William B. Quandt

on the peace process in the Middle East

George W. Bush never set out to be the president who would remake the Middle East. During his campaign for the presidency in 2000, he spoke of pursuing a "humble" foreign policy and expressed doubt about nation building. According to one of his cabinet members, Paul O'Neill, Bush was deeply skeptical that anything could be done to improve prospects for peace in the Middle East: in a January 2001 National Security Council meeting, he reportedly said, "If the two sides [Israel and Palestine] don't want peace, there's no way we can force them."

How, then, did Bush become the first president to explicitly support the creation of a Palestinian state?

Part of the answer, of course, is 9/11. While Bush and his closest advisers strenuously deny that the stalemate between Israelis and Palestinians had anything to do with the Al-Qaeda attack on the United States, or with the broader phenomenon of Islamist radicalism, it is nonetheless noteworthy that after 9/11 the administration began to unfold a policy seemingly designed to give moderate Palestinians some hope of achieving a state of their own in the West Bank and Gaza.

During Bush's first term, however, little was actually done to advance the President's so-called two-state solution – with a new state, Palestine, peacefully coexisting with Israel – because Bush lacked confidence in Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasir Arafat. Indeed, he made it clear that until Arafat was gone, he would not be willing to promote a peace settlement.

Bush and his advisers were not the only ones who thought that Arafat was the primary obstacle to peace. After the failure of President Clinton's intensive attempt to broker an Israeli-Palestinian peace in 2000, apparently Clinton himself told Bush on January 20, 2001, that Arafat was to blame for the negotiations' collapse. Clinton's chief negotiator, Dennis Ross, expressed the same sentiments in *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace*, a voluminous account of the negotiations of the 1990s.

Not all of the American participants in the negotiations shared the Clinton-Ross view. Robert Malley, the Middle East expert on Clinton's National Security Council staff, argued in an August 9,

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2001, *New York Review of Books* article that Arafat alone was not at fault for the failure of the 'peace process.' His boss, Sandy Berger, also assigned blame to a number of different parties, while another writer went so far as to place much of the blame on Ross himself. And one recent publication claimed the divergent negotiating styles and subcultures of Palestinians and Israelis were key reasons for their inability to reach agreement. My own view is that all of the leaders – Clinton, then-Israeli Prime Minister Aharon Barak, and Arafat – contributed to the failure through tactical and strategic choices that – though understandable in a narrow sense – showed more sensitivity to domestic concerns than with the imperatives of statecraft. Nonetheless, the Clinton-Ross view formed the Washington consensus about Arafat, preventing any real progress toward peace during Bush's first term.

Arafat died on November 11, 2004, in somewhat murky circumstances – many Palestinians believe to this day that he was poisoned. His successor, chosen in a relatively free election in January 2005, was Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazin), a moderate and an elder statesman who denounced the use of violence by Palestinians and spoke convincingly of peace with Israel. With his rise to power, many were convinced that Israeli-Palestinian peace was once again a possibility. After all, if Arafat had been the main obstacle, nothing would prevent the revival of the peace process now.

Since Arafat's death, some progress has been made. For example, the level of violence between Israelis and Palestinians in 2005 and early 2006 has dropped significantly. Bush also held a cordial meeting with the new Palestinian president, during which he spoke in strong terms about the importance of a viable Palestinian state, going so far as to imply that such a state should have borders that approximate the 1949 armistice lines, i.e., nearly all of the West Bank and Gaza, a condition totally rejected by Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Despite such intriguing hints of continued diplomatic activity, the basic story by late 2005 involved a new Israeli determination to act unilaterally, not to negotiate. Israel's decision to withdraw from Gaza in August 2005, which some hoped would begin a new round of peacemaking, seemed instead to reflect Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's vision of the future – one that does not involve a negotiated peace with the Palestinians. Rather, his plan was to have Israel establish "facts on the ground" that both sides would eventually come to accept as the new reality. These "facts" include a barrier that Israel is rushing to complete, which will define a de facto line of separation between Israeli-controlled areas and Palestinian population centers. On the Israeli side of the barrier, which will include at least 10 to 15 percent of the West Bank and most of east Jerusalem, settlement activity shows no signs of abating. As for Jerusalem, Sharon said many times that there is nothing to negotiate. His likely successor, Ehud Olmert, reiterated this same point after Sharon's incapacitating stroke early in 2006.

The unilateralist Israeli 'vision' has little in common with the one that Bush purports to uphold, yet Bush has shown no indication of having a strategy for coaxing Israeli leaders into showing more flexibility. In reality, it is the Israelis who have been setting the pace for developments on the ground. For example, according to the Road Map, a Palestinian state with "provisional borders" should have been established by

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the end of 2003, a date now redefined as the end of 2006 or 2008. However, many Palestinians see this as a trap, preferring to negotiate an overall agreement that includes permanent borders.

With diplomatic prospects already cloudy early in 2006, a further complication arose with the surprising Hamas victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections. With about 45 percent support among Palestinian voters, Hamas managed to win 56 percent of the seats in the Legislative Council, enough to form a government on its own should it seek to do so. While the process of putting together a new government may take some time and may end up with a broad coalition, there is no doubt that Hamas will play a major role in setting the agenda for the Palestinian side.

What will this mean for negotiations and peace? At first blush, the prospects seem dim. Hamas does not recognize Israel's right to exist, and both Israel and the United States see Hamas as little more than a terrorist organization. With time, Hamas may moderate its behavior and its views, but there will inevitably be a period of doubt among Israelis and their friends. This probably means that Israeli unilateralism will be reinforced, that negotiations will be discounted, and that the Bush vision of Israel and Palestine living side by side in peace will fade from the scene – an ironic casualty of Bush's insistence on bringing democracy to a Middle East still convulsed with issues of occupation, terror, and identity politics.

This situation is unfortunate for Bush, whose grand design for transforming the Middle East – through regime change in Iraq, the 'global war on terrorism,' his advocacy of democracy as the solution to the region's ills, and his rhetorical support for Israeli-Palestinian peace – is not going well. It is unlikely we will see the hopes raised by Bush's inflated rhetoric about Israeli-Palestinian peace fulfilled. Bush's views on the importance of resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict have evolved in recent years, but the facts on the ground have made it increasingly difficult for both parties to reach a peace agreement.

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