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"American Mediation of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict: A positive Assessment of the April 2002 Powell Mission"

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Impetuous Assessments Derived from Irreconcilable Objectives

With virtual unanimity, the American, European, and Arab press categorized Secretary of State Powell's recent mediation effort in Arab-Israeli diplomacy as a failure, or too little and too late. A cursory and unscientific survey of reports, analyses, and editorials written on April 18, the day Powell returned to the United States, called it a flop. A *New York Times* correspondent called it "an apparent failure;" *The Times* in London said Powell had "returned empty-handed;" and *El Pais* (Madrid) termed the trip "a complete failure." An editorial in Madrid's *El Mundo* bellowed, "Powell fails, USA loses its credibility." Munich's *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* wrote, "No cease-fire, no withdrawal by the Israelis from the Palestinian autonomous territories, no clear declaration of war by the Palestinians on the terror from their own ranks -- nothing, absolutely nothing was achieved by the Powell visit." Jerusalem's *al-Quds* editorial said his mission "failed to achieve its modest goal;" Egypt's *al-Ahram* summed it up, "Apart from some fainthearted talk of a mysterious international conference, Powell's visit did not produce anything."

On the contrary, these assertions notwithstanding, Powell's trip was anything but a failure. In fact, from an American perspective, it was a moderate success. Powell's mission was aimed at not allowing the Bush Doctrine's implementation to stall because of fall-out, deflection, or tension derived from Palestinian terror and Israeli response. Powell's objectives were modest: add content, contours, and a possible pathway to go from purely security discussions to a negotiated Palestinian-Israeli political outcome; avoid the Palestinian-Israeli conflict from clogging efforts to enter phase II of the "War on Terror," namely remove Saddam Hussein from power. In fact, when compared to all American efforts at Arab-Israel mediation since the aftermath of the June 1967 war, Powell's limited successes were all the more astonishing because of the obstacles which stood in his path.

Negative and summary judgment that castigated Powell's departure from the Middle East, mostly because he departed without a written agreement in hand was based on the wrong-footed assumption that success is only measured in obtaining a visible and tangible outcome. A

lack of sophisticated comprehension existed that a negotiating process does not result in instant satisfaction; it always lacks a finite beginning and end. Perhaps the necessity to report conclusions as demanded by the electronic media forced reporters in the written media to reach the conclusion of premature failure. Results from negotiations are not like having a tooth pulled, oil changed, or ordering a pizza. Instead of leaving the region with a loud pop from his Champaign cork, he left it with an inaudible fizz. And the media called it "undrinkable." Progress in process is measured over time, something media deadlines find inherently abhorrent. Without historical perspective, analysts parachuted into the region with the Powell entourage; they interviewed protagonists, each with separate objectives sought from the Powell mission, and immediately reported that Powell had "failed" to meet their specific and special objectives. Which of the reporters understood that in the Arab-Israeli crisis, each side complains, badgers, and beseeches the umpire or mediator, and when the mediator balances respective desired outcomes, as mediators are supposed to do, the mediator and the other side in the conflict are to blame. It is either this moment in time or the depth in passion that media possess for the conflict and its principles that generate these overwhelming negative assessments. Is it possible that a collective media distaste for Israeli policies over the last several decades and particularly for Israeli Prime Minister Sharon personally contributed to a "guilt" by association in assessing Powell's mission?

Look at historical comparisons. No such clamor for instant results accompanied Secretary Henry Kissinger in his Middle East shuttle diplomacy in the early 1970s nor was it demanded when Middle East adviser Dennis Ross and Secretary of State James Baker took ten months to cobble together the modalities of the Madrid Middle East Peace Conference in 1991.

Who in the written media understood that Powell's objective was to "cool tensions" and catalyze cease-fire negotiations that already were well on their way to completion before he arrived in the Middle East on April 7, 2002? How many reported that Major General Anthony Zinni, Powell's special adviser on the Middle East, had crafted four-fifths of the details of the Intifadah's cease fire, just days before the Passover massacre, itself more than a week before Powell arrived in the Middle East?

