

Analyzing President Bush's New Framework for Mideast Peace

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Brief Analysis

President George W. Bush today tore up a generation of conventional wisdom by offering a **bold, new approach** (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020624-3.html>) that conditioned U.S. support for eventual Palestinian statehood on a new political leadership; a "working democracy"; and far-reaching security, judicial, constitutional, and economic reform. At the same time, he seemed to ask nothing of Israel to which even the current Israeli government has not, in theory at least, already agreed. Having articulated this strategy, the White House will now surely face sustained pressure from Arab and European partners—and perhaps even from some within the administration—to balance the equation by early certification of Palestinian reform and/or accelerated demands on Israel for a redeployment of troops and a freeze on settlements.

Key Points

The main thrust of President Bush's speech marked a distinct departure from longstanding international efforts made toward Arab-Israeli peace. For the first time, the United States has declared that progress in Middle East peacemaking is dependent on the internal political development of one of the actors; in other words, democracy must come before U.S. support for statehood. This effectively replaces the original Oslo concept of transplanting the Yasir Arafat-led Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) into the West Bank and Gaza in order that Arafat and his military apparatus could provide security against terrorism and reap the benefits of a PLO-controlled "authority." In its place is a long series of conditions that a reformed Palestinian administration must meet before it merits U.S. support for statehood, which itself can only occur, said the president, through negotiations with Israel. At the same time, the president effectively rejected a timeline-focused negotiation process in favor of performance-based diplomacy. While the president noted the possibility of fulfilling all requirements for statehood within three years, the wording of his comments was subdued and noncommittal; the agreement, he said, "could"—not "should"—be reached within that timeframe.

The president also introduced a new idea—"provisional statehood"—as a waystation between the current Palestinian Authority and the eventual creation of a sovereign state according to the vision of "two states, side by side." Originally, this idea was conceived as a diplomatic inducement for Palestinians to reap an early reward for choosing diplomacy over terror. But no part of the president's speech indicates that Palestinians are likely to earn even this

new interim status anytime soon, as he offers no dates, only prerequisites: "And when the Palestinian people have new leaders, new institutions and new security arrangements with their neighbors, the United States of America will support the creation of a Palestinian state whose borders and certain aspects of its sovereignty will be provisional until resolved as part of a final settlement in the Middle East."

Democracy, beyond Arafat

Although the conceptual shift in U.S. policy enunciated by the president was profound, most headlines are sure to highlight his call for Palestinians to replace Arafat and his colleagues with a new breed of leadership. On this issue, the president could not have been clearer: "Peace requires a new and different Palestinian leadership so that a Palestinian state can be born," he said. "I call on the Palestinian people to elect new leaders, leaders not compromised by terror." With this call for leadership change, the president may have opened himself up to criticism by some in the Arab world who would protest American interference in internal Palestinian national decisions. Nevertheless, he is sure to be cheered by vast numbers of Arabs and Muslims whose disappointment will be that the president did not extend his call for leadership change and democratic transition to their countries as well. Indeed, in a strange language shift, the president cited the need for Palestinian "democracy" five times but when it came to discussing his vision for the wider Muslim world, "democracy" did not make the list of "universal hopes" he cited.

Questions for U.S. Policy

While this bold presidential statement laid out a general agenda to guide U.S. efforts in the coming months, the speech left unanswered several key questions. These include:

Will the United States continue to deal with Yasir Arafat as the "democratically elected leader of the Palestinian people," in the words of Secretary of State Colin Powell, now that President Bush has called for the rais's replacement? Operationally, will U.S. diplomats discuss implementing the president's call for reform with Palestinian leaders that the president has said must go?

How will U.S. policy respond should Israel decide to bring about leadership change before a Palestinian election next February, in order to secure the protection of its citizenry?

Are there any circumstances under which the United States will recognize the legitimacy of an election victory by Arafat?

What role will various actors—American, European, Arab, Israeli—play in fulfilling the supervisory and oversight functions outlined by the president? Who will determine the certification benchmarks and what constitutes ongoing satisfactory performance?

What lies behind the awkward construction, twice repeated, that the incipient Palestinian state must reach an agreement on security with Egypt and Jordan, in addition to Israel? Does this suggest that the provisional Palestine may enjoy some form of early "border control" responsibilities?

What actually triggers Israeli conciliatory moves, such as a settlement freeze and redeployment of forces to the positions held prior to September 2000, before the start of the Palestinian uprising? The text suggests that Israel need only remain committed to its previous promises to implement the Mitchell Commission recommendations on both these issues, which require substantial Palestinian action before Israeli counteraction.

Political Context

This speech represents a major gamble for the Bush administration. Prodded by Arabs and Europeans to lay out a detailed vision for moving forward in the Middle East, the president presented a plan that will satisfy neither; after all, the president focused heavily on the need for leadership change (i.e., no more "last chances" for Arafat) and on adding a new (and, in legal terms, uncertain) stage of provisional statehood before the prospect of Palestinian

statehood becomes real. At the same time, the president committed his office to intensive engagement on the details of Palestinian reform, in all its aspects. Avoiding the slippery slope toward becoming "trustee" of a new Palestinian "mandate" while fulfilling this commitment will be a tricky enterprise. Perhaps most difficult of all: guiding this process through sure opposition both from Arafat (despite rhetorical acceptance) and the avowedly antipeace organizations within the Palestinian community. For the silent Palestinian majority, the president offered a hopeful, democratic future—one that will be built with the full support of the United States; for the atavistic leadership of the Palestinian Authority and its tacit colleagues in antipeace organizations like Hamas and the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, fighting the president's vision through terrorism and violence will be a high priority.

A Final Note: Syria

Although the focus of the speech was on "democratic Palestine," two important phrases suggest a new tone in U.S. policy toward Syria, a country that has received much off-the-record praise in recent weeks for its contribution to the fight against al-Qaeda. In place of conventional language, the president called for eventual negotiation toward "comprehensive peace" between Israel and "a Syria that supports peace and fights terror." That implicit criticism follows a previous statement calling on Damascus to "choose the right side in the war on terror by closing terrorist camps and expelling terrorist organizations." In this stark language, the president corrected the sense that the administration has looked away from continuing Syrian support for terrorism—most recently evidenced in the confirmation that the Megiddo suicide bombing was ordered by the Damascus-based Palestinian Islamic Jihad. It remains to be seen whether the president's admonition keeps Syria and its Hizballah allies from trying to heat up the Israel-Lebanon border to ensure that their interests do not suffer from the intensive focus on Palestinians, as has often been the case with presidential initiatives on Palestinian issues in the past.

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