

Subtle Backtracking:

Assessing the Quartet's New York Statement

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Brief Analysis

In the most significant Bush administration pronouncement on Arab-Israeli issues since President George W. Bush's landmark June 24 speech, Secretary of State Colin Powell joined with leaders from the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), and Russia in issuing a "joint statement" on Middle East policy in New York yesterday. In characterizing the meeting of "Quartet" diplomats that produced the statement, much of today's media reportage highlighted the contrast between Secretary Powell's fealty to the president's security-first approach and the preference of the other Quartet members for pursuing security, political, and humanitarian objectives simultaneously. Yet, a close reading of the Quartet's statement shows a different trend -- namely, a disquieting resurrection of pre-June 24 prescriptions for Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking, as well as acquiescence by U.S. participants in subtle yet meaningful backtracking in key areas of policy.

Background

Over the past year, the Quartet has emerged as an active player in Arab-Israeli diplomacy, variously complementing and substituting for unilateral U.S. involvement. The reasons for this emergence are many and varied. First, in the wake of September 11, both Washington and its Quartet partners saw management of (and possible resolution to) the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as essential to damming the political floodwaters of the war on terror in the Muslim and Arab worlds; this urgency powered a natural urge to cooperate. Second, with the worsening of Israeli-Palestinian violence, the near-total cessation of contacts between the two sides, and the reluctance of Washington to pursue initiatives in such an inhospitable environment, the Bush administration looked to the Quartet to gain some "burden sharing" on an intractable issue and to secure additional avenues of engagement and influence with local parties. Third, at a time when the administration was pilloried for its alleged unilateralism (i.e., the "axis of evil" speech), the Quartet's multilateral cooperation provided a visible refutation of the Euro-critique of U.S. foreign policy. Fourth was an inside-the-Beltway rationale: for the State Department, highlighting the need to maintain Quartet cooperation on Arab-Israeli matters so as to gain chits for future Quartet cooperation on the administration's wider agenda (e.g., fighting terror, "regime change" in Iraq) has been an oft-cited tool in interagency debates over Middle East issues. Of course, it is difficult to define with precision how much importance one should attach to "alliance politics" as a

factor in determining U.S. Middle East policy (or overall foreign policy); indeed, the president seemed unperturbed about likely EU-UN-Russian reactions when he delivered his June 24 address. Nevertheless, the current investment in coordinating U.S. peace process policy with the Quartet is clearly uncharacteristic of U.S. Middle East diplomacy for most of the last quarter-century. Simply put, given the time and effort invested in Quartet diplomacy by the secretary of state, the fruit of these labors merits close attention.

From Madrid to New York

Yesterday's statement was the Quartet's second joint communique, following the Madrid Declaration issued on April 10, six days after President Bush's first Rose Garden address lambasting Arafat's "failed leadership." Just as that Madrid statement underscored important differences between the Quartet and the policy enunciated by the president just days earlier (see "The Bush Speech vs. the Powell Mission: Assessing Washington's Twin and Competing Middle East Policies," PolicyWatch no. 616, April 15, 2002), so too did yesterday's statement underscore important differences between the Quartet and the policy enunciated by the president in the Rose Garden three weeks ago. Indeed, the differences between the Quartet communique and the president's speech seem to far outweigh the differences allegedly cited between the secretary of state and his Quartet partners:

In the opening paragraph of the Quartet statement, the group issued an unqualified reaffirmation of the original Madrid communique, "to which the Quartet remains fully committed." In fact, it is impossible to reconcile the Madrid declaration with the president's June 24 speech. Madrid was an Arafat-centric document, which repeatedly appealed to Arafat -- by name, as "the recognized, elected leader of the Palestinian people" -- to play a constructive role in various areas; however, with the June 24 speech, the United States entered the post-Arafat era. Similarly, Madrid called on Israel to "halt immediately its military operations," a policy at odds with the president's stated understanding of the need for active Israeli self-defense in the territories. Moreover, Madrid outlined a process of "immediate, parallel and accelerated movement toward near-term and tangible political progress," which runs counter to the "security first, diplomacy later" sequence articulated by the president.

In the New York communique, the Quartet said that "implementation of an action plan [on Palestinian reform] . . . should lead to the establishment of a democratic Palestinian state." However, there is no reference to the fact that negotiations -- not just fulfillment of the "action plan" -- should be prerequisite to statehood. The only reference to Israeli-Palestinian negotiations is much later in the statement, when the Quartet "reaffirms" the need for a "negotiated permanent settlement." In suggesting a distinction between the creation of a Palestinian state (which might occur without negotiation) and a final settlement (which requires negotiation) the Quartet vision contradicts President Bush's June 24 statement that "creation of a provisional state of Palestine . . . could rise rapidly as its comes to terms with Israel, Egypt and Jordan on practical issues such as security."

More important, the Quartet statement makes no mention at all of the idea of provisional statehood, or even the concept of a Palestinian state's provisional borders and powers. The idea of provisionalism -- one of the two major policy innovations in Bush's June 24 speech, alongside his call for new Palestinian leadership -- was entirely absent from the New York statement.

The New York declaration also calls on Israel to make conciliatory gestures that differ in substance and timing from the president's speech. For example, the Quartet stated that "frozen tax revenues should be released," noting that a "more transparent and accountable mechanism is being put into place." This call for immediate and unconditional release of funds without an already functioning auditing system differs from the president's statement that "Israel should release funds into honest and accountable hands." A similar, subtle shift in wording can be found in the Quartet's call on Israel to take "immediate measures" on security matters and to seek security improvement through "reciprocal steps," both of which reshuffled the sequence of responsibilities from what the president outlined last month.

The New York statement also made no reference to three important aspects of the president's speech: the need for Arab states to stop the flow of material, financial, political, and ideological support to terrorist groups; the unmistakable warning to Damascus that the United States would only support peacemaking with "a Syria that supports peace and fights terror"; and the abject failure of the existing Palestinian leadership (which could have been cited by the Quartet without reference to Bush's specific call for new leadership). Indeed, by avoiding the issue of Palestinian leadership altogether, the Quartet provided no logical rationale for its heavy emphasis on the need for Palestinian reform. One without the other does not really make sense.

Conclusion

Despite President Bush's shot across the diplomatic bow on June 24, translating that vision of peacemaking into reality remains a daunting task. Although no one should have expected the Quartet to parrot the president's speech, the fact that its statement contradicts that speech in critical areas is a worrisome sign that disagreements on Middle East policy persist not only among America's allies, but within the administration itself.

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