There remained the mistaken belief or unrealistic hope that if Washington waved its magic wand, if the oval office was seriously engaged, another miracle would occur in the Holy Land. What did the pundits and analysts expect? Sharon and Arafat would act like Mother Theresa or suddenly discover the political will, courage, and vision they so far have hidden from themselves and others for a life-time? Was

Powell supposed to announce the implantation of the American 82nd or 101st Airborne Divisions that would remove 200,000 Israeli settlers from the West Bank and Gaza Strip? Was he supposed to turn off the almost daily venomous attacks thrust at the Bush Administration by the government-influenced press in Egypt? It took Powell a long two days to convince Arafat to decide to make a simple declaration, for the umpteenth time, that terrorist attacks are not condoned. Was Powell supposed to bring Hamas and Islamic Jihad terrorists home with him and send them on to Cuba along with the Afghan detainees? Did one expect Arafat to finally drop his AK-47 in favor of his olive branch? Did one expect Sharon to forsake seventy percent of the Israeli public who supported his eradication of the terrorist infrastructure?

Anticipated hopes for tangible results were inflated and misguided. Because American engagement at the Secretary of State level or above had been urged by virtually every outside party, once Powell committed himself to the mission, hopes for a major break-through bottled up for months were uncorked like a thoroughly shaken Champaign bottle. It was as if, somehow, Powell was supposed to write some prescription not just to end the violence, but to restore the sense of hope destroyed by the failure of the July 2000 Camp David (Clinton, Arafat, Barak) summit bludgeoned by the eighteen-month-long Palestinian uprising. Violence had become so intense and frequent, the vast majority of European and American observers wanted some immediate commitment by the parties to end communal carnage, end settlements, end terrorism, end the "occupation."

Moreover, reconciling American objectives with those of other interested parties was important but certainly not possible to obtain. If Powell returned from his mission with some of overlapping objectives satisfied, that would be sufficient. But each, the EU countries, Arab capitals, Palestinians, and Israelis wanted their "wish" fully satisfied. With that as a measuring rod, Powell could not succeed. For Powell, the key was to find a way to reduce or end the violence, reignite security discussions, and set in place mechanisms necessary to drive negotiations toward political conclusions. As mediator it would be best for the respective sides do what was necessary in some volunteer fashion, never appearing that the heavy hand of the United States had imprinted itself on the desired outcomes. How could Powell publicly announce a cease-fire, an end to Palestinian violence, and a timetable for Israeli withdrawal and then have any of these aspects not carried out or violated? What would that do for American credibility? And if that did happen, how could Washington return to active mediation with egg on its face and a diplomatic black eye for non-performance by actors, who clearly danced to the music of their own domestic orchestras? Washington could not control either Arafat or Sharon. So the mission was

aimed at reducing Palestinian-Israeli tensions, lessen friction among post September 11 coalition partners about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and thereby permit the Bush Administration to redirect its energies into the next identifiable phase in the war on terrorism: either remove the Iraqi regime or, impose upon Baghdad compliance in monitoring Saddam Hussein's capacity for the production of weapons of mass destruction.

Israelis were interested in security guarantees while the Palestinians needed a definite political outcome. Israelis wanted to use a calendar to calculate implementation of upcoming understandings or agreements; impatient for the lifetime of a national movement, the Palestinians demanded to use a clock. Powell had to reconcile the primarily different outlooks of content and time. Thankfully but unlike Kissinger or Baker in earlier years, Powell did not have an oil sword access to Middle Eastern oil or its price as a strategic concern jabbing at his diplomatic side.

Palestinians wanted Arafat's immediate release from physical encirclement, an immediate Israeli cease-fire and withdrawal from Arab towns, the end of internal and external closures, and end to the indignities imposed by Israeli occupation, implantation of an international observer force in the territories, an end to all settlement activity, a promise of an economic reconstruction package, and ultimately, Israel's withdrawal from all of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and east Jerusalem. Arafat needed a political ladder from which to descend; he need to show to his fragmented constituencies that the eighteen-month Palestinian Intifadah achieved some finite political objective. Not only did the Palestinian leadership fear that the Intifadah would not result in a satisfactory political conclusion, they feared losing Washington's attention, already proven to be aloof if not less than enthusiastic about diving anew into Palestinian-Israeli negotiations. What would be worse for Yasir Arafat than continue to have the White House ignore him? In a three hour meeting with Powell, how much of that time was devoted to Arafat's demands for his personal release as compared to the broader needs of the Palestinian people and the future aspirations of the Palestinian national movement?

