

# Let the Truth-Telling Begin

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In his long-anticipated speech on the Middle East yesterday, Secretary of State Colin Powell reminded both Arabs and Israelis of certain basic realities: that there can be no peace without unequivocal recognition of Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state within secure borders; that Israel is entitled to security, without which peace will not be possible; that continued occupation of Palestinian areas will not provide Israel the peace and security its people justifiably crave; that expanding settlements and making Palestinians feel powerless is a prescription for confrontation, not stability; that statehood for the Palestinians is a necessary and legitimate outcome of peacemaking, provided it is not a haven for terror and for those who would attack Israel; that violence has produced only disaster and pain for Palestinians, and has not ended the occupation but rather has cemented it; that incitement in Palestinian media and schools betrays any interest in peace and must come to an end if Palestinians are to be credible as partners for peacemaking; and, finally, that good-faith negotiations on the core issues of Jerusalem, borders and refugees are the only way ultimately to settle this conflict.

In effect, Powell sought to tell each side that it must cease the kind of behavior that has led to the current imbroglio and that both sides must also recognize that each has needs that have to be addressed. Being a crafter of past speeches on the Arab-Israeli conflict by secretaries of state and presidents, I can attest that nearly everything the secretary said has been said before. Nonetheless, Powell's statement is important.

For the first time, the administration has offered a systematic explanation of its understanding of the reality in the Middle East: what it will take to change it and what it is prepared to do to help bring about such a transformation. This speech provides a point of departure: It gives everyone a reason to step back and to pause. It gives Palestinians and Israelis a new justification for changing their behavior, particularly because neither will want to be blamed for blocking an initiative that might stop a destructive war of attrition producing pain on both sides.

The speech creates a moment. By definition, moments don't last. Whether this one can be used to create a new reality on the ground will depend on the vigor with which the administration is prepared to act. Assistant Secretary of State Bill Burns will be going to the area and will be joined by retired Marine Corps Gen. Anthony Zinni, a new senior adviser to Secretary Powell. If the follow-on steps by the administration are serious, and if Zinni's mission is to work with each side and to hold them accountable to the commitments already made in the Tenet work plan

(which provides an outline for ending the violence) and the Mitchell report recommendations for restoring confidence, we may succeed in defusing the conflict and reestablishing a peace process.

There has been no shortage of commitments made in the past year; there has been an absence of commitments that were actually carried out. There must be a consequence for non-performance, and both sides must know it. Accountability has to become a part of any process between Israelis and Palestinians. Without it, there is little chance of transforming the present war process back to a peace process.

The principles of accountability and responsibility should guide the administration in its efforts in the Middle East. While we need to apply these principles to Israelis and Palestinians alike, our Arab friends must now assume their responsibilities as well.

Last week Saud Faisal, the Saudi foreign minister, expressed his displeasure with the administration's passive approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict. But American officials could legitimately use his words -- it is enough to drive a "sane man mad" -- to describe our reaction to behavior by the Saudis and others that makes peace far more difficult to achieve. No longer can we tolerate public postures on the part of our Arab friends that help create a climate that justifies terror against Israel. No longer can we ignore media that are not free except when it comes to glorifying suicide bombers. No longer can we afford to remain silent when the mainstream Egyptian media spread calumnies such as the allegation that the Mossad was responsible for the Sept. 11 attacks.

Perpetuating mythologies that demonize is hardly a sign of someone committed to peace. It has to stop. If it does not, we have no chance of success in peacemaking efforts, much less in combating terror. For our Arab friends, who are so eager for us to resume a more activist approach to peacemaking, it is time to stop disseminating myths and start telling the truth about what is necessary for peace.

Neither side will get everything it wants. Each will have to compromise. Each has legitimate needs that must be reconciled. And each has a responsibility to prepare its public for peace. Indeed, leveling with the publics -- something that Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority has always resisted -- is essential at this point. No one in the Arab world has to give up the cause of Palestine, but all must be responsible in pursuing it. Helping the Palestinians does not require mindless support of every Palestinian position, particularly in circumstances such as those that occurred last year, when there was clearly an opportunity to end the conflict and Arafat could not seize it.

That opportunity is now gone; violence destroyed it, along with far too many Palestinian and Israeli lives. Now we must reestablish faith in peaceful coexistence before we can go on to focus on solutions to the conflict. Truth-telling is the first critical step in that direction. Truth-telling, so long denied in the Arab world, would beget truth-telling in Israel. Powell's speech may provide more than just a "moment" if it becomes the basis for truth-telling in the Middle East. ❖

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