

Arafat's Final Chance?

President Bush's Speech: Textual Analysis

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Brief Analysis

In his Rose Garden speech yesterday, President George W. Bush jumped head-first into the waters of Middle East diplomacy by committing the prestige of his administration to the achievement of an Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire and, ultimately, to "ending the conflict and beginning an era of peace."

Analytically, the most important innovation in the president's speech was his clear differentiation between the Palestinian people and the flawed, failed leadership of Yasir Arafat; absent was any hint of the recent days' mantra that Arafat remains indispensable to peacemaking. At the same time, however, the administration stopped short of breaking new ground operationally, relying instead on the prestige of the presidency, the persuasive powers of the secretary of state, and the implied threat to turn to other, as-yet-unnamed "responsible Palestinian leaders" to take the reins of power in the event this last-chance diplomacy fails to stem the terrorism and violence of recent days. Along the way, the president's decision to mesh political objectives with the goal of a ceasefire risked both an erosion of U.S. credibility in Mideast diplomacy and even more terrorism by giving Palestinians reason to believe that violence does succeed in chipping away at U.S. conditions for high-level political engagement.

Key Elements

The following key analytical assumptions and judgments emerge from an assessment of the Bush speech:

Looking beyond Arafat: As Israel has isolated Arafat in his Ramallah redoubt in recent days, the administration's sympathy for Israel's plight has been complemented by a consistent chorus of support for Arafat as the elected leader of the Palestinians. Through him, said the president in the Oval Office recently, runs the "path to peace," despite whatever deficiencies Arafat may have as a leader. Yesterday, however, the president presented a different picture. Indeed, the most important sentence in the speech was the one not uttered—i.e., no reference to Arafat as continuing to play a central role in Arab-Israeli diplomacy. Instead, the president described Arafat as responsible for the plight in which he finds himself, a leader who "betrayed the hopes of the people he is supposed to lead." Perhaps most important, on nine different occasions, he called on either the Palestinian people, the Palestinian Authority (PA), or "responsible Palestinian leaders" to pursue peace in a way that Arafat has not.

Setting up the dichotomy between the failed leader and the people who deserve better signals a sea change in

Washington's approach to the Palestinian problem. Through that prism, the president made a strong case for a new opportunity to transform the current crisis into hopeful promise. However, the president stopped short of operationalizing this principle by cutting ties with Arafat or suggesting that now would be the time for Israel to force his departure. While it may be reasonable to infer from the president's characterization of Arafat, his yearning for "responsible Palestinian leaders," and the several days that will elapse before Secretary Colin Powell arrives in the region that Israel, in the interim, has a green light to act against Arafat, that was almost surely not the intent of the speechwriters. But it is virtually impossible to read this speech and not conclude that Secretary Powell's mission to the Middle East is Arafat's last chance to perform or else face diplomatic oblivion. Whether the administration is, in fact, ready to take that step—especially since one of the motivating factors for deeper engagement is to quiet mounting criticisms from the Arab world—remains an open question.

Inconsistency on addressing Israeli military action: While headlines in today's newspapers, such as the New York Times, highlight a call for Israeli withdrawal from West Bank towns recently occupied, one will be hard-pressed to find that request in the president's speech. In fact, the president only asked Israel "to halt incursions into Palestinian-controlled areas and begin the withdrawal from those cities"—i.e., to enter no new towns and to start the process of leaving, without a specified time schedule. Indeed, the only "immediate action" President Bush himself asked Israel to take is "to ease closures and allow peaceful people to go back to work." This approach to Israeli actions, however, has been contradicted by U.S. support for a United Nations Security Council resolution passed yesterday calling on Israel to withdraw from Palestinian cities "without delay." The inconsistency begs the question of whether Secretary Powell's talking points will underscore the president's words or the text of the UN resolution.

