

# This Is No Time for Another 'Peace' Process

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Yesterday, facing a mounting death toll among Israelis and Palestinians, Secretary of State Colin Powell endorsed the contours of an international report on the ongoing conflict and issued what he termed a "clarion call" for an "unconditional cessation of violence." The sequence of events he proposed — a complete ceasefire followed by confidence-building measures, a cooling-off period, and then a return to peace talks — makes sense.

Sadly, though, Mr. Powell's well-intentioned, well-presented plan is likely to join a long list of U.S. peace initiatives that didn't work. Despite its many sound elements, Mr. Powell's proposal lacks the strategic recognition that the parties are at war, that neither is ready for a high-profile U.S. diplomatic initiative, and that pursuing one prematurely runs the risk of eroding America's ability to engage successfully when the time is right.

Renewed activism in the Arab–Israeli arena marks an abrupt shift from what has proven, in general, to be four months of good Middle East policy. From its early days, the Bush team has sought to change both the style and substance of President Clinton's diplomatic dash of late 2000. It correctly shelved premature proposals for an Israeli–Palestinian final settlement, called on Yasser Arafat directly to "stop the violence" at the heart of the cycle of attack/counter-attack, cited Hezbollah's cross-border attacks as the root cause of tension across the Lebanon–Israel frontier, and consulted broadly with Israeli, Egyptian, Jordanian and other Arab leaders. Throughout, the administration kept its lines open to senior Palestinian officials but made Oval Office access for Mr. Arafat recompense for, not a precondition of, Palestinian restraint.

Yet there have been some worrisome missteps. On the Palestinian front, Mr. Powell's most significant mistake was criticism of a one-night Israeli incursion into Palestinian territory last month as "excessive and disproportionate." Regrettably, this statement whet the Palestinians' appetite for even more vocal U.S. involvement; thankfully, it was not repeated. Other miscues include the issuance of three successive State Department reports from this administration whitewashing Palestinian Authority culpability for violence. And there was an official meeting, in Washington, with a senior Arafat aide, Faisal Hussein, who only weeks earlier attended radical conferences in Beirut and Tehran, where he called for building a Palestinian state "from the river to the sea" — i.e. the extermination of Israel.

Elsewhere, the State Department has exhibited a curious fondness for Hezbollah's patron, Syria. In February, Syrian President Bashar Assad won fawning praise from Mr. Powell for promises to implement "smart sanctions" on Iraq

that, as now appears clear, Syria has no intention to keep. But when the Damascus-based Palestinian terrorist leader Ahmed Jibril admitted two weeks ago to dispatching boatloads of weapons, missiles and explosives to the Gaza coast, there was nary a word of U.S. criticism of his Syrian host.

Now a series of events, including Israel's retaliatory attack on a Syrian radar station in Lebanon and the use of American-built F-16 aircraft against Palestinian targets, have prompted numerous calls on President Bush to intervene directly in the Mideast conflict. If only Washington would "do something," many opine, then bloodshed will be averted.

To some, "doing something" means appointing a special Middle East envoy, just weeks after abolishing this Clinton-era post. To others, it means adopting all of the Mitchell Committee report, which includes among its generally wise prescriptions the poison-pill idea of a freeze of Israeli settlement activity, ensuring a head-on collision with Israel's 10-week old government. And to others, "doing something" means issuing a full-blown American peace plan.

Wisely, Mr. Powell appears to have rejected all these ideas. Yesterday he elevated a local diplomat to "special assistant" rather than appoint a special envoy. He fudged on the Mitchell Committee's most controversial recommendation, leaving considerable doubt as to U.S. policy on a "settlement freeze." And he specifically did not offer a plan to end the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. In sum, Mr. Powell got the tactics right.

Regrettably, though, he got the strategy wrong. Israelis and Palestinians are at war. The reason: Seven years of intensive diplomacy did not produce the Palestinians' oft-stated and long-desired outcome — full Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 borders. Israel certainly came close, offering 96% of the West Bank, all of Gaza, and large swaths of Jerusalem. Israel even went far to accommodate the Palestinian "right of return," which absurdly demands the unfettered entry of Palestinian refugees to two states, current Israel and future Palestine. At a time when the new Israeli government, elected with 62% of the vote, can barely offer the Palestinians half the land Mr. Arafat rejected six months ago, diplomacy cannot provide the needed incentive to stop the violence.

Although the visuals of the Middle East are horrifying and the telephone calls from anxious European allies and Arab leaders are mounting up, the sad reality — brought home through my own trip to Jerusalem two weeks ago — is that the parties have too much fight left in them for diplomacy to work. Eventually, either one will win, one will tire, or one will make a terrible mistake. Then, when violence stops, other mediators exhaust themselves, and our friends seek our help, the U.S. should be ready to re-engage in an active and prominent way.

America has three principal interests in the Arab–Israeli arena: supporting Israel's security needs, promoting stability in friendly Arab states, and preventing a descent to regional war. For now the best it can do is try to prevent the conflict from spreading, especially into domestic upheaval in weak Arab states. This means finding ways to speed additional assistance to vulnerable allies like Jordan, and raising the stakes for countries that pour fuel on the local fire, like Syria.

Most of all, the Bush team needs patience. The peace process, like the stock market, has moved from "irrational exuberance" to its value phase. If President Bush is serious about creating a "new foundation" for Middle East peacemaking, then investing for the long haul is sound strategy.

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