

The Reluctant Mediator

Today, more than at any time previously, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict requires active mediation. Two years of ceaseless violence have shown that Israelis and Palestinians cannot peacefully manage their conflicting interests. The escalating violence in the Middle East threatens not only regional stability but also other U.S. interests. The conflict fuels protests, demonstrations, and anti-U.S. sentiment throughout the Arab world. The situation also distracts the attention of senior U.S. decisionmakers who would otherwise focus more heavily on key foreign policy priorities—such as the broader war on terrorism and the campaign against Iraq.

The last two-and-a-half years have shown that U.S. involvement is necessary but not sufficient to contain the viciousness of the conflict. When Washington abstains from negotiations, powerful centrifugal forces jeopardize broader U.S. interests and demand immediate attention. U.S. involvement alone, however, is not enough. The failure of Camp David II in July 2000 revealed that, even when fully involved, the United States cannot single-handedly coax the two parties toward peace. Other outside parties, including the Europeans, Saudis, and Egyptians, have leverage that they must bring to bear.

Although the need for outside intervention is apparent, the barriers to finding a solution are rising. Trust between Palestinians and Israelis has eroded. Sixteen percent of Palestinians support Hamas, a fundamentalist organization that supports an extensive network of social services and is dedicated to the destruction of Israel.¹ This support has increased by nearly 50 percent from the pre-Camp David II period. Islamic groups in general receive

Rachel Bronson is an Olin Senior Fellow and director of Middle East Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. The author would like to thank Rachel Abramson for her research assistance on this article.

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a total of 25 percent of the population's support. In May 2002, 52 percent of Palestinians supported suicide bombings, a decrease from 58 percent in December 2001. Three years earlier, 39 percent had strongly opposed these actions.² Israeli support for violent action against Palestinians has jumped as well. After the Passover bombing in March 2002, 71 percent of Israelis supported their government's intense military operation in the West Bank.

The Bush administration seems finally to have recognized that U.S.-led international involvement is necessary. After the administration's initial aversion to intervention, it now "stands ready" to work "intensively" toward resolving the conflict.³ Still missing, however, is the game plan. President George W. Bush's speech on June 24, 2002, did not lay out a course of action for moving from the current situation to the articulated goals of establishing a Palestinian state. The president called for reform of Palestinian institutions without articulating how that could be accomplished. No inducements were proffered to facilitate its outcome.

Similarly, no reference was made to the proposed international summit or to the all-important quartet—a group comprising the European Union (EU), the United Nations (UN), Russia, and the United States.⁴ The administration would be wise to reconsider the role of the quartet and support Secretary of State Colin Powell's efforts to mobilize it because its use is the only way to lock in the international support necessary to resolve the conflict.

More than Just the United States

Recent U.S. administrations have tried to distance themselves at one time or another from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with little success. President George H. W. Bush's secretary of state, James Baker, offered the White House telephone number to both parties in the conflict, chiding, "When you're serious about peace, call us." President Bill Clinton's secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, echoed, "I will come back [to the Middle East] whenever the leaders have made hard decisions, but I am not going to come back here to tread water." The current Bush team entered office determined to avoid involvement.

The current president shunned a mediating role largely because of Clinton's unsuccessful legacy. If Clinton, with his intimate knowledge of the issues, his carefully crafted personal relationships, and his seemingly special interest in the region, could not steer the parties toward resolution, Bush seemed unlikely to achieve any better. The administration tirelessly tried to keep the region's problems off the political radar screen. Once it saw that the level of violence was not only escalating, but also straining Washington's relationships with important Arab and European partners as well as jeopar-

dizing other foreign policy priorities, the administration began searching for real policy options. As every president realizes along the way, the policy of avoidance quickly becomes too costly to maintain. In November 2001, Bush appointed Gen. Anthony Zinni as his special envoy to the Middle East, a position that had been vacant for 10 months.

Although U.S. involvement is necessary for mitigating violence, the United States cannot single-handedly drive the two sides to peace, as Camp David II indicated. The United States has a special relationship with Israel, but Egypt has a special relationship with Yasser Arafat as well as the Arab world. Saudi Arabia, which houses Mecca and Medina, plays a unique leadership role in the Islamic world. The EU is a principal financial backer of the Palestinian Authority, and the UN oversees more than 20,000 workers within the Palestinian territories. The process will only move forward through coordinated and concerted efforts. Each party has leverage in the crisis and must be compelled to exploit it.

Saudi Arabia and Egypt appear willing to play a more active role than in the past.

