

ORLANDO SENTINEL

24 June 2002

"Cautious Engagement for a Palestinian State"

By Kenneth W. Stein

An unprecedented sense of urgency is being presented to the Bush administration: Become actively engaged in Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy now. Should the Bush administration provide an immediate hand in mediating Palestinian-Israeli differences? Should it forcibly drag the parties to places where they will not go of their own free will? In an otherwise highly secretive administration, the very public and drawn-out manner in which ideas have floated about "the Bush plan" for Palestinian-Israeli negotiations speaks volumes. The governing priorities are for building consensus before cautious engagement.

Moving at a deliberately controlled pace to establish a Palestinian state is the administration's policy preference. It seeks to pass through stages for the proposed state's maturation; it seeks to avoid impetuous action in which American policy or choices overshadow the requirement for significant Israeli-Palestinian compromises and concessions to one another. Yasser Arafat, George W. Bush, Ariel Sharon and the issues in front of them demand plodding preparation. This is management diplomacy, not the heroic diplomacy of Anwar Sadat, Henry Kissinger, Jimmy Carter and Menachem Begin of the 1970s. The calendar is in use, not the clock.

Since there are no magic formulas to reconcile Israeli security needs with Palestinian national aspirations, since powerful influences in the Bush administration -- Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld -- are wary of any Carter-like or Clintonesque total immersion in Arab-Israeli diplomacy, since there is abundant administration disdain for Arafat's track record, since neither a political structure nor economic framework for a viable Palestinian state is yet in place, since congressional elections loom in November 2002 with implications for 2004, and since natural churning is going on in Palestinian and Israeli communities, patience is preferred rather than risking expenditure of limited political capital.

A two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is essential. An incrementally emerging Palestinian state under some combined European Union-American-Arab League trusteeship can work. First noted as a solution to the Arab-Zionist issue after World War II, the notion of a trusteeship can emerge from the proposed Middle East

negotiating conference slated for later this summer. Co-sponsored by Arab countries, Palestinians, Israelis, the EU and Americans alike, the trusteeship needs a procedure to effect substantive compromises as the state evolves. The questions facing their international community are when and under what conditions can and should a state emerge? When will the billion-plus dollars in annual financial aid be in place to support the state's growth? It is the correct course not to rush Palestinians and Israelis to forced conclusions on extraordinarily sensitive issues of borders, Jerusalem, settlements, refugees and prerogatives for the proposed Palestinian state.

Already, Palestinian and Israeli societies are debating internally about future borders and definition. With a consensus only now emerging for a two-state solution, the United States and a trusteeship group are not yet in a position to offer bridging suggestions on sensitive issues, especially on Israeli settlements and Palestinian refugees.

Meanwhile, Palestinian and Israeli societies are yearning for change. Arafat's leadership is under severe duress; his people give him only a 34 percent approval rating. Perhaps elections in six months will see him chosen as president again, but, in addition, elect a prime minister who will have executive powers similar to the way the English prime minister and monarch divide real and ceremonial powers. Palestinians themselves are clamoring for internal reform, including the creation of a constitution.

Meanwhile, a majority of Israelis are now willing to evacuate the settlements, but doing that will be prolonged and difficult. Israel's construction of fences and trenches around the West Bank is a first step in unilaterally separating the Jewish population from Palestinian Arab masses that incubate suicide bombers. And quietly, Palestinian and Israeli representatives continue to meet on matters of security.

The Bush administration recognizes that until Palestinians and Israelis decide for themselves in a more concrete fashion what they want to concede to the other, no amount of outside coercion, pressure or force will take them, at least today, where they do not want to go.

Managing a trusteeship for a Palestinian state with European and Arab support is preferable to imposing one or seeing the consequences of its early demise.

Memo: At Emory University in Atlanta, Kenneth W. Stein teaches contemporary Middle Eastern history and political science. He wrote this commentary for the Orlando Sentinel.