

# New Follies on the Mideast

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**T**he US administration should be wary of three "conventional wisdoms" that have stealthily displaced lessons from years of experience promoting Arab-Israeli peace.

These ideas pretend to offer the promise of true conflict resolution. They sound logical and reasonable. But they are wrong in conception and would be reckless in practice. First is internationalisation, based on the idea that, left to their own devices, Yassir Arafat and Ariel Sharon, the Palestinian and Israeli leaders, will never make peace -- so outsiders must intervene. This replaces the traditional US formula that third parties cannot want peace more than the core actors themselves. Operationally, internationalisation ranges from a new United Nations Security Council resolution defining the parameters of a final settlement to the dispatch of international forces to implement an imposed accord.

This makes sense only if you believe the Israeli-Palestinian conflict started in March 2001, when Mr Sharon became prime minister, and that the conflict is, at its heart, a duel between these two long-time adversaries.

History tells a different story. By the time of Mr Sharon's victory, the present conflict was already five months old. Mr Sharon's was a wartime election; his national unity government, a wartime cabinet. That Israel has had five different prime ministers -- Likud and Labour -- since the signing of the 1993 Oslo accords is testament to the fact that Israelis know how to calculate risk and opportunity and they respond accordingly. No injection of internationalisation can obscure a simple truth: until this war is over -- until terrorism ends, real security is restored and large-scale retaliation becomes unnecessary -- peacemaking will never be possible.

The second "new wisdom" is that the US has no choice but to deal with Mr Arafat. After all, it is argued, Mr Arafat is the democratically elected leader of the Palestinian people and the US does not choose other people's leaders for them. Nevertheless, the White House seems uneasy with this position, as intelligence confirming Mr Arafat's deep, personal connection to terrorism, continues to mount. The result is a second-best initiative to reform Mr Arafat's security services and to make the Palestinian Authority more accountable and pluralistic.

This approach is naive and flawed. First, its logic runs against US law, which stipulates that the Palestine Liberation Organisation, with Mr Arafat at its head, is a terrorist group with which the US has relations only by dint of periodic presidential waiver.

Second, granting Mr Arafat virtual immunity runs against precedent. In June 1990, the US cut ties with Mr Arafat when he violated commitments to renounce terrorism. That bold step advanced peace by forcing him to meet Israeli conditions for peacemaking. Hence, the Oslo accords.

Third, and most important, this Arafat-centred approach subverts any chance of real Palestinian reform. As long as Mr Arafat feels inviolable, change will be cosmetic, at best. In the Middle East, only the weak or ill give up power without a fight; Mr Arafat is neither.

Whatever new "unified" structure is created for Palestinian security services, the real problem was not the number of agencies or their overlapping responsibilities but the fact that they were infused with a culture that viewed terrorism as a legitimate tool of policy. Changing that requires changing the leadership that promoted that culture.

The third new idea is that real progress towards peace is contingent on defining the endgame of negotiations. This is summed up in the pithy line that the "peace process" has, for the past decade, provided for too much "process" and too little "peace". If only the parties knew what gains each would enjoy and what compromises were necessary to achieve them, it is argued, progress would be swift.

Yet the real debate today focuses on two "process" issues: the "who" and "when" of negotiations. Mr Bush himself raised the question of participation when, in his landmark April 4 speech, he called on Arab leaders and "responsible Palestinian leaders" to substitute for Mr Arafat's failed leadership. And in terms of timing, the depth of mutual animosity means more time, not less, is needed for lasting compromises to be made. Until these issues are sorted out, attempting to define an endgame for negotiations is both premature and an invitation to further conflict.

More likely to provide a basis for future peace is a policy by which the US extends its hand to the Palestinian people, invests capital and effort in remaking the Palestinian Authority and defines clear benchmarks for Palestinian reform that, if not met, would trigger immediate suspension of ties with the incumbent Palestinian leader. The short cuts advocated by proponents of the latest "conventional wisdom" would lead only to a diplomatic dead end. ❖

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