

# US Middle East proposals strengthen Sharon's position in Israel

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US Secretary of State Colin Powell's long-awaited speech November 19 had been heralded as signalling a new approach to securing a negotiated settlement in the Middle East, in order to maintain Arab support for the war against Afghanistan. In the event, his speech at the University of Louisville, Kentucky was carefully crafted to deflect criticism of US support for Israel and appear even-handed in the Israel-Palestine conflict, without materially changing US foreign policy in the region.

Powell said that the Bush administration accepted all the basic principles of the Clinton proposals and would seek to revive Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The goal, he said, was an "end to the conflict and nothing less than that". The solution was two states, Israel and Palestine, with Israel defined as a Jewish state within its 1967 borders. A Palestinian state, however, could only come about as a result of talks between the two sides. And these could resume only after the cease-fire plan negotiated by CIA Director George Tenet last June had been implemented, along with the staged programme for restarting negotiations set out in the report by former US Senator George Mitchell last April.

Thus Powell reaffirmed Washington's commitment to Israeli security, renewed US support for the establishment of a Palestinian state, and set out the order that talks must follow without specifying how a settlement could be achieved.

By seeking to revive negotiations without placing any demands on Israel, however, Powell's proposals serve to strengthen Prime Minister Ariel Sharon *vis a vis* both the Palestinians and the right wing zealots within his own cabinet.

Powell did call for Israel to end its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and spoke of putting together an international financial package to rebuild the Palestinian economy, so as to create a "viable" Palestinian state. But in doing so, he essentially reiterated the need to agree to the short-lived Tenet cease-fire, whose terms had been highly favourable to Israel. Negotiated in the aftermath of the suicide bombing of a discotheque in Tel Aviv that killed 17 Israeli teenagers, Palestinian Authority (PA) Chairman Yasser Arafat, under heavy US pressure, had agreed to:

- \* Arrest prisoners freed from jail at the start of the *intifada* plus further suspected terrorists, including members of Hamas and Islamic Jihad and Fatah guerrillas operating from within PA areas;

- \* Accept a buffer zone around the Israeli settlements that would be "no go" areas for Palestinians;

- \* End the armed confrontation without linking the cease-fire to any of the recommendations in the UN-sponsored Mitchell report, which called for a freeze on Israeli settlements, or, indeed, the implementation of previous agreements by the Israelis.

In return, Israel agreed to lift the closures on the Occupied Territories and undertook not to mount any offensive against Arafat's headquarters or carry out military operations in areas under Palestinian control. Negotiations on the form of a Palestinian entity, including the further withdrawal that Israel had agreed to under the Wye Accords but had not implemented, would not restart until the cease-fire had taken effect for at least six weeks.

In effect, Powell equated the 14-month *intifada* with terrorism. The Palestinian groups Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah have been placed on the US list of proscribed terrorist groups and the ball has been put firmly in Arafat's court.

All the immediate demands were placed on the Palestinians: Arafat has to arrest or re-arrest, prosecute and jail all those Israel says are involved in terrorism and put an end to the *intifada* that had, according to Powell, become "mired in the quicksand of self-defeating violence". He must also end all incitement to violence and anti-Israel propaganda, not just in Palestine but all over the Arab world and make a "100 percent effort" that would be measured not so much by intentions as by results. These were the prerequisites for implementing the Mitchell report, which had merely called for an end to the expansion of Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank and Gaza.

Powell did not, however, accede to Sharon's demand for a seven-day cease-fire before implementing the Mitchell recommendations. But even as he spoke, the Israelis were replacing settlers' mobile homes with concrete buildings on the West Bank.

In the past, whenever the onus has been placed on Arafat to cease all violence, Sharon has seized the opportunity to mount murderous assaults on the Palestinians in order to provoke retaliation and escalate the conflict, while simultaneously expanding the settlements.

Powell told the Israelis that they must, through negotiation, end their occupation of Palestinian territories. But he barely mentioned Israel's brutal suppression of the uprising—almost universally condemned as excessive—in which more than 800 Palestinians and 175 Israelis have been killed, thousands more injured and hundreds of Palestinian homes demolished. He totally ignored Israel's policy of assassinating its opponents.

He made no proposals to end the conflict over Jerusalem that had sparked the *intifada*. Neither did he address the issue of the Palestinian refugees who seek a return to their homes in Israel. These were issues to be addressed in the negotiations over the final status agreement on Palestine. But with his insistence on the Jewish character of the Zionist state, Powell effectively ruled out any right for Palestinian refugees to return to their homes if they are inside Israel's pre-1967 borders.

Insofar as Powell placed demands on Israel—to freeze the

settlements—these would only take effect after the violence had stopped and the six-week “cooling off” period stipulated in the Mitchell Report. But as Israel’s liberal daily paper *Ha’aretz* said, “Who knows how long that will take, and what will happen by then on the ground?” In other words, the Powell plan has given Sharon plenty of time and enables him to shore up his shaky coalition, as it faces the sharpest economic decline in Israel’s history, a mounting budget deficit and fiscal crisis, and strikes that have closed Tel Aviv airport and the universities.

