

U.S. Sees It Can't Avoid the Mideast

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The Bush administration came to office, seeking to stay as far clear of the Mideast peace process as possible. Who could blame them?

President Bill Clinton invested an extraordinary amount of time and energy in a bid for a far-reaching grand deal -- a comprehensive peace treaty between Israel and Palestinians involving the transfer of 97 percent of the West Bank -- that was designed to end many decades of conflict.

Not only did Palestinian Authority chairman Yasser Arafat reject the Clinton plan, but he personally broke his word to Clinton and did not even try to halt the violence that raged in the West Bank and Gaza against Israel during the final months of the Clinton administration. The result was dead Israelis and Palestinians.

Israelis, who had been conditioned since the start of the Oslo process in 1993 to believe that they would have to make painful concessions for peace, now believed land for peace meant land for war. Moderates deserted the peace wagon in droves.

The careful alignment of the political stars went awry. Indeed, there was no political upside for the Bush administration. There would be no way the new president could offer a better deal than Clinton, and Arafat has seemed incapable of taking yes for an answer.

While Sept. 11 changed so much in the world, it has yet to change this cold logic. The Clinton plan is most likely to constitute the contours of a grand deal, yet there is no evidence that Arafat is any more ripe for this today than he was when he spurned it last December.

However, the speech by Secretary of State Colin Powell yesterday suggests that the administration has realized it is a false choice to say a grand deal or nothing. An all or nothing approach as put forward by Oslo has left us with nothing -- except more bloodshed.

To put it simply, what is needed now is crisis stabilization, not conflict resolution. It has been five months since CIA Director George Tenet devised a workplan for Arafat to do what he has promised officials of two U.S. administrations, namely to arrest those dozens of terrorists that he has let out of prison at the start of the violence more than a year ago.

Beyond the debilitating effect of the violence, there is what Powell referred to yesterday as a "culture of hatred." For example, when the Palestinian Authority-sponsored Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Ikrima Sabri, was pressed to condemn terrorism after Sept. 11, he said that the killing of Israelis does not constitute terrorism.

Fighting terrorism is not the only issue that has been ignored. Similarly, an equal amount of time has passed that an international commission, headed by former Sen. George Mitchell, was formulated to rebuild the torn confidence between the sides and relegitimize the whole peacemaking enterprise.

Since both sides accepted the Tenet and Mitchell reports, the hope was that the parties themselves would find a way back to the table. Yet ample time has passed, and the parties have found it impossible to make concessions to each other, each viewing such moves as zero-sum or political arm wrestling.

Given its position with the parties, the United States is uniquely positioned to intercede. Washington is capable of warning the Palestinians that there are consequences if they do not implement the Tenet workplan.

Specifically, the United States should employ a variation of the Bush doctrine enunciated in his speech to Congress, namely, that the United States should isolate regimes that harbor terrorists. Among the confidence building that would occur on the Palestinian side is curbing settlements as called for by the Mitchell report. While not against the letter of Oslo but contrary to its spirit, it should be noted that if Arafat would have accepted the Clinton plan, probably about 100 settlements would not just be frozen, but dismantled. Indeed, when Powell said in his speech yesterday that the occupation must stop, a more truthful declaration would have been that Israel offered to stop it last year.

The issue at hand requires stabilizing the situation. The goal may be a limited objective, but it is by no means not a modest one. Both Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon face serious domestic opposition to these ideas at home, so U.S.-brokered diplomacy will need to be carefully crafted.

Yet, this at least has a better chance of success than pretending a year of bloodletting is immaterial, and insisting that diplomacy pick up where Clinton off. This would have been ludicrous.

There are elements of Clinton's approach that Bush has realized are useful. In his speech yesterday, Powell announced he would dispatch Gen. Anthony Zinni, the former head of the U.S. military command in the Mideast known as Centcomm.

The dispatching of Zinni properly ends this administration's phobia of dispatching an envoy to the Mideast. Powell made clear that the envoy will remain in the region until he achieves his twin objective of a ceasefire and restoring confidence. This suggests a determination that has been lacking in the Bush administration until now.

Apart from exhibiting resolve, the Bush administration's first diplomatic effort in the Mideast will hopefully reverse the sense throughout much of the Oslo process that violence was effectively used by the Palestinians as a tool of negotiations.

All eyes were on the prize of a grand deal and everything else was ignored. Yet, no peace is sustainable on that basis and on public attitudes turned to enmity. The idea that you can employ violence over the course of a year and insist that diplomacy pick up where things were before you started shooting will hopefully be discredited by the limited, but important, scope of the Zinni mission. ❖

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