Appropriately, one of the Bush administration's first moves to manage the conflict was to expand the number of parties involved in resolution efforts. Powell's April trip to the region demonstrated this policy shift. Although the king of Morocco sarcastically asked Powell if he did not think "it would be more important to go to Jerusalem first," the secretary's itinerary was well considered. By stopping to meet with Moroccan, Saudi, Egyptian, European, and UN leaders before reaching the region, Powell began laying the framework for a more comprehensive approach toward resolving the conflict.

Directly involving the Egyptians, the Saudis, and others marks a significant departure from the approach that Clinton adopted toward the end of his tenure. Clinton was convinced that a deal could be ironed out if the Israelis and Palestinians sat down face-to-face, in isolation. At Camp David II, the Saudis, Egyptians, and Jordanians were therefore kept at a distance. Unfortunately, Arafat was incapable of resolving, or unwilling to resolve, the issue of the final status of Palestine without the active involvement of the other nations. Arafat would not make any decisions on Jerusalem without Saudi Arabia; similarly, he needed Egypt's support in selling any deal to the Arab world, especially one that abandoned Palestinian refugees. When Washington placed last-minute, frantic calls to regional leaders, urging them to use their leverage and encourage Arafat to accept the deal that Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak offered, Arab leaders balked. They were unwilling to provide diplomatic cover, in part because Clinton's strategy had so severely limited the negotiating arena that

others were unwilling to help move the process forward. The Bush administration is trying to avoid such mistakes.

The administration now regularly and publicly petitions Saudi Arabia and Egypt for assistance. Given current realities within each state, this multilateral approach is timely. For their own domestic reasons, Saudi Arabia and Egypt appear willing to play a more active role than they have in the past. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is profoundly shaking the foundations of Arab regime stability. The arrival of satellite television and the Internet means that Middle Eastern regimes are no longer able to monopolize information. Al-Jazeera, the Middle East Broadcasting Network, and other stations profoundly affect public discourse. Arab publics now watch hours and hours of violent footage from the West Bank and ask why their own leaders are so impotent. In the past, Arab leaders used the fighting between Israelis and Palestinians to divert attention away from domestic problems; now the fighting exacerbates these problems.

Middle Eastern leaders may finally believe what they have said all these years—that fighting between the Palestinians and Israelis risks the region's stability as well as their own. Thus, for the first time, the Saudis and others have a profound self-interest in reducing the violence. The peace proposal put forth by Saudi crown prince Abdullah underscores this concern. As Israeli minister of defense Benjamin Eliezer said, "There are sparks of light coming from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. The world is starting to realize that this struggle is no longer local."⁵ The Bush administration now faces the challenge of capitalizing on these changes.

Bring on the Quartet

One way to harness these changes is by U.S. exploitation of the leverage the quartet provides, either through an international summit or regular high-level meetings. Before the president's speech, the administration seemed to be crafting an elegant mechanism for bringing outside parties together to exert influence over the peace process cohesively and coherently. An international summit was to convene in the summer or fall of 2002.

Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon first suggested the idea of the international conference during Powell's April trip to the Middle East. Acceding to Sharon's request that Arafat not attend the conference, Powell quickly began lining up international support for a ministerial conference. Shortly thereafter, at Crawford, Texas, Abdullah and Bush discussed a conference "to be convened at the foreign ministers' level, with major Arab states and Israel attending, under the auspices of the United States, Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations."⁶ On May 2, the quartet met in Washington and en-

dorsed the idea of an international conference scheduled for the summer. The following day, the Bush administration officially endorsed the idea, and, within a few days, both the Palestinians and Israelis gave their support.

In his June meeting with Egyptian president Husni Mubarak, Bush continued to advocate the strategy, although on June 10, after meeting with Sharon, Bush argued that conditions were not right for such a meeting. Ten days later, the White House articulated its hope to convene an international conference in September, coinciding with the UN General Assembly meeting. The omission of any reference to the summit in the president's June 24 speech effectively killed its prospects.

The president did, however, have Powell meet in mid-July with senior representatives of the quartet, along with the foreign ministers of Israel, Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia.

The president himself even met with Arab foreign ministers. Even if a summit is improbable, the Department of State should continue to keep the quartet alive because it offers several opportunities. It would help to outflank both the current Palestinian and Israeli leadership. For the Israelis, the quartet meetings would provide a forum into which the Israeli peace camp could introduce ideas for conflict management, a potential that senior Israeli officials acknowledge. Israel's coalition government, stocked with hard-line Sharon supporters, is not terribly sympathetic to constructive solutions for moving forward. Meetings of the quartet provide an extranational forum where moderate Israelis can introduce and develop their ideas.

Equally important for resolving the conflict, the quartet, if well managed, would maintain pressure on Egypt and Saudi Arabia to actively constrain Arafat. European and Arab leaders frequently express frustration with the Palestinian leader. Regular meetings between the quartet and Saudi Arabia and Egypt will inhibit them from avoiding their roles in conflict resolution, as they often do. In addition, U.S. ideas will be better received if they come from an international group, rather than directly from the White House.