Israel sought to establish security for its population terrorized by suicide bombings that haphazardly killed men, women, and children mostly because they were simply Jewish or Israeli. Israel wanted weapons confiscated and incarceration and trial for all those associated with terrorist attacks. It wanted control of the killers of tourism minister Ze'evi, the Palestinian financial adviser who paid for acquisition of arms aboard the Karine-A arms ship seized in early January, and those alleged terrorists using the Church of Nativity as a shield for their complicity in alleged terrorist attacks. As frequently as possible, the Government of Israel sought to reaffirm an identity of interests with the

Bush Administration's war on terrorism.

Arab world objectives were both pan-Arab in scope and, as usual, underpinned by distinctively separate parochial preferences. Broadly speaking from a general Arab view, the Powell trip required six comprehensive accomplishments if it was to be categorized as a successful intervention by most Arab countries: removal of the siege around Arafat's headquarters in Ramallah, a Powell-Arafat meeting, an immediate and unconditional cease-fire and withdrawal from Arab towns, definitive linkage of security discussions to a finite political outcome for the establishment of a Palestinian state, amelioration of the desperate economic conditions of the Palestinians in the territories, and deflection of enough American energy and attention away from Washington's planned focus on destabilizing the Iraqi regime. Individual Arab countries had different national objectives to foster. The Saudis eagerly sought to rebuild their "image" as an American friend precisely when the U.S. military was moving key bases of operation out of Saudi Arabia to other Arabian Gulf states. One could sense that the Saudis were a bit frightened by a two-edged sword: their public image in America was severely tarnished because 15 of the 19 terrorists involved in the September 11, 2001, attacks were Saudi nationals, and there was unfriendly ticking sound that reminded them that Russian oil production, from the Caspian Sea and former Soviet Republics would soon further diminish Saudi influence in international oil politics. The Jordanians, more than any other Arab state, aggressively but quietly worked with the United States to broker an end to the Israeli-Palestinian violence. A cornerstone in Jordan's foreign policy remained evident: to achieve more quiet than heat on any issue pertaining to Palestinians identity, because of reverberations on this issue structurally influenced the political temperature in Jordan. With cross-the-boarder rocket and artillery attacks, the Syrians and the Lebanese militarily warmed up their southern borders with Israel, coincidentally when Powell was due and in the region, all aimed to remind him that they too had territorial issues with Israel that should not be forgotten. Perhaps more so than any other time in recent memory, the role of Cairo as the sole Arab bridge to Palestinian-Israeli relations was eclipsed by Saudi and Jordanian engagement. And President Mubarak was not happy about that emerging reality, nor the fact that he could not produce a more energetic Bush effort to curb the policy options of Israel's Sharon.

EU countries had their own list of fears which generated desired outcomes from the Powell visit. Some were worried that Palestinian-style suicide acts would spill over into Europe; others that an oil embargo and certainly higher oil prices would ensue if the region became destabilized. Many EU countries wanted sanctions, pressure, and a big stick to be applied to the Israelis. (As it turned out, the EU could not agree on what

pressure to apply on Israel as it left its April 15 Luxembourg meeting, deciding it better to support the Powell mission and refrain from issuing sanctions against Israel, a non-action that would still preserve an appearance of EU neutrality should it be called upon to play some mediation role.) Nonetheless, European irritation existed that the "Barcelona Process" dialogue and cooperation between the two shores of the Mediterranean was still being partially held hostage to the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict. How could Powell possibly reconcile these various objectives, leave the Middle East without something physically tangible in hand, and be deemed successful by reporters impatient for a finite result?

Over-coming American Reluctance to be Engaged: Telescoping Security Requirements with a Political Outcome

By any standard of comparison to previous American engagement in mediating the Arab-Israeli conflict, Secretary of State Powell's April 2002 diplomatic mission was the most difficult. Consistent reluctance to become fully engaged again at mediator in the Arab-Israeli conflict stemmed from several factors. There was the natural predisposition of George Bush not to be engaged, at least initially in foreign affairs, let alone engaged in the contentious and violent Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Moreover, the Bush Administration could not help but notice the Herculean but failed effort by its predecessor to reach a negotiated Palestinian-Israeli settlement. The Clinton Administration exited with enormous frustration at Arafat's unwillingness to make compromise on any of the major issues under negotiation. And especially since September 11, the Bush Administration's pre-existing lack of faith in Yasir Arafat's word was only sharpened when the concept of "eradicating terrorism" became a hallmark of the Bush Doctrine. Additionally, within the Administration itself there was division about how much effort should be spent on trying to mediate what appeared to be irreconcilable Palestinian-Israeli differences.

