

## The Bush “Vision” for Palestine: Realistic or Apocalyptic?

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President George W. Bush unveiled his “vision” for addressing the Palestinian issue on 24 June 2002. As he endorsed an eventual two-state solution in Palestine, Bush

1. called on the Palestinians to stamp out violence against Israelis and
2. pressed for reform of Palestinian institutions and the election of “new” leaders.

Success in these tasks would lead to the freezing of new settlements, withdrawal of some Israeli military units at an undefined future time, and creation of a “provisional” (undefined) Palestinian state on some of the territory—a state that may or may not negotiate a final peace with Israel within three years.

Meanwhile, the president’s rhetoric, or lack thereof, is widely interpreted as giving unconditional U.S. support for Israeli military actions against the Palestinians, either in response to terrorist actions or as preemptive actions to forestall violence.

The most obvious feature of the Bush “vision” is that it requires nothing of the Likud government of Israel. Indeed, some Israeli commentators have suggested that the “vision” is so one-sided that it must have been written by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Foreign Minister Shimon Peres is reported by the Israeli press as having listened to the speech in disbelief and despair. This view is shared by the United States’ European and Arab friends and

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allies, whose advice and interests, after extensive consultations, the president simply ignored.

Not surprisingly, Sharon and Pat Robertson of the Christian Right, along with the pro-Israeli lobby in and out of Congress, have warmly supported the Bush speech. It is worth noting, however, that the “vision” falls far short of the mark “of turning the cycle of violence into a stable peace” in the context of a balanced road map for peace as advocated by some prominent, knowledgeable Jewish Americans.<sup>1</sup>

Palestinian public reaction has ranged from rage to statesmanlike attempts by the Palestine Liberation Organization leadership to put the best face on the speech as a useful “first step.” Yassir Arafat himself has tried to sidestep the issue of his removal at the top of the Palestinian Authority; he has not endorsed the concept of “new leadership” but has shuffled some ministerial portfolios. European Union governments have muted public criticism, while noting much remains to be done to turn this vision into a workable peace plan. Friendly Arab governments generally have followed the EU position in public, while stating clearly that it is up to the Palestinians to choose their own leaders. And while important voices in Washington increasingly echo Sharon’s view that Arafat personally must go, several EU countries, led by the French, have had high-level contacts with Arafat since the president’s speech. This all suggests that a U.S. and Israeli effort to manipulate forthcoming Palestinian elections will not have much, if any, support from friends.

Another factor—and weakness—is the lack of definition of *success* in the preliminary scenario, which would trigger subsequent phases, which would require difficult decisions by the Sharon government and probably result in new elections in Israel. Who—or what body—will declare success or lack thereof? If it is Sharon, there never will be any subsequent phases, just indefinite death and destruction for both parties.

There are broader policy implications to the speech. For the first time, an American president appears publicly to have sought to divorce the search for

1. See, for example, Kenneth Adelman and Stephen J. Solarz, “Wanted: U.S. Leadership,” *Washington Times*, 7 June 2002. The authors are, respectively, the former director of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency and a former congressman and senior member of the House International Relations Committee.

peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors from the other important U.S. interests in the Middle East and, since 11 September, in the broader Muslim world.

Successive American presidents have understood since World War II that the U.S.-led peace process was an important complement to protecting our other interests in very different circumstances. Indeed, this was seen as a necessary balance to and an important element in our commitment to Israeli security.

During the Cold War, we made clear our commitment to meaningful peace processes that required compromises from all the parties as we sought to protect our interests in the Persian Gulf, maintain stability in the area, and limit opportunities for the expansion of Soviet influence.

The United States took the lead to secure passage of Security Council Resolution 242 after the Six Day War in 1967; the land-for-peace formula of 242 became the bedrock of U.S. policy. The strategic shift of Egypt from the Soviet Union to the United States in 1974 under President Richard Nixon was possible only in the context of U.S. leadership in the Arab-Israeli arena and the expectation of Anwar Sadat that we were serious about "land for peace."

