

The Bush Speech vs. the Powell Mission: Assessing Washington's Twin and Competing Middle East Policies

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Brief Analysis

On April 12, Robert Satloff, executive director of The Washington Institute, addressed the Institute's Special Policy Forum with Dennis Ross. The following is an edited version of Dr. Satloff's remarks. [Read a summary \(templateC05.php?CID=1496\)](#) of Ambassador Ross's remarks.

The best way to view the current situation is by recognizing that there are actually six wars going on simultaneously: 1) the Israeli-Palestinian war; 2) the war against terror; 3) the war against Saddam Husayn and the axis of evil; 4) the war within the Arab world between rulers and ruled; 5) the war among Israelis to determine Israel's future and a long-term strategy; and 6) the war for the heart and soul of the Bush administration's Middle East policy. These wars overlap, intersect, and converge, but they are not the same. One affects the other, usually in negative ways.

Washington's Twin Policies

There are currently four distinct trends fighting for the soul of U.S. policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict:

- On one end of the spectrum, there is the "imposition" trend that says the United States needs to get in, get tough, and just impose a peace. This is manifested in different ways, from Zbigniew Brzezinski's op-ed column to Thomas Friedman's call for the dispatch of U.S. or NATO troops to the administration's newfound reliance on the UN Security Council as a helpful player. This is a worrisome trend, yet it is picking up speed.
- On the other end of the spectrum, there is the neoconservative trend of supporting Israel as it fights its war of self-defense, with advocates like William Bennett and William Kristol. In the administration, it is reflected in statements by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld highlighting Iraq, Iran, and Syria as the real threats to regional stability. There is great sympathy for this in the White House, but not what can be called "operational sympathy."

In the middle, two antithetical, irreconcilable strategies exist side-by-side and constitute the basic contradiction in the president's speech and the Powell mission. One is a post-Arafat strategy, the other is Arafat-centric.

The basic idea of the president's April 4 speech is revolutionary: to turn the clock back at least one generation, when the conflict was not the post-1967 intercommunal conflict between Israelis and Palestinians but the pre-1967 conflict between Israel and the Arab states. The idea is to make Yasir Arafat truly irrelevant by having Arab states

and, if possible, alternative Palestinians provide the constructive leadership that Arafat does not offer. The implication would be to transform Arafat into a latter-day version of the Mufti of Jerusalem, who ignominiously led the Palestinians in the 1930s and 1940s, only to die in oblivion in the 1970s, with a new leadership having taken his place. This approach explains why President George W. Bush called on Arab states and the Palestinian people, but not Arafat, to show real leadership.

In theory, this is a great idea, but as implemented, it will fail because the administration has done very little to make it likely to succeed. Instead, its operational policy has been to let the Arab leaders say to Secretary of State Colin Powell, "Go talk to Arafat, get Israel to withdraw, and then we'll see." By then, Arafat will be back in the game and the strategy will be in tatters. Regrettably, this Arafat-centric alternative seems to reside in the State Department. This is not because they have malicious motives but because many in the State Department have an exaggerated appreciation for the fears expressed by some Arab leaders and an exaggerated belief in the potential for old formulas to work after they have failed many times before.

Two Strategies, Side by Side

To illustrate these two approaches, take a close look at President Bush's April 4 speech and the Madrid "Quartet" statement read by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan on April 10 on behalf of the United States, the European Union, Russia, and the UN. Both supposedly reflect U.S. policy:

- Why the fighting? The president gave a clear rationale for Israeli military action: to fight terrorism, a principle that he endorsed. The Quartet statement called recent fighting "senseless."
- Arafat as leader? In his speech, the president referred to Arafat once, in the context of his failed leadership. Since then, he has not referred to him by name at all. In contrast, the Quartet included three specific references to Arafat, including an affirmation of his personal leadership based on him being the "recognized elected leader of the Palestinian people." This turns U.S. policy on its head. After all, the only reason the United States has a relationship with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) -- and Arafat -- is because he was deemed in 1993 to have met U.S. conditions for dialogue by renouncing terror. The United States has no relationship with Arafat based on the 1996 Palestinian elections.
- What do we ask of the parties? According to the president, the Powell mission was to achieve "an immediate and meaningful ceasefire; an end to terror, violence, and incitement; withdrawal of Israeli troops; implementation of already agreed upon Tenet and Mitchell plans, which will lead to a political settlement." Presumably, this sequence had a logic. However, that same sequence is reordered in the Quartet statement, which calls for a halt to Israel's operations (something the president never asked for) instead of a ceasefire as the first order of business. Also, the Quartet reverts to the old formula of asking the Palestinians for "maximum effort" to stop terrorism, by implication substituting "effort" for the president's focus on "results."

Then comes the most logically tortured passage in the Quartet statement. In successive sentences it calls for the Tenet and Mitchell plans to be "fully implemented" and then calls for "immediate parallel and accelerated movement toward near-term and tangible political progress." Anyone who has ever read Tenet and Mitchell know that the two sentences are antithetical to each other, that the Quartet was playing a game of diplomatic sleight of hand. Indeed, the whole purpose of Tenet (a security plan that includes processes of verification and monitoring) and Mitchell (a confidence-building plan leading to political negotiations) is that they require time to prove the bona fides of the parties and rebuild trust in the possibility of negotiations. It is a logical impossibility to implement these as the Quartet requested. Indeed, it was bad enough that, while in Cairo on Tuesday, Secretary Powell called for "instantaneous" movement from Tenet to Mitchell to peace talks; it is worse that on Wednesday any sense of sequence disappeared completely.

It would have been less outrageous if the Quartet had been honest and tried to make the case that the situation in which Tenet and Mitchell were negotiated no longer exists -- that the depth of terrorism and the extent of Israeli military reaction has changed the on-the-ground situation, calling for new formulas. But instead of being open and straightforward, the Quartet opted to rewrite agreements previously negotiated with Israelis and Palestinians. And in the process, they reordered what the president said just six days earlier.

The Role of Arab States

Sadly, in this area the Quartet was the most dismissive of the president's approach. In his speech, the president called on the Arab world to deliver a blow to terrorists, stop incitement, act against the al-Aqsa Brigades, Hizballah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad, and step forward to show the world that Arab states are truly on the side of peace. Regrettably, in the Quartet statement, the only task of Arab states is to "preserve, strengthen, and assist the Palestinian Authority, including its . . . security capacity" -- i.e., precisely those intelligence and security organs that have proven themselves to be part of the problem in the region, not part of the solution.

It is impossible to reconcile the president's speech and the Quartet statement endorsed by the secretary of state. They reflect two different approaches to the current situation and its resolution. And those who argue that the president himself has shifted gears toward the alternative approach should read the full transcript of his spokesman's press briefing on April 11. On virtually every point, he reaffirms the original language and intent of the president's April 4 speech, not the Quartet statement.

These two statements exemplify the battle for the soul of the administration's Middle East policy. While all focus is on Secretary Powell, the real test will be faced by the president when the secretary returns with either minimal achievements or none at all. Then the president will face a choice: get tough on Arab leaders for failing to rise to the test of leadership; finally get tough with Arafat and break off ties, seeking a complementary political package from Israel to show the positive face of severing relations with Arafat; or get tough on the Israelis for failing to provide the Arabs with incentive to trigger this new approach. Of course, the president may choose elements of all three options. His choice, one must recall, will affect every other war now underway: against terrorism, against the axis of evil, within the Arab world, and within Israel itself.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute.

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