The Bush team is slowly marshaling the many components of an international response to reduce conflict in the Middle East. Given the administration's initial reluctance to intervene, its diplomatic maneuvers are striking. The White House Press Office's statements, which often contradict statements from earlier weeks if not days, have been less impressive. Referring to the different positions taken by the White House after meetings with individual Middle Eastern leaders, one administration official stated

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that the policy looked a lot like a decision to “love the one you’re with.”⁷ Unless the administration establishes a clear path along which to lead the rest of the world, however, its efforts will be for naught.

The Need for a Bold U.S. Plan

Unfortunately, Washington’s current ideas are not bold enough to break the cycle of violence. In his June 24 speech, the president called for a complete reform of the Palestinian Authority, demanding legislative and judiciary reform, elections by the end of the year, a new constitution, and an externally supervised restructuring of security institutions. As soon as the Palestinians undertake such changes, discussion of final-status issues such as refugees, Jerusalem, and borders can begin; and the United States will start asking Israel for concessions.

The president’s proposal amounts to a return to the ambiguous days of the Oslo peace process, with a few twists. Similar to the Oslo Accords, which called for a five-year interim period (with final-status issues to be broached in three), Bush stated, “With intensive effort by all, this agreement could be reached within three years from now.”⁸ Like Oslo, final-status issues are again deferred to a future date. If the Palestinians undertake specific reforms, they will receive a “provisional” state, something they already have, although under Oslo the provisional state was called “Territory A.”

The president’s plan deviated from Oslo in two important ways. First, the president’s plan is results, rather than time, based. The three-year duration is less important than a demonstration of “real performance.” The parties need not move to final-status negotiations until the Palestinians have made major reforms. The second difference is a new layer of prerequisites to final-status negotiations. Now, the Palestinian people must force their leadership to embrace democracy, denounce terror, and forego corruption—something for which they have been calling for years, to no avail. Once these changes occur, the Israelis and Palestinians are expected to reinstate final-status negotiations, and Washington will ask Tel Aviv to begin withdrawing troops to positions assumed before the fighting began in 2000—still short of full withdrawal. Israeli soldiers are therefore likely to watch Palestinian political reform efforts from atop their turrets in Ramallah.

The process for resolving the final status of the region remains vague. The president offered no road map for how results were to be achieved. He did not invoke the quartet or mention the international summit. If Oslo failed, what reason exists for believing that the president’s call for action will be successful? The demands are harder to achieve, yet the mechanisms for fulfilling them are more vague. Even if the president gets the election for

which he is calling, Arafat is likely to win, and Hamas candidates may gain increased representation in municipal elections.

Instead of more interim agreements, a two-pronged approach is required. The first is a continued focus on terrorism. The president has defined terrorism as his chief international concern. He should therefore continue to avoid working directly with Arafat until Palestinian attacks on Israeli citizens end. Washington should not pressure Israel to release Palestinian assets or undertake any other such measures until it sees real change on this front. Senior U.S. diplomats should publicly support the many prominent Palestinians who signed a widely circulated petition opposing the use of terror and should actively denounce Israeli harassment of Palestinian moderates such as Sari Nusseibeh. The president's future speeches and policy should focus on the end of terrorism, rather than on democracy and market economics. The demand for institutional reform should be left to the Europeans, who provide significant aid to the Palestinian Authority and who therefore pay the direct monetary cost arising from corruption and authoritarian governance.

If Oslo failed, why would the president's call for action succeed?

Second, the United States should publicly endorse a concept of what the end state would be. Clinton's ideas outlined in his address to the Israel Policy Forum in early January 2001 and the Taba talks later that month are a useful place to start. Along with a demand to end terrorism, Washington should put the understandings reached at Taba in January 2001 back on the table as the official U.S. starting point for dialogue. At Taba, the parties agreed to return to the Palestinians 94–97 percent of the West Bank and Gaza territory captured by the Israelis in 1967 and also agreed on a series of land swaps. The parties made significant progress in resolving how to allocate sovereignty over East Jerusalem and began devising creative solutions to the refugee problem. By omitting any reference to refugees in his original enunciation of the Saudi plan, Crown Prince Abdullah provided cover that allows Arafat to compromise on this issue. When the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is finally resolved, it will be resolved according to Taba parameters. Washington must boldly recognize the inevitability of this outcome and support it consistently, continuously, and publicly.

Putting the agreements reached at Taba back on the table offers many benefits, including:

- Providing a real plan for the United States, one that the international community desperately seeks.
- Recognizing and promoting a point of departure that can gain widespread support on both sides as well as from other international parties.