President Jimmy Carter's personal engagement in 1978 led to the seismic event of peace between Israel and Egypt, which, after implementation of the treaty with the personal support of President Ronald Reagan in 1982, became the basis of American peace and strategic policies in the entire area.

The Reagan administration in its first year and a half tried to ignore the Palestinian problem and delink it from our other important issues in the southwestern Asia region. One important result of this neglect was the chaos of the Sharon-led Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, which was a failed and tragic effort to destroy Palestinian nationalism by military force. President Reagan unveiled his Reagan Plan for peace in September 1982. This was an effort to try to revive the peace process and to facilitate the management of our multiple interests in the area. (This plan, based on the Jordanian option, was initially accepted by Arafat—most reluctantly—and King Hussein, rejected by Menachem Begin and his Likud government, and months later finally rejected by the PLO.)

In the context of developing the winning coalition in the Persian Gulf War,

President George H. W. Bush's personal commitment to the search for peace was vital to securing the support on the ground, as well as in political spheres, of Egypt, Syria, and other Arab states. This led to the crucial 1991 Madrid Conference, which helped unlock a productive peace process that lasted a decade.

In the 1990s, U.S. active leadership in the peace process helped to enlarge the circle of peace. Jordan and Israel made peace, and Syria and Israel came very close, with the personal commitment of President Bill Clinton to the effort. That the 2000 Camp David Summit did not succeed does not detract from these U.S. efforts. This involvement served also to strengthen the friendly governments in the Persian Gulf against domestic critics of U.S. troops on the ground, required to enforce our quarantine of Iraq and strengthen their resolve against any perceived threats from Iran.

It should be noted that until the assassination of Yitzak Rabin and the election of Benjamin Netanyahu in 1996, there had been only sporadic Palestinian terrorist attacks against Israelis since the inauguration of the Oslo Process in 1993. It took the combination of Netanyahu and Sharon, with their determination to destroy the Oslo Process and prevent the emergence of an equitable two-state solution, to spawn the spate of suicide bombings against innocent civilians; as a result, with the acquiescence of Arafat and the PLO, this obscene tactic of desperation evolved from the actions of a few fanatics to become the mainstream of Palestinian resistance to continued Israeli military operations and occupation. Sharon's openly and deliberately provocative visit to the Temple Mount in 2000 lit the fuse to the al Aqsa *intifada*, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Since 11 September 2001, it has become clear that in the Arab and broader Muslim world our antiterrorist policies and rhetoric are being judged against our perceived support for Israeli oppression of Palestinians, something the United States has vigorously denied. Now, an American president appears openly to be supporting such Israeli actions. Indeed, he is perceived to be hijacking his own global antiterrorism policy and handing it to Sharon. Meanwhile, the Israeli military occupation—the root cause of the problem—is virtually ignored. This will help fuel anti-Americanism in this vast expanse of the world, make it even more difficult for us to claim our war

is against terrorism and not Islam, and create new, unwelcome pressures against friendly, cooperating governments.

At the very least, it will not be helpful to our efforts for sustained international cooperation against those whom the United States considers terrorists, including Saddam Hussein. A lengthy period of perceived U.S. abandonment of a credible peace process—and the Palestinians—could well threaten the stability of a number of friendly governments. Whether or not these friendly Persian Gulf countries would resort to the "oil weapon" to save themselves—as some observers have warned—remains to be seen, since it is a dangerous two-edged sword. One hopes that neither we nor they will have to face such a situation; but prudent policy makers should not simply take our Arab friends for granted, regardless of how we may ignore their important concerns.

