

# THE OREGONIAN

## Commentary

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### **“Powell faces a different Middle East reality”**

**By Kenneth W. Stein**

Of all the times that the United States has sought to mediate in the Arab-Israeli conflict, Secretary of State Colin Powell's present undertaking is the most difficult.

The odds are stacked enormously high against him. For Powell to accomplish what Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and President Jimmy Carter did a quarter century ago would be worthy of a Nobel prize: respectively obtaining disengagement agreements and then a workable peace treaty that would stand the test of time.

While Powell's chances are reasonably good for pulling off a temporary truce or cease-fire in the 18-month intifadah, his chances are poor for igniting full-fledged negotiations with a sustainable outcome.

The secretary of state arrives in Israel today. It is not for a lack of Bush administration will or courage that Powell has waited until now to enter the negotiating fray personally. Realities in the Palestinian-Israeli theater and the acrid surrounding environment point to little possible long-term progress. Only major changes by Ariel Sharon or Yasser Arafat, and from their respective populations, will end the killing fields.

What the administration has done, for which it has received little credit, is carefully set in place a framework for a negotiated Palestinian-Israeli agreement: There is the Tenet cease-fire proposal, Mitchell Plan (developed with Turkish, Norwegian, and European Union input) to generate some trust on the ground; Bush's own repetitive articulation of the need to create a Palestinian state alongside an Israeli state in security, and Powell's November 2001 speech, which carefully sketched a negotiated settlement's outline.

The United States and Europe have put the ladder in place for the sides to descend if they want to. So far, their reluctance is greater than their willingness. And Washington can not force them to climb off their separate perches.

The Bush administration could not help but notice the herculean but

failed effort by the Clinton administration to reach a negotiated Palestinian-Israeli settlement; it could not help but notice that Bill Clinton himself placed the blame for negotiating intransigence on Arafat's shoulders. Both were warning signs not to jump head-first into the negotiating pool unless there was more than shallow water.

And the Bush administration's pre-existing lack of faith in Arafat's word has only been sharpened since Sept. 11, when the concept of "eradicating terrorism" became a hallmark of the Bush Doctrine. While some will argue that Palestinian opposition and attacks against Israeli actions are the legitimate actions of freedom fighters struggling against occupation, the U.S. administration does not see it that way, nor do a majority of the American people.

Unlike the Egyptian-Israeli negotiation of the 1970s -- when Israel knew it would have to return the Sinai for an agreement and when Egypt knew that a treaty was the price for its land returned -- neither side has clearly decided what it's willing to relinquish. In other words, neither side seems ready yet to make excruciatingly painful concessions about substance.

Arab states and Palestinians refuse, clearly and unambiguously, to give up the goal of allowing Palestinians to move back to Israel proper, to the pre-1967 war Israel. Israelis refuse to give up all or virtually all the land and settlements created in the West Bank and Gaza Strip since then.

Israelis have no doubt that a Palestinian state will be established. Less clear is Palestinian and Arab world willingness to see a Jewish state exist on land that Palestinians consider their own, all the way to the Mediterranean Sea.

Powell's chance for negotiating success is complicated by the unrestrained repugnancy that Sharon and Arafat possess for each other, a mutual leadership disdain unprecedented in the history of the Arab-Israeli relations. No trust between Sharon and Arafat could ever be lost because they never had any to lose; they have been stalking each other for a lifetime.

When Kissinger and Carter negotiated, Arab public opinion was relatively quiet. Now, an unprecedented level of anger is shown for Israel and the United States.

Israeli priorities have changed, too. Israelis are distraught about suicide bombers and are consumed with destroying the roots of Arab terrorism, and 70 percent support Sharon's actions against Palestinian

terrorism.

Layered onto these obstacles are the sensitivities and raw emotions that surround the key negotiating issues: borders, resource use, settlements, Jerusalem, refugees and prerogatives of the Palestinian state.

Success by Powell will require thick skin and enormous endurance. Merely meeting the security needs of both sides will be insufficient. Merely reaching a contractual understanding will be useless without a mechanism of enforcement and a price to pay if any side remains non-compliant. Without a long-term financial aid package to build a Palestinian economy, a cease-fire and Israeli withdrawal from the Palestinian cities will be meaningless.

After Powell leaves, the administration will need a person or process in place that enjoys presidential authority and sustains collaborative European, Russian, Arab and U.S. support.

Any interim agreement must be telescoped or directly linked to a political process that results in the establishment of a contiguous, self-governing Palestinian state. It must assure Israel of unqualified security, even if there remain periodic episodes of violence. Finally, Arab states must clamp down on the verbal venom that flows too frequently from Arab government-controlled media; it only adds oil to this already burning fire.

Stark facts will remain after Powell leaves: The Palestinian quest for self-determination, just like the Jewish state of Israel, cannot be physically destroyed. Israel cannot absorb 3 million Palestinians and still be a majority Jewish state.

A two-state solution is the only viable option. The questions, which only Israelis and Palestinians can answer, are how and when.

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