The Powell Speech:

Expectations and Realities

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Brief Analysis

Secretary of State Colin Powell's November 19 Louisville address on the Arab-Israeli peace process was important as much for what it did not say as what it did say. Indeed, the sole innovation in the speech was the appointment of a new "senior advisor"—retired Marine General Anthony Zinni—to "prod and push" the parties into the first stage of the Mitchell Committee's peacemaking sequence, i.e., a ceasefire. The Zinni appointment itself is interesting. Although the choice of a general underscores the importance of addressing security issues before turning to diplomatic disputes, the naming of a veteran of CENTCOM, with its close relationships in the Arab world, raises anxieties in Israel. How he balances these two images is a key element in determining the success of his mission.

Beyond that announcement, the speech was as much psychology as diplomacy, with Secretary Powell keen to send studiously balanced signals of empathy to Israelis and Palestinians on issues of central concern to both. See, for example, the list of four items which Secretary Powell said "must stop," two targeted at each side: Palestinians "must stop" terrorism and incitement; Israelis "must stop" settlements and occupation.

From the outset, it was clear that the speech was not going to be the enunciation of the Powell Plan for Middle East peace. By not offering any policy innovation, the secretary seemed to recognize that the objective circumstances—the failure of the Camp David/Taba talks, the ongoing intifada, the leadership for Israelis and Palestinians—rendered the success of any major initiative highly unlikely. Pursuing such an initiative, from a U.S. political standpoint, would be highly unwise. Secretary Powell even avoided any suggestion of a change in the details of the inherited Tenet/Mitchell sequence (ceasefire, confidence-building measures, fulfillment of past obligations, final status negotiations).

Implementation of the Tenet/Mitchell sequence is a complicated process in itself. While the secretary placed a major focus on the need to "stop settlement activity," this stage—according to Tenet/Mitchell—will be addressed after not only the cessation of violence, which may be subject to factors not solely within Arafat's control, but also after resolution of some issues that are completely under Arafat's control, such as the confiscation of illegal weapons and the end to anti-Israel and anti-Jewish incitement. It is therefore not surprising to find a differentiation between a

"vision" aspect to Secretary Powell's speech and an "operational" one. The former outlines in deliberately general terms the administration's view of peace between the two parties—while refraining from presenting any new initiative—and the latter focuses on the short-term steps toward renewing negotiations, steps that have already been laid out.

Interestingly, in a paragraph devoted to a post-peace U.S. vision of the Middle East, Secretary Powell displayed remarkable hesitation on one key point—democracy. Instead of describing democracy as a long-term objective of the United States, he used the term "politics of participation," which is sure to raise far fewer eyebrows in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the region. Regrettably, no mention was made of the opportunity for democratic development in the Palestinian Authority, steps toward which would include ratification by Arafat of the "basic law" already approved by the Palestinian Legislative Council and the holding, when circumstances permit, of long-planned municipal elections.

What Palestinians Expected and Did Not Get

Expectations in the Palestinian and Arab world were exaggerated prior to the speech, and disappointment was evident. Secretary Powell made no mention of a specific timetable for final status negotiations; no change on the policy toward U.S. or international monitors to verify compliance with the ceasefire (contrary to what the New York Times reported, Powell merely restated longstanding policy that any monitoring mechanism requires the agreement of both Israelis and Palestinians); and no suggestion that the administration was reneging on its public commitment to "seven days of quiet" as the opening stage of the ceasefire.

Secretary Powell has given media interviews to the effect that the seven-days concept was Ariel Sharon's idea, not his, and therefore no further comments by him were necessary. It is instructive, however, to check the record of his June visit to Jerusalem and Ramallah, during which he publicly endorsed the seven-days idea on several occasions. (Sharon had wanted ten days, and Powell convinced him to accede to seven.)

What Israelis Expected and Did Not Get

There were numerous items that Israelis might have expected from a secretarial address on the Middle East peace process but did not hear. The speech included no reference to "U.S.-Israel strategic cooperation" or to the U.S. commitment to maintain Israel's "qualitative edge"—staples of U.S. Mideast diplomacy. Indeed, there was no sense in the secretary's remarks that Israel faces any threat from Arab states or Iran, only that Israel is mired in conflict with the Palestinians. (While the speech discussed Afghanistan and the Arab-Israeli arena, neither Iraq nor Iran were mentioned.) The regional context was absent in terms of peace diplomacy as well, e.g., scant mention of what Arab states and leaders can do to promote an environment of peace, no mention of King Abdullah of Jordan's ideas about Arab security guarantees to Israel.

Secretary Powell repeated numerous statements by predecessors on Arafat's need to fulfill obligations and noted that, if the Palestinian leadership fails in this regard, "they must be held to account"—but he offered no specifics on the thorny issue of compliance. Moreover, he made no specific reference to Hamas, Hizballah, or the Palestinian Islamic Jihad—the three anti-Israel terrorist groups which have been the subject of considerable debate inside the administration post-September 11. To Israelis, two formulations must have sounded odd: references to specific terrorist acts against Israelis failed to include the two most emotive ones (the bombing of the Dolphinarium disco and the Sbarro pizzeria), and the list of heroic peacemakers did not include the obvious Likud personality that would have had resonance with the Sharon government—Menachem Begin.

Net Assessment

The Powell speech was important more for the fact that it was given than for any particular line, paragraph, or idea in it. Its significance is twofold: it gives key Arab countries ammunition to argue that the United States is pursuing

the peace process as it prosecutes the war, and it gives Arafat a diplomatic ladder with which to descend from the dizzying heights of the intifada, should he be looking for such an opportunity.

A new era in Arab-Israeli peacemaking has almost surely not been opened by this speech—that will likely have to await a change in the objective circumstances of the regional situation (i.e., a change in leadership, a stunning defeat for regional radicals like Iraq, etc.). While U.S. diplomacy can play some part in creating a more positive environment for the eventual return to active peacemaking, U.S. victory in the war on terror is a more critical element in achieving that goal.

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