A favorite indoor game in Washington during summer 2002 became trying to understand how any U.S. president could present proposals so disconnected from the objective situation and thus, so obviously, be destined not to succeed in the form presented. The reasons offered include but are not limited to the following:

1. The midterm congressional elections and, perhaps more importantly, the reelection bid of the president's brother, Governor Jeb Bush of Florida, scheduled for November 2002. White House political strategists were reported to believe that a shift of Jewish voters to the Republicans would ensure the continued control of the House of Representatives and the reelection of Governor Bush.
2. The right-wing conservative Christians form a major base of the Republican Party and are strongly pro-Israeli and anti-Palestinian. (Former president Reagan told Ambassador Philip Habib and me in spring 1991 after a White House luncheon meeting on the Middle East that, as he understood it, the conservative Christian support for Israel was based on biblical prophesy: in order for Armageddon to occur, Israel had to exist so that it could be destroyed. Hence, any possible threat to the Jewish state has to be opposed. In this view, the peace process itself is a threat that must be opposed.)

3. Self-styled hard-line neoconservatives in the administration and Congress—many of whom are avidly pro-Israeli—are in favor of unilateral, tough policies, presumably to promote U.S. interests. The Bush “vision” fits in with this policy outlook in general and, of course, particularly delights those who support Sharon. They have little use for feckless Europeans; as for the Arabs, they maintain, with utter cultural contempt, that they understand only the language of force. The argument goes along these lines: we are so strong and they need us so much, these folks have no options except to support U.S. “antiterrorist” policies in Palestine and elsewhere and in general to support our interests as we define them more broadly in the Arab/Muslim world. In their view, this represents a *realistic* approach to the world.

4. In an obvious effort to obscure the facts of the Palestinian issue, important elements of this domestic coalition again demonstrate their ignorance of the area by going far beyond those in the human rights community, who have with justification criticized the authoritarian Arab regimes. They proclaim that democracy in Palestine, pursuant to the “vision,” will be a harbinger of the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and thus usher in a tidal wave of democratic reform in the Arab world, including of course, the oil monarchies of the Persian Gulf. This conveniently ignores the fact that the most likely result of real democracy in these countries without a solution to the Palestinian issue would be the replacement of friendly authoritarian governments with virulently anti-Israeli and anti-American regimes with a strong flavor of militant Islamic influences. Obviously, the United States should continue to press for liberalization where possible in these countries. However, it is to be hoped that President Bush would not wish to be faced with this apocalyptic development in this strategic part of the world.

### **Finally, President Bush Himself**

Untutored in things of the world, and his own position as president tainted as a result of the extraordinary circumstances of his election, President Bush found himself catapulted into a position of uncontested national and international leadership by the events of 11 September. He and his adminis-

tration performed extremely well in working with other interested and concerned countries in destroying the terrorist-supported government in Afghanistan and capturing, killing, and scattering al Qaeda forces. While pursuing the difficult task of the reconstruction of Afghanistan, the United States is simultaneously working with other countries to root out remnants of al Qaeda everywhere. (And the United States concurrently took the lead in defusing a dangerous potential Indian-Pakistani nuclear confrontation.) As a result, the president's domestic polls are at very high levels.

Given all of these factors, and the president's own predilection for jingoistic, simplistic rhetoric, if not solutions, it is not all that surprising that his vision is essentially a replaying of a winning hand: antiterrorism. Of course, the circumstances between Afghanistan and Palestine and al Qaeda and the Palestinian Authority are so different as to ensure his hand will be trumped at many points. He will need some new cards.

Any U.S. proposal to succeed must offer important substance to the Israelis and Palestinians and be supported by a coalition that includes Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia along with the EU, which is an increasingly important political, financial, and trade partner with the area. Any coalition has to be sustained and nurtured by common interests. Since Bush simply brushed off the advice of the Europeans and the Arabs and by extension the entire Arab League, which had endorsed the recently proposed plan of Saudi Prince Abdullah, and ignored the real concerns of our closest Arab friends while allying himself with Israeli extremists, there is no basis for any effective coalition in support of the fulfillment of the Bush vision as originally articulated.

There is one exception to the implausibility and wrong-headedness of the Bush vision: reform of the Palestinian Authority. Regardless of the shortcomings of the overall Bush proposal, reform of the Palestinian Authority and elections will receive wide support, in Palestine and elsewhere. Indeed, this is not original with the United States. Key members of the Palestinian Legislative Council, for example, have been pressing Arafat for several years to implement democratic reforms. These are very smart people who know what they need, and they would welcome sincere U.S. support. Ironically, Bush's pro-Israeli proposals could help ensure success of this reform effort, which is so very much in the interests of the Palestinians.

