

Zinni Mission in the Aftermath of Powell's Speech

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Brief Analysis

Secretary Powell's November 19 speech did not introduce any new substantive points into the debate. However, it outlined for the first time the Bush administration's view regarding the situation in the Middle East. It also offered some important symbolic points that could provide Yasir Arafat a means of ending the current impasse. He may indeed consider doing so. The points in the speech that will probably be well received by the Palestinians include the use of the term "occupation." Many Palestinians see occupation as the very essence of the conflict. Combining Powell's mention of occupation with his references to Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, Palestinians may infer that he is calling for a return to the June 1967 borders.

Many today speak of the U.S. obligation to be involved in the Middle East peace process. However, this entails the reciprocal obligation of others to be involved as well—notably, the countries of the Arab world. It is crucial that Arab governments create a climate in which peace is acceptable and terror and violence are not. Their responsibilities lie in both the way they speak to the Palestinians and the way they prepare their own public.

In the aftermath of the Gulf War, when the Madrid Conference convened, radical forces in the region were in disarray and the moderates had a renewed sense of confidence. Similarly, if the United States achieves success in the campaign against Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda, it would have a new credibility with a very positive effect on peacemaking in the Middle East. Of course, the task today is more complex and difficult to evaluate than that of ten years ago, but a fundamental change in the Middle Eastern landscape on a range of issues—for example, a concrete change in Iraq—could have such a positive effect. This would enhance the sense of risk attached to certain actions (as was the case when, in the wake of September 11, Arafat made a deal with Hamas to stop suicide bombings).

What is needed of each side today is already laid out clearly in the Tenet recommendations and the Mitchell Report. The real question is whether each can live up to its obligations; thus, the key issue is accountability. To achieve this,

the United States must be prepared to go public—listing violations on both sides—and it should encourage other countries to apply pressure against violations. There is a mechanism built into the Wye River Memorandum for just such verification and monitoring. This is crucial, for if the Palestinians were to do their part, there would be an incentive for Israelis to do the same. Although Arafat has devastated the peace camp in Israel, the will for peace is still very much alive there.

At the moment, each side wants to appear responsive to Powell's initiative, but moments do not last. If this speech is not followed by intensive mediation, it will not take hold, just as the Mitchell Report failed to take hold. It is therefore imperative that General Anthony Zinni be relentless in pressuring both sides, and that he speak publicly about violations of agreements. Furthermore, Zinni must have, and appear to have, the authority to speak on behalf of the United States.

DAVID MAKOVSKY

While Powell put forward a vision for Middle East peace, its operational aspects were not focused on conflict resolution, but on crisis stabilization. His focus was on the short-term, limited objective of reaching a ceasefire and then returning to negotiations—a vital objective. Since the outbreak of the intifada on September 28, 2000, around 650 Palestinians and about 200 Israelis have been killed. The entire structure of the Palestinian Authority (PA) has eroded, and much of its infrastructure has been lost. Palestinian GNP per capita has been cut in half, and Israel is mired in serious recession, with a severe blow taken by the tourism industry. The current conflict has brought a fundamental loss of hope for a better future on both sides, and has created severe disillusionment with the peace process in general.

The central problem on both sides is one of leadership. On the Palestinian side, the intifada has actually hurt Arafat's popularity severely and has placed heavy internal pressure upon him. According to polls conducted by Dr. Khalil Shikaki, 47 percent of Palestinians expressed support for Arafat after Camp David; today, only 33 percent do so. Support for Islamist factions has risen from 17 percent to 27 percent within one year. Moreover, 83 percent of Palestinians see the PA as corrupt—almost double the number from five years ago. Finally, only 11 percent today have confidence in the peace process, compared to 44 percent in 1996.

We now have a moment of limited opportunity. Some around Arafat view the intifada as a losing strategy, although Dr. Sari Nusseibeh is the only one to go public. A key question is the attitude of the "young guard" in Fatah and the PA apparatus. Dissatisfied with Arafat, this young guard made a tactical alliance with Islamist factions, and this alliance has been at the center of the intifada. The Tel Aviv disco bombing, the Jerusalem pizzeria bombing, and September 11 have made the young guard reconsider this alliance. Arafat must now co-opt the young guard by initiating political and economic reforms while confronting terrorism. The dilemma of confrontation versus co-optation is a false choice—both should be tried. Arafat's tendency, however, has been to do neither.

On the Israeli side, compliance with the Mitchell Plan regarding a settlement freeze could bring Sharon into a clash not only with traditional advocates of settlements, but also with the ultra-orthodox, who have become increasingly hawkish. Israeli Ministry of Interior data, as reported by Ha'aretz, show uneven growth in the settlement population: 2.44 percent growth in the first six months of 2001, as opposed to 8 to 12 percent growth annually in the past decade. Of significant note, the growth—led by the ultra-orthodox—that has occurred this year is primarily in areas that would be annexed into Israel according to the Camp David/Taba agreement.

A second very important point is the change in the Israeli political map. Since the outbreak of the intifada, there has been a very sharp turn to the right by the Israeli electorate. Due to the changes in the electoral laws, the Likud central committee is now perhaps the most important body in determining Israeli prime ministers. In this predominantly right-wing body, the issue of a settlement freeze could have serious effects on Sharon's standing. A further obstacle

is the power of former Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, a very popular figure in the Likud rank and file who has significant influence over about twenty-eight of the sixty-four right-wing Knesset members. Today, the likely alternative to Sharon is this more hawkish coalition on the right, led by Netanyahu.

The Israeli political mood is greatly influenced by the actions of the Palestinian side. This was evident in the 1996 elections after the suicide bombings of February-March of that year, in Barak's 1999 victory after a period of relative calm, and in Sharon's previously unimaginable landslide after the outbreak of the intifada. Peaceful measures taken by the Palestinians would therefore have an important effect on internal Israeli politics in the future.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Natan Sachs.

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