constituency, the sooner the Palestinians will enjoy the rosy future everyone deserves. ❖

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