Second, this negotiation was dramatically different from the Egyptian-Israeli negotiations of the 1970s where each side knew what it would be providing the other. Then, Israel knew it would have to return Sinai for an agreement; Egypt knew that a treaty might be the price for the return of its land. Neither Israelis nor Palestinians had yet clearly decided what it was they were willing to relinquish to the other. From the Bush administration's view, neither side seemed ready yet to make excruciatingly painful concessions about substance. Arab states and Palestinians so far refused to clearly and unambiguously give up the right of Palestinians to return to pre-June 1967 War Israel, which would undo the majority Jewish state once and for all. Israelis refused to give up all or virtually all the land and settlements created in the West Bank and Gaza

Strip. And their were asymmetrical strategic realities: Israelis had no doubt that a Palestinian state should be and would be established; less clear was Palestinian and Arab world willingness to state unequivocally that Jewish state should, could, and would exist on land that Palestinians considered their own. At a deeper level, Powell confronted a core reality that substantial numbers in the Arab and Moslem world were still opposed to the legitimacy and acceptance of a western-oriented Jewish state in its midst. That view was shared by many in Europe, such as the high level Belgium foreign ministry official who told me openly in March 2001 at a private lunch, that "Israel was a historical mistake." Unlike Sinai, the issues on the Palestinian-Israeli negotiating table were fiercely contentious: Jerusalem, borders, refugees, borders, and prerogatives of the Palestinian state to-be to be resolved easily.

Third, impairing Powell's chances at a negotiating success was the unrestrained repugnancy which Sharon and Arafat possessed for each other. It was a level of leadership disdain unprecedented in the history of the Arab-Israeli relations. Neither Begin and Sadat nor Ben-Gurion and Nasser respectively despised each other with such intensity. No trust between Sharon and Arafat could ever be lost, because they never had any between them to lose. And Powell was expected to have these grizzled septuagenarians who hated each other for a life-time, to suddenly accept a cease-fire? Furthermore, never before in the history of American mediation, had the President of the United States publicly chastised one potential negotiator, namely Arafat in the manner which President Bush verbally held the Palestinian Authority leader responsible for the suicide attacks against Israelis.

Fourth, when Kissinger and Carter negotiated in the 1970s, Arab public opinion was relatively quiet vis-a-vis American mediation, in part because each side knew what was ultimately expected of the other. Both Israelis and Egyptians understood and accepted the concept of land for peace. Both understood that only Washington could deliver a satisfactory agreement. And in the 1970s, the EU barely raised a voice in Arab-Israeli negotiations, their focus was on eastern Europe and the Cold War. Thirty years later, the EU wanted to be a player, but was frustrated by its own internal divisions.

Fifth, Powell needed to complete his mission with a minimal amount of expected domestic fallout particularly from Bush's core supporters. Why fall into the quagmire of Middle East negotiations and damage high public approval ratings? Yet, the Administration took the risk, that any public disapproval of meeting with Arafat would only be a temporary setback. Making no compromises with terrorists was the mantra of the Bush Doctrine. He used the word thirty four times in his 2002 State of the Union address. Arafat's complicity in the Karine-A arms smuggling ship

was undisputed; his association with the suicide bombers was indisputable. The President's repeated demand that Arafat do more to stem suicide attacks against Israelis resonated in the minds of the American people. But when Powell undertook the task of negotiator-mediator, by definition that meant that he would contradict the philosophical boundaries set by President Bush in his definition of the war on terrorism and be forced to meet with Arafat. While a month previously Vice-President Cheney did not meet with Arafat, Powell's meeting with him was seen as a flip flop, an inconsistency, or as the *Economist* (April 20-26) called it "smudging moral clarity." The meeting with Arafat was necessary to meet basic Arab objectives and foster again negotiations. When Kissinger, Carter, and Baker negotiated previously, there was no need, and in fact distinct restrictions against negotiating with Arafat and the PLO.