The prospect of restarting the negotiations gives Shimon Peres and the Labour party a fig leaf to cover their unity with the expansionist Sharon. At the same time, Sharon can appease the right wing zealots by claiming that Israel is not being asked to make territorial concessions or evacuate the settlements.

The Zionist lobby had clearly provided the editors if not the scriptwriters. The Bush administration had made every effort to avoid a confrontation with Sharon. Bush had personally intervened to tone down the speech. Powell was forced to withdraw his criticism of Sharon’s insistence on “seven days of calm” as a pre-condition of Israel implementing the Mitchell Report. While Sharon claims that the US had agreed to this, they did not want to get into a fight over it before a cease-fire had been achieved. The speech went through several dozen drafts, with every word weighed in terms of how it would sound to the Arabs and Israelis.

Powell has sent retired General Anthony Zinni to the region. Zinni is the marine commander who led Clinton’s Operation Desert Fox against Iraq on the eve of his impeachment in 1998 and last year sent the USS Cole to Yemen. His instructions are to “push and prod” the Israelis and Palestinians into a cease-fire and he was told not to leave until he had achieved his mission.

Palestinian leaders have given Powell’s speech a cautious welcome, seeking comfort in a few of the formulations. But on the ground, the mood is more sombre: Powell’s equation of the *intifada* with terrorism essentially mirrored the Israeli view. Nabil Amer, a member of Arafat’s cabinet, warned that while the Palestinian leadership was willing to act against organisations that wanted the cease-fire to fail, without diplomatic progress, it would be impossible to implement it.

Even though he rejects its key recommendation—the freezing of all expansion of Jewish settlements—not surprisingly, Sharon broadly welcomed the US plan as it commits him to nothing until Arafat has ended the *intifada*. Sharon is due in Washington next week to talk to President Bush, having postponed an earlier trip two weeks ago to avoid being pressured into making any concessions.

For months now, the Bush administration has been under pressure from its Arab client states in the Middle East—Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Egypt and Jordan—to rein back Israel’s military and economic campaign against the Palestinian uprising, and restart talks aimed at resolving the conflict. These reactionary and unpopular regimes feared that the deep resentment in the Arab masses of US support for Israel’s brutal suppression of the 14-month *intifada*, combined with mounting economic and social misery at home, could unleash a social explosion and topple their rule. In August, Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah wrote to Bush urging that he seek a resolution of the conflict.

After the US terror attacks, Sharon has used the “war against terrorism” as an excuse to intensify his own campaign to eliminate the Palestinians as a political entity, by destroying the Palestinian Authority’s infrastructure and assassinating key officials and opponents of Israel. The army had even plotted to kill Arafat. More than 150 Palestinians have been killed since September 11.

This cut across Bush’s attempt to build a broad coalition against “terrorist supporting” states such as Afghanistan and bring down Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq. The price Bush’s Arab allies demanded for supporting the war against Afghanistan was some move towards the establishment of a Palestinian state. One Saudi minister said that Bush’s lack of effort to pursue peace in the Middle East “makes a sane man go mad”.

It was with this in mind that Bush made his speech at the UN recognising the right of the Palestinians to a viable state of their own—although he refused to go as far as meeting or even acknowledging Arafat.

However, more recently other issues have played a part in Washington’s back-peddalling on the Palestinian issue. The apparent military success of the war in Afghanistan has strengthened the hand of the “hawks” such as Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld and his deputy Paul Wolfowitz against Powell, who was previously more insistent on securing the support of the Arab regimes.

Secondly, much as Washington might like a speedy resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict, it is wary of putting pressure on Sharon lest it destabilise his factious coalition and precipitate a general election. In 1991-92, when the then Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir stood in the way of US strategic interests in the region and opposed a peace deal with the Palestinians, Bush senior could dispense with his services because the Labour Party under Yitzhak Rabin had reinvented itself as the party of peace. Today, Bush junior has no such luxury.

Arafat’s authority within the Palestinian masses is equally circumscribed, making him an unreliable vehicle for reaching any kind of deal. Washington settled on a compromise plan that it hoped would diffuse the situation. According to a State Department official, it “would stabilise the Arab world and call the bluff of Osama bin Laden’s outrageous claims to represent them”.

But since Powell’s November 19 speech, which followed a brief period of relative calm, at least 10 Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank and Gaza. An Israeli booby trap killed five Palestinian boys in Gaza. Israel has assassinated the most senior Hamas militant on its “wanted” list. Its troops have shot at a taxi in the Gaza strip, killing the driver and injuring three passengers, and soldiers fired on demonstrators leaving the funeral of the five boys, killing a teenager. On Sunday night, Palestinian sources said Israel had carried out several attacks using helicopter gun ships in the Gaza Strip. Missiles destroyed a police post north of Gaza City and at Deir el-Balah in central Gaza buildings belonging to Arafat’s Fatah group were also targeted. A third attack was said to have been mounted against Palestinian security positions near the Khan Younis refugee camp in southern Gaza.



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