

# Bush's 'Vision' of a Palestinian State

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**T**he idea of a Palestinian state has always been part of a vision, so long as the right of Israel to exist is respected." With those words, President Bush on Tuesday launched U.S.-Middle East diplomacy into new and uncharted waters.

The idea of Palestinian statehood has not, of course, "always" been part of Washington's vision for Arab-Israeli peace. Indeed, President Reagan specifically rejected statehood in 1982. More generally, the thrust of U.S. diplomacy has been to focus on process rather than preferred outcomes, i.e., how peace should be made rather than what that peace should look like.

Some critics dismiss this focus on process as the Washington equivalent of fiddling while the Middle East burns. But the record of the past three decades has shown it to be among the wisest and most successful elements of U.S. foreign policy in the modern era. Through the peace process, the U.S. resolved the long-standing conundrum of balancing ties with Israel and Arab states, wooed Soviet allies to the U.S. camp, removed the threat of superpower confrontation from the Middle East and permitted the rise of a tacit coalition of moderate powers -- Israel, pro-West Arab states and Turkey -- that was instrumental in winning the Gulf War.

Along the way, the U.S. helped engineer peace treaties between Israel and two of its neighbors (Egypt and Jordan); promoted diplomatic negotiations between Israel and its two other neighbors (Syria and Lebanon) and, perhaps most of all, created the conditions for Israel and the Palestinians to negotiate directly, without international interference, toward the goal of resolving their century-old conflict. All told, not a bad record.

Today, one year into the second Palestinian uprising and one week into what looks like yet another failed attempt at an Israeli-Palestinian cease-fire, the "peace process" does not look very auspicious. Car bombs explode in Jerusalem with frightening regularity; violence is the norm. The two parties are barely speaking with each other, let alone negotiating their differences peacefully.

Even before Sept. 11, there was a powerful attraction to intervene by presenting a U.S. vision of how the conflict should ultimately be resolved. Since then, the perceived need to line up Arab and Muslim coalition partners in the war against terrorism only added another quiver in the arrow of those who argue that the time has come to resolve this pesky local conflict -- by an imposed solution, if necessary -- so that the world can focus without distraction on

larger issues.

Advocates of that policy, however, are wrong. Lending endorsement to Palestinian statehood in the current environment cannot but be interpreted by Palestinians as the first political fruit of the intifada. The desire to continue the armed struggle against Israel will gain new urgency. For Israelis, whose last prime minister gave the Palestinians an offer of statehood that was roundly rejected, U.S. backing to statehood in the absence of ongoing diplomacy will only fuel fears that the anti-Osama bin Laden coalition will be built at their expense. And throughout the Middle East, millions of Arabs will see the U.S. offering a major diplomatic concession to Arab leaders who may condemn the killing of innocent American civilians but countenance the killing of innocent Israeli civilians, and who are unwilling to do much about either.

In the current environment, what Palestinians and Israelis need is more process, not less. The U.S. needs to send a clear message about the necessity of negotiations as the only path to resolve disputes, not pronouncements from afar on how their dispute should end.

"More process " wouldn't require a major new initiative or the dispatch of a high-profile envoy. What is needed is consistent talk from the White House and a willingness to penalize whoever refuses to implement existing commitments to stop violence, fight terrorism and negotiate peacefully.

In the larger sense, the incumbent president should consider the merits of the sequential approach his father adopted a decade ago.

When Saddam Hussein gobbled up a neighboring state and posed a threat to international security unseen since World War II, Bush the elder received numerous messages from Arab and Muslim leaders demanding U.S. intervention in the Israeli-Palestinian arena as the price for support in the campaign against Iraq. He refused to be drawn in prematurely, confident that victory in Desert Storm would deflate the region's radicals, embolden the moderates and create the conditions to invigorate the search for Arab-Israeli peace.

That was the right approach then, and it is still the right approach. ❖

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