However, even the area of political reform is likely to be hindered, not helped, by the evolving conditionality of the Palestinian elections proposed by Bush and now scheduled for January 2003. As noted above, important voices in the United States echo Sharon's insistence that Arafat be replaced and prevented from running in the new elections. Meanwhile, our EU and Arab friends appear to be going in another direction.

Looked at strictly on its merits, replacement of Arafat by leaders who would govern according to some acceptable (Western) standards would be very much in the interests of the Palestinians. Should elections be held, however, in all likelihood Arafat will be overwhelmingly reelected as head of the Palestinian Authority. (Our own rhetoric would seem to guarantee that any secular opponents would be open to the charge that they are puppets of the Central Intelligence Agency and Mossad.) International monitors, probably led by former president Carter, would validate the elections. Then what? Efforts to tamper with the results, or reverse them, or even prevent elections or dictate who might be candidates would have the effect of making a mockery of Palestinian democracy and political reform.

Not the least of the problems for the Palestinians in mounting credible elections, as well as in controlling terrorism, is the widespread destruction of Palestinian institutions and security forces and continued Israeli military occupation of the population centers.

Despite the obvious obstacles in the way of even beginning to implement the Bush vision—and with no willing obvious important partners in the area except Israel, which is being asked to do nothing except continue with its current policies—the State Department and Secretary Colin Powell will have to do their best to proceed to fill in the blanks of the president's vision. In this respect, when a senior Israeli embassy officer was asked soon after the president's speech what Israel believes should be the first steps the United States should take, he responded: "Get rid of Arafat and end terrorism." This is hardly the missing road map, but it does indicate the similarity—if more evidence is needed—between the views of the Israeli government and the president's vision.

Recognizing the difficulty of implementation, former ambassador to Israel Martin Indyk, an early, enthusiastic supporter of the Bush proposals, recom-



mended in the *Washington Post* on 29 June 2002 that the territories currently under (nominal) control of the Palestine Authority should be transformed into a United Nations trusteeship with the United States as the administering power. It may come to something like this as we stumble along looking for that elusive but required road map. But the first reaction of the State Department could not be to tell the president that his vision is so flawed that it should be ditched in favor of an entirely new approach.

We can expect a continued flurry of activity by the administration, with State Department officials, including Secretary of State Powell, meeting with members of the EU, the Russian government, the UN, and friendly Arab governments in an effort to get some traction for the president's vision. Despite their frustrations and disappointment, our European and Arab friends will want to work with the United States to try to modify and salvage the Bush initiative. While working with us on security and elections, they will seek to convince us that there must be some immediate linkage to Israeli actions—like a settlements freeze—to put some balance into the effort and enhance its credibility and chances for success. As the elections near, it is probable that efforts will be made to create a constitutional structure that would ensure that, even if reelected president, Arafat would reign rather than rule, with control of the government—and finances—in other hands.

With some such linkage, elections and progress on the security front, the United States, EU, Russia, and UN would be in a position to declare the first phase a "success" and start the serious business of trying to broker a peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Perhaps this could be the purpose of the much-discussed but always postponed international conference.<sup>2</sup>

Would President Bush approve of such a scenario? Some who have studied his modus operandi in Texas as well as in Washington believe he could do so, if he is persuaded (perhaps with the help of British prime minister

2. Meanwhile, influential international voices continue to advocate early U.S. leadership for a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace. The International Crisis Group, under the leadership of former Australian foreign minister Gareth Evans, released on 17 July 2002 in Washington, D.C., "Middle East End Game," a sophisticated, thorough plan for comprehensive peace, including road maps and timelines.

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Tony Blair) that the result of such modifications in the details will be progress toward the general goals enunciated in his vision.

One optimistic skeptic has remarked: "Well, all is not lost. There can always be a second speech, but not before the second week of November." Let's hope so, but in the meantime pray the casualty count on both sides is low.