

Sowing Division or Making Peace?

By Jim Lobe | July 18, 2007

President George W. Bush's major policy address on July 16, promoting a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine, has been greeted with considerable skepticism by Middle East specialists in Washington.

Most analysts said Bush's speech—including his pledge to provide some \$190 million to support Palestine Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas and convene a regional conference to support renewed Israeli-Palestinian peace talks—was too little, too late and included too many conditions to rally strong Palestinian or Arab support.

The speech, which came on the eve of a new trip to the region by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, marked Bush's full embrace of what has been called the "West Bank First" strategy.

It calls for providing full support to Abbas on the occupied West Bank while isolating Abbas' main rivals, former Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh and his Hamas party, which took over the Gaza Strip last month after a series of gun battles with security forces loyal to Abbas' Fatah.

Bush said Washington would provide Abbas and his new government, headed by Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, with nearly \$200 million in mainly economic assistance, including humanitarian aid for Gaza, as well as an additional \$80 million in "non-lethal" aid for his security forces.

He also announced that Washington will convene "an international meeting" chaired by Rice later this fall to promote both internal Palestinian reform and the bilateral peace process that could offer Palestinians a "political horizon" for the achievement of a "viable and contiguous" state of their own.

"So I will call together an international meeting this fall of representatives from nations that support a two-state solution, reject violence, recognize Israel's right to exist, and commit to all previous agreements between [Israelis and Palestinians]," Bush said.

"The conflict in Gaza and the West Bank today is a struggle between extremists and moderates," he said, insisting that Hamas' recent takeover of Gaza "demonstrated beyond all doubt that it is [more] devoted to extremism and murder than to serving the Palestinian people."

He added that Palestinians now face a "moment of choice" between "the vision of Hamas ... [of] chaos, and suffering, and the endless perpetuation of grievance," and the "vision of President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad ... of a peaceful state called Palestine as a homeland for the Palestinian people."

Bush also called, as he did in 2002 when he first endorsed a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine, for Tel Aviv to halt its expansion of Jewish settlements and to remove unauthorized settlement outposts on the West Bank.

"At the same time, Israelis should find other practical ways to reduce their footprint without reducing their security—so they can help President Abbas improve economic and humanitarian conditions," he said.

Bush's remarks, which were the subject of a protracted internal debate within the administration, were criticized by most analysts here for failing to take account of new realities on the ground, particularly in light of Fatah's routing by Hamas in Gaza and indications that Abbas' popular support has eroded significantly since he was first elected president in January 2005.

"It's not only 'too little, too late,' it's actually a little more dangerous than that," said James Zogby, president of the Washington-based Arab American Institute. "When [the Bush administration] could've helped [Abbas] out after he was elected and had strong support, they didn't. And when they could've moved Israel forward, either during [former Prime Minister Ariel] Sharon's time or when [Prime Minister Ehud] Olmert was first elected, they didn't."

"Now they have a situation where Palestinians are deeply divided and Olmert has single-digit support, and here comes the president with less than a couple of hundred million dollars and a gentle suggestion that the Israelis should get rid of their illegal outposts and checkpoints [on the West Bank]—something they committed themselves to do five years ago and didn't follow through."

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“The hallmarks of this administration’s policy have been neglect when they could do something, then letting ideology trump reality when they do do something, and then being ineffective as a result,” Zogby said. “This has all the earmarks of that.”

Shibley Telhami, a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and an expert on Arab public opinion, echoed Zogby’s analysis, noting that the speech itself offered “nothing new” and demonstrated that the administration is “really kind of out of touch” with the situation on the ground.

“The administration seems to think that the strategy here is to empower Abbas and Fatah to be able to defeat Hamas politically or militarily,” Telhami told the Inter Press Service. “I don’t think that can happen, certainly not in the foreseeable future.

“Most Arab governments— including those who want to see Hamas weakened— have reached the conclusion that it’s really difficult to isolate Hamas,” he went on. “They’ve all come around to the view that Hamas has to be brought back in [with Fatah].”

Telhami also took issue with Bush posing a “choice” for Palestinians. “When you put a choice on the table, you say, ‘I’m going to give you a Palestinian state.’ But what is being put on the table is \$190 million and a conference, and, of course, there have been many conferences that have failed.

“If you’re a Hamas supporter, and you’re rejecting [Abbas] because you see him as being weak, and you know that whatever the \$190 million is going to do, it’s not going to trickle down to people who have been under sanctions since Hamas won the [parliamentary] elections [in January 2006], that’s not a real choice for them.”

Daniel Levy, a former Israeli peace negotiator currently based at the Century Foundation and the New America Foundation, was even more dismissive of the speech, which, he said, “may well drive Palestinian politics towards a period of even greater chaos that could create a space for al-Qaida look-alikes to gain a foothold [in the Palestinian territories].”

Bush’s approach, he said, appeared to be based on “deepening” the conflict between Fatah and Hamas rather than trying to bring them together.

“The two-state solution that the president claims to support will need to deliver and have legitimacy on both sides in order to have a chance of being sustainable. That cannot be based on an irreconcilable Palestinian political division,” Levy noted, pointing to recent press leaks by U.S. intelligence officials who oppose the West Bank First strategy on the grounds that Hamas is too strong and has too much popular support to be effectively isolated or marginalized.

Nonetheless, Ziad Asali, president of the American Task Force on Palestine, insisted that Bush’s reiteration of his support for a two-state solution was both “positive and timely,” particularly after last month’s events in Gaza.

“The team of Abu Mazen [Abbas] and Fayyad is one that can’t be rejected by Israel as a partner,” he said. “And we’re seeing from Israel that this team is being taken seriously.

Indeed, David Welch, Rice’s top Middle East adviser, insisted to reporters after the speech that Abbas and Fayyad constituted “the best Palestinian government since the formation of the Palestine Authority in 1994.”

Jim Lobe is the Washington bureau chief of the Inter Press Service and a contributor to Right Web (<http://rightweb.irc-online.org>).

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