

Assessing Powell's Trip to Israel and the Palestinian Territories

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Brief Analysis

While the main purpose of Secretary of State Colin Powell's first foray into the Middle East was to discuss Iraq, he also visited Israel and the Palestinian Authority and injected a dose of what some would call "evenhandedness" — giving each both something to be pleased about and something to be unnerved about.

Powell did not please Israelis completely as he did not specifically endorse Israel's policy of closures to handle the intifada, and he used Palestinian terminology in calling for a "lifting of the siege." Moreover, he did not assign blame for the ongoing violence, nor did he distinguish between the types of killing. Israel says there is a difference between, on the one hand, selectively targeting Hamas, Hizballah, or Tanzim activists who are responsible for killing innocent civilians and, on the other hand, the actions of a Palestinian bus driver who plowed into a bus stop full of unsuspecting travelers. Israeli officials privately — so far not publicly, in order not to offend Powell — term such an approach of failing to distinguish between these acts as one of moral equivalence. At the same time, the Palestinians could not be happy that Powell accepted Israeli sequencing, in the peace process, whereby he declared a reduction of violence was a precondition for resumption of peace negotiations. This position was at odds with the Clinton administration, and the Barak government for that matter, which pressed talks further despite the ongoing violence. Taken together, these two principles could show the embryonic form of the Bush administration's policy on the peace process: siding with the Palestinians on economic — and perhaps even symbolic — matters, while siding with Israel on the proper context of diplomacy. Some of the main points of the Powell visit include:

Evenhandedness While the intifada is heading into its sixth month, Israel has viewed the Palestinian violence as an illegitimate effort orchestrated by the Palestinian Authority (PA) to use force as a means to alter negotiating terms for final status negotiations. In recent weeks, Israel has reportedly brought substantial evidence to the CIA and other branches of the U.S. government to back up its contention that the PA stands behind the killings. On the other hand, the PA has publicly claimed that the intifada is a popular uprising that expresses frustration with Israeli occupation. The two sides differ both on motives and source of the violence, and even on whether the killings of the two sides are comparable.

Powell apparently decided to avoid all these issues of contention. During his Middle East trip, Powell consistently bemoaned the ongoing violence, but never went beyond his call for both sides to avoid an "escalation of violence."

The Palestinians view this as a victory, which they hope represents a departure from the policies of the Clinton administration, which they have called "one sided."

Furthermore, Powell made clear that he was not happy with Israel's closure policy of the territories, and in honor of Powell's arrival, Israel lifted some check-posts that divided the Gaza Strip. (The check-posts were imposed last week after mortar shells were fired at a Jewish settlement in Gaza.) At his joint press conference with Chairman Yasir Arafat, Powell said, "I also want to express my deep concern for the dire economic situation that everyday Palestinians must bear...We discussed how it is necessary to lift the siege as soon as possible so that economic activity can begin again in the region." Israel has imported 30,000 foreign workers over the last few months to make up for the shortage of Palestinian workers.

Lowering Violence as a Precondition for Negotiations Yet, Powell did not just side with Palestinians. Speaking to reporters on the plane to Kuwait on Monday, Powell made clear in blunt remarks that he accepts Israeli prime minister-elect Ariel Sharon's condition that peace talks must be preceded by Palestinian efforts to quell intifada violence. Powell said peacemaking "does begin with a lowering of the violence. We are at the beginning of a long hallway . . . and at the end is the negotiations for peace." He added, "it's going to be some time before they can get back to the negotiations, it seems to me." Powell said a reduction in violence is "really the sine qua non to moving forward." During his visit, Powell repeatedly called for a restarting of security cooperation between Israel and the Palestinians.

In contrast, the Palestinians have actively opposed any conditionality between halting violence and resuming peace talks. The Palestinians have also insisted that talks must resume where they left off with the Clinton administration, as Arafat himself said in a joint press conference with Powell in Ramallah. However, Powell indicated in an interview with CNN that the Clinton ideas left with Clinton.

Informed sources report that Powell privately told Israeli officials that while Clinton's proposals cannot be the starting point for negotiations, it is also true that the two sides cannot go back to "zero." He also said that the ideas for moving the negotiations forward need to come from the region, not the United States. Yet, it remains unclear if this will be a viable model, given that Sharon and Arafat have differing visions of the peace process.

Powell Not Seeking to Release PA Funds While there is no doubt that Powell favors an easing of economic conditions in the Palestinian territories, at the same time, Powell told reporters that he did not ask Sharon to release an estimated \$57 million in Palestinian tax revenues since Sharon has made clear that he does not want to release the sum so long as there is a "rising spiral of violence." (Sharon announced that money will only be released if Arafat unequivocally makes a public statement calling for the end of violence, the Palestinians halt incitement, and there is a renewal of security cooperation between the two sides.) While some commentators have focused on the taxes Israel needs to transfer to the PA, it should also be noted that the revenue involved in this transfer is largely a function of the number of Palestinian workers in Israel, and this number has dropped dramatically during the intifada.

Powell's Assessments of Sharon and Arafat In assessing Sharon, Powell suggested he was pleasantly surprised. He declared, "I found [Sharon] very reflective, very thoughtful, very engaged on the issues." He added, "the prime minister-elect understands . . . that he has taken upon his shoulders great responsibility, not only for the people of Israel but the people of the region." When asked if he thought Arafat was as "open-minded," Powell declared, "Arafat held to positions he has held to all along. The conversation was brisk on a number of occasions. We had a good discussion."

Americans Care about the Mideast The fact that Powell's first trip abroad was to the Middle East reflects deeper American public concern with the Middle East. While Powell's comments during his Senate confirmation hearings suggest that the Bush administration may not want to prioritize the Middle East peace process, a poll taken by Gallup

earlier this month suggests that 83 percent (as opposed to 77 percent last July) of Americans believe that "development of a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian situation" should be an American foreign policy priority. In the same poll, 63 percent of Americans have a favorable view of Israel, which is almost triple the amount of support that Americans have for the Palestinian Authority, 22 percent. Curiously, support for Israel has risen in recent months, despite the West Bank clashes. According to Gallup poll taken earlier this month, Americans sympathies run with Israel rather than the Palestinians by a margin of 51 to 16, which is wider than the 41 to 11 margin from a poll taken in mid-October.

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