- Improving Israel's security and international standing. The international community will find it more difficult to criticize Israel's ongoing military raids if viable political alternatives, rather than the current political vacuum, accompany them.
- Improving immediately the popularity of younger Palestinian leaders who advocate a two-state solution, thus dampening the dynamics of Palestinian radicalism.

Endorsing such an end state would challenge the rejectionist leadership on both sides. For Arafat, the growing prestige of a younger generation supportive of a two-state solution would pose a greater threat to his leadership than Hamas and Islamic Jihad do. Arafat's history of veering toward these two groups as their popularity grew suggests that he would reverse his course and lean toward compromise if taking that stance improved his own chances for survival. In Israel, reviving the Taba agreements would make clear that

Sharon's advocacy of long-term interim arrangements and continued demolition of Palestinian homes and land are dead-end initiatives that guarantee only continued conflict and occupation.

Just as the quartet can begin moving the global community to support more moderate policies, a proposal for a two-state solution along Taba lines will bolster the silenced Israelis and Palestinians who continue to support

such a goal, even during these trying times. The international support that such a plan would generate would increase the chances for its successful implementation. Although U.S. leadership is needed, other governments have to keep the pressure on both sides to follow through on their commitments.

At the moment, the U.S. government is far from a Taba-like initiative. One senior official has described such an approach as "a long pass" for which the parties in conflict are simply not ready. Adopting this approach would be difficult for the president to sell domestically. The Republican Party has become increasingly opposed to a negotiated settlement as the right wing has evolved a more uncompromising position on Middle East peace. Karl Rove's admonitions to Republicans—that they should not forget their base—have significant implications for Middle East peace. As important, if not more so, the majority of the U.S. population supports Israel's actions. Polls taken after September 11 show a marked increase in support for the Israelis and a decrease in support for the Palestinians. Arguing for compromise and mod-

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eration, and proposing a plan against which the Israeli prime minister campaigned, would be a costly political step.

Such a plan, however, would likely draw to the Republican Party crossover voters, the lack of which cost George H. W. Bush the 1992 election and rendered George W. Bush's presidential victory so narrow in 2000. It would also provide an example of success for the president's war on terrorism, which should have positive results at the ballot box.

Learning the Ropes

The administration's initial reluctance to mediate the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was predictable. Most administrations travel the same learning curve: they are initially reluctant to intervene; slowly recognize that intervention is necessary; and eventually attempt to manage, if not end, the conflict. The current administration is following a well-trodden path.

Now that the Bush administration has become involved at the highest level, the willingness and ability of the White House to pull together all the various pieces required and to march the Palestinians, Israelis, and the international community toward peace remain to be seen. The administration has learned important lessons from Camp David II, and it is actively broadening the field of participants. Resolution will only occur if other actors also pressure the warring parties.

So far, it seems unlikely, however, that the president's game plan will fuse the pieces into a cohesive and effective whole. The ideas presented on June 24 will not change the dynamics of the conflict. Free and fair elections in Palestine will likely deliver a clear victory for Arafat. Hamas may gain greater local representation.

The Palestinian leadership's decision to continue to use terror, at a time when Bush has declared war on such tactics, has tied the U.S. administration's hands to some extent. The president's declaration, therefore, that the United States "will not support the establishment of a Palestinian state until its leaders engage in a sustained fight against the terrorists and dismantle their infrastructure" is appropriate.⁹ Layering new demands of institution building, democracy, and an end to corruption, while the Israelis continue to occupy Palestinian cities with tanks, however, amounts to raising the bar and lowering the possibility of the Palestinians clearing it. The Bush administration is unlikely to sustain the international support it has been courting for months. The United States is sorely needed, as are Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the quartet. But so is a reasonable plan.

Notes

1. PSR-Survey Research Unit, *Public Opinion Poll #4* (May 15–19, 2002).
2. CPRS Polls-Survey Research Unit, *Public Opinion Poll #44* (October 14–16, 1999).
3. Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, “President Bush Calls for New Palestinian Leadership” (June 24, 2002) (hereinafter Rose Garden speech).
4. A passing reference was made to the European Union.
5. “Misery, Frustration Motivate Palestinian Bombers,” Agence France Presse, June 21, 2002.
6. Patrick E. Tyler, “Mideast Turmoil: The Hurdles and the Goals,” *New York Times*, April 29, 2002, p. A1.
7. Todd S. Purdum, “Mideast Turmoil,” *New York Times*, June 12, 2002, p. A16. An Arab official earlier made this characterization of U.S. policy. See Karen DeYoung, “Bush Alters Tack on Mideast; Peace Plan Depends on Many Players,” *Washington Post*, May 5, 2002, p. A1.
8. Rose Garden speech.
9. *Ibid.*