Defining the Powell mission: Whatever the president's real intent may be in terms of Israeli withdrawals, it is important to note that the president did not call upon Israel to make any political or diplomatic gesture to which it had not already agreed, e.g., implementation of a ceasefire, the Tenet workplan, the Mitchell confidence-building scheme (including a cessation of settlement activity), and negotiations leading to "secure and recognized boundaries" and an eventual two-state solution. (The reference to "secure and recognized boundaries is important because it differs from the Saudi-inspired Arab League peace proposals, which call for withdrawal to the 1967 lines without reference to whether those lines provide security.) What is significant is the telescoped timeframe suggested by the president's expansive definition of Secretary Powell's mission: "He will work to implement United Nations Resolution 1402, an immediate and meaningful ceasefire, an end of terror and violence and incitement, withdrawal of Israeli troops from Palestinian cities, including Ramallah, [and] implementation of the already agreed-upon Tenet and Mitchell plans, which will lead to a political settlement." Judging from the president's words, Secretary Powell may be spending considerable time in the region. It looks as though he has become the new special envoy, with General Anthony Zinni perhaps playing the role of on-the-ground monitor of agreements once they are reached.

A role for the regionals: In a speech laced with straight talk, some of the straightest was aimed at America's regional friends and adversaries. While praising the melody, if not the lyrics, of Crown Prince Abdullah's withdrawal-for-normal-relations offer, the president challenged Arab allies to act in ways that would truly transform regional politics: to condemn suicide bombers as "murderers, not martyrs"; to act against antipeace groups like Hamas, Hizballah, and Islamic Jihad; and, most important of all, to help the Palestinian cause by finally helping the Palestinian people in the three ways that could effect real change: "by seeking peace, fighting terror, and promoting development." To the two Middle Eastern members of the "axis of evil," the president gave additional rationales for this designation, citing Iran's arm shipments to the PA and Iraq's guilt "in soliciting murder" by paying subsidies to the families of suicide bombers. Perhaps most important, the president picked up a refrain used frequently by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in recent days, putting Syria on notice for its amiable approach to anti-Israel terrorism: "Syria [must] decide which side of the war against terror it is on."

Conclusion

It is an irony of history that the Bush administration—which came to office appropriately risk-averse about investing in Middle East diplomacy—today finds itself engaged, as a matter of its own volition, at a high level less than fifteen months after inauguration. And, no less important, yesterday's speech is just the opening chapter of an even deeper engagement. That is because the president's speech almost surely constituted a holding pattern, an interim step between alternative futures. A sample set of possible scenarios include the following:

Terrorist attacks even before Secretary Powell arrives in the region, sorely complicating and perhaps even aborting the mission before it starts. (Indeed, the announcement of Secretary Powell's arrival "next week" is especially perplexing; the haste suggests that the administration believed it was urgent to respond to the scenes of rioting and protest in friendly Arab capitals, but the tardiness in arriving on the scene only provides the terrorists with a window in which to act.)

Arafat acceding to the Bush plan in principle but saying and doing far less than even a minimalist version of "fighting terror" would require. Depending on whether the United States accepts this unsatisfactory behavior as satisfactory, this would, in turn, either force Israel to refuse to fulfill its responsibilities under Tenet-Mitchell or compel the United States to certify, once again, that Arafat had failed the test of leadership, thereby triggering the new chapter in U.S.-Palestinian relations hinted at in the president's speech yesterday. The role of Arab states—from the perceived instability in Jordan and elsewhere to the prospects of Arab support in an anti-Iraq strategy to their intervention in providing for an alternative, responsible Palestinian leadership—is likely to be critical.

Each side fulfilling its political and security responsibilities in short order, with the United States acting as midwife to a new negotiating process, after the Palestinian leader's bona fides have been certified through U.S. monitors.

Palestinian refusal to meet security demands prompts further Israeli retaliatory measures, feeding an already worrisome trend in U.S. and international circles to "impose" a peace on the local parties. Repeated support for UN Security Council measures on Israeli-Palestinian violence, even ones supportive of U.S. efforts, are already setting the stage for "internationalization" of the conflict, ranging from calls for the dispatch of U.S. or NATO forces to intervene or for the convening of a Dayton-like conference to impose peace terms.

In each of these scenarios, the Bush administration is more deeply engaged in Arab-Israeli affairs in the future than it is today. Not in every case would the engagement complement the administration's wider regional interests, especially vis-a-vis Iraq. Indeed, if responding to Arab critiques of inactivity was at least partly the reason for the administration's new initiative, it is doubtful that cutting ties with Arafat—the logical next step in the event that Arafat once again fails the test of leadership—is the sort of heightened engagement that proponents of this policy would like to see. That, however, is precisely the path in which the administration is heading. And given the larger equities the United States has in the war on terror, the price it may pay for pursuing that option is almost surely less than the one it would pay for failing to meet this challenge head-on.

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