Crosstown Contrasts:

The White House, the State Department, and Middle East Policy

by Robert Satloff **(/experts/robert-satloff)**

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Brief Analysis

The fracas over Secretary of State Colin Powell's interview with the London Arabic daily al-Hayat yesterday—the contents of which White House spokesman Ari Fleisher has pointedly refused to endorse—reflects a growing pattern of White House–State Department division on key Middle East issues, a damaging dynamic that will only be exorcised through clarity and resolution from the Oval Office.

Context

The first seventeen months of the Bush administration have witnessed two trends in Middle East policymaking and White House–State relations. On the one hand, when clear policy directives have been issued at the presidential level, a sometimes-reluctant State Department has not only deferred to the White House but has supported and defended the president; such was the case, for example, with the "axis of evil" characterization. On the other hand, when the White House has displayed strategic ambivalence, State has proven to be the driver of policy; such is the case with U.S. policy toward Yasir Arafat (which has evolved from an internal debate over whether to sever ties with the Palestinian leader to the current affirmation of his indispensability), and apparently toward the issue of military action against Saddam Husayn. If, as reported, the president will shortly be issuing a statement summarizing his views on Arab-Israeli issues, this dynamic will again be put to the test.

While news reports frequently highlight unnamed sources leaking internal State Department "plans"—such as the recent media flurry over an alleged State scheme to convene peace talks on the basis of a return to the 1967 lines, with minor modifications -- one need not refer to journalistic accounts to contrast State-White House views on key policy issues. Secretary Powell's comments in the al-Hayat interview highlighted at least two key differences: 1) suggesting the creation of a temporary Palestinian state, just days after President George W. Bush pooh-poohed the idea of even convening a peace conference because "no one has confidence in the emerging Palestinian government"; 2) referring repeatedly and respectfully to Arafat as the main address for diplomacy just days after President Bush derisively dismissed Arafat by stating, "he's not the issue, the Palestinian people are the issue." Other examples of State Department pronouncements—some nuanced, some straightforward—that either suggest new policy directions or reveal key differences with White House statements are as follows:

On Arab responsibility for peacemaking. In his press briefing Tuesday (June 11), State Department spokesman Richard Boucher repeated the now-familiar triad of peacemaking responsibilities—Israeli, Palestinian, Arab—outlined by President Bush on April 4. In a new twist, however, Boucher noted, "especially I think on the Arab side, [this responsibility] has been met." This overlooked comment is a major statement with profound (and ultimately counterproductive) consequences. By issuing a definitive declaration that any of the parties' responsibilities have been met, the State Department essentially frees that party from further responsibility. It is important to recall the specifics of the president's April 4 challenge to Arab leaders: "All states must keep their promise, made in a vote in the United Nations, to actively oppose terror in all its forms. No nation can pick and choose its terrorist friends. I call on the Palestinian Authority and all governments in the region to do everything in their power to stop terrorist activities, to disrupt terrorist financing, and to stop inciting violence by glorifying terror in state-owned media." Although several Arab leaders have condemned attacks on civilians, it is absurd to suggest that the president's April 4 standard has been met, especially in terms of working against terrorist organizations like Hizballah or Hamas, halting all official and unofficial financial support to terrorists (including families of "martyrs"), and preventing incitement to terrorism. (Kudos to Jordan, which is recently reported to have fired eight university professors who flouted campus bans on praising suicide bombers as "martyrs.")

On the future of Israeli settlements. In a little-noted National Public Radio interview on June 8, Secretary Powell outlined a new U.S. policy on Israeli settlements in the West Bank:

"With respect to settlements, the Mitchell plan that we've supported all of last year made clear that settlement activity must come to an end. It is one of those major issues that we will have to discuss in order to find a political solution. You may recall at the tail end of President Clinton's administration they had arrived at least at some initial negotiating positions that suggested the Israelis were prepared to leave a large percentage of those settlements. We'll see how we get back into that kind of a discussion in due course. But the settlements remain one of the key issues that will have to be resolved because the settlements reflect the occupation which President Bush said, in his important April 4 speech, must be ended."

Whereas President Bush has endorsed a freeze in all settlement activity as a confidence-building measure as called for in the Mitchell Report, Secretary Powell here went much further. In an elegant fashion, the secretary shifted the focus from a freeze on settlement activity to a rollback of settlements themselves. This marks a shift in Bush administration policy. Indeed, although dismantling some settlements may be an essential element of a final-status agreement, the secretary hinted at an endorsement of the Camp David/Taba talks without reference to the Clinton-Barak-era ideas of multiple settlement blocs annexed to Israel, retaining up to 80 percent of settlers and a large number of settlements; rather, he simply connected settlements to the occupation which must, as the president said, "be ended." In the real world of diplomacy, it is important to note that Powell resurrected a theme developed when the governments of the United States and Israel were walking in strategic lock-step on the issue; it is far more contentious to advocate settlement rollback when the Israeli government is not on board.

On benchmarks for reform. On May 31, Secretary Powell discussed Palestinian security reform with a BBC interviewer. He said that Palestinian leaders are coming to the realization that they will have to make changes resulting in "an Authority that one can work with, that we can work with and ultimately the Israelis can work with." With these few words, the secretary raised the prospect that acceptable differences could exist between U.S. and Israeli benchmarks for Palestinian reform—that the Palestinians might be able to pass the threshold at which the United States "can work with" a reformed PA security apparatus some time and distance before Israel would "ultimately" be able to do so. This formula not only turns the peace process on its head—after all, it is an Israeli-Palestinian process, not a U.S.-Palestinian process—but it also ensures that there will be U.S.-Israel and Israeli-Palestinian conflict over the extent and depth of Palestinian reform. At its core, this sequence runs counter to the

president's "first things first" comment Monday, when he noted, without reference to U.S. ties with the Palestinians, that the object of reform is to "give the Palestinian people hope and to give the Israelis the confidence that the emerging government will be someone with whom they can deal."

Conclusion

Since his landmark April 4 speech, the president has issued mixed signals on his approach to Arab-Israeli peacemaking, perhaps best symbolized by his simultaneous embrace of the unbridgeable strategic approaches of Saudi crown prince Abdullah and Israeli prime minister Sharon. That gray zone of ambiguity has proven fertile ground for a series of questionable trial balloons and stealthy policy innovations. While diplomatic ambiguity sometimes has its advantages, the administration must be wary lest ambiguity drift in a direction that would make the ultimate goals of regional security and peaceful resolution of conflict more difficult than before.

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