Tirelessly, in late December 2000 and early January 2001, President Clinton tried to reach a Palestinian-Israeli agreement. On December 23, 2000, Clinton presented negotiators from both sides with his personal outline of a peace agreement; on January 7, 2001, he articulated those points in a speech in New York City. Though Clinton's "parameters" were deliberately vague, they were a major milestone in the U.S.-sponsored peace process. For the first time, a U.S. president went way beyond the general frameworks of UN Resolutions 242 and 338. Clinton proposed a Palestinian state alongside Israel, land swaps, refugee resettlement in the Palestinian state, security guarantees for Israel, the inconsistency of building Israeli settlements and bypass roads, an international force in Palestine to provide border security along the Jordan Valley and to monitor implementation of the final agreement, and an end to the culture of violence and culture of incitement. In essence, Clinton, in the midst of Palestinian-Israeli violence, repeated again but with significant modifications what was left on the table at the unsuccessful Camp David summit in July 2002. Again the Palestinians rejected Clinton's far-reaching proposals.

Bush Administration officials inherited a pregnant framework which would trigger possible American re-involvement in Arab-Israeli negotiations. Emerging from the Middle East Peace Summit at Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, in October 2000, the Mitchell Report investigated the underlying causes of the Intifadah, suggested ways to prevent violence from recurring, and offered ways to reduce tensions and build confidence between Palestinians and Israelis. Named after its chairman, former U.S. Senator George J. Mitchell, the Mitchell Report's authors included U.S., UN, and European representatives. Their April 2001 report, noted that "the only one way to bring peace, justice and security in the Middle East [was] through negotiation." Though the report investigated the causes for the outbreak, it carefully avoided assigning responsibility. Concluding, it

recommended an end to the violence and rebuilding confidence, all with the objective of resuming negotiations.

In June 2001, CIA Director George Tenet's effort to broker a Palestinian-Israeli cease-fire was followed by Powell's second trip to the Middle East. Yet, Washington still found it impossible to broker a cease-fire. Though prodded by Arab and European leaders to take a more proactive approach, no logical argument could be made or imperative presented to name a special envoy for Arab-Israeli negotiations or invest the political capital or time of the Oval Office or State Department. The Mitchell Report and Tenet cease-fire plan remained the Bush Administration's outline for going from confrontation to conciliation. During the summer of 2001, prior to the September 11, attacks on the United States, the administration was preparing to move from just a discussion of security issues, namely a cease-fire to a finite political conclusion. On November 10, 2001, at the United Nations, President Bush became the first sitting Republican US president to advocate a Palestinian state alongside Israel. The suggestion barely received a whimper of reaction, let alone protest from American supporters of Israel or Israelis themselves. This in sharp contrast to the vilification that President Jimmy Carter received when he advocated a Palestinian homeland in March 1977.

Further defining a framework for a political outcome, Secretary of State Powell's speech made at the University of Louisville on November 19, 2001, reaffirmed that Israel had to end the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza; this was the first time the U.S. had ever offered a precise public definition of "occupation," geographically restricted to the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In appointing Major General Anthony Zinni as his special adviser, Powell sought to not only to test to see if the violence could be stopped and a cease-fire put in place, but whether Israel's Prime Minister Sharon would shut down settlement activity once and for all and be prepared to withdraw settlements in the framework of a two-state solution. And would the Palestinians accept and implement a two-state solution, where the Jewish majority of the state of Israel would not be adversely affected by the political outcome? Arafat's December mission to Israel was greeted with Palestinian violence against Israeli civilians and he departed incredulously. After all the prodding by the Arab world to become more involved, the American mediation effort was clobbered by Palestinian violence.

When Powell reached Israel this time, Zinni had been in the Middle East for several weeks prior, already pounding out a phased cease-fire. Powell's objective was to link security matters-- a cease-fire-- with achievement of a political outcome. As a pathway linking and telescoping security issues with a negotiated outcome, the convocation of an

international or regional conference was suggested in Powell's meetings with Arafat and Sharon. Terms of reference for a conference included several documents, declarations, and statements: the traditional Middle East negotiation framework, United Nations Resolution 242 and 338, the Arab summit's Beirut Declaration, UNSC Resolutions 1397 and 1402 all of March 2002, President Bush's April 4, 2002 Middle East speech and the April 10 Joint Statement by the EU, the US, Russia and the UN on the escalating confrontation in the Middle East. Enough common foundations existed to shape letters of invitation and create the modalities for a future conference.

While preparations for a conference developed, security matters were to be dove-tailed with an Israeli withdrawal and cease-fire which directly connected to preliminary political discussions. In essence the Israeli and Palestinian sides would publicly announce a cease-fire, most probably in the context of the US, Israeli, Palestinian trilateral security committee talks, headed by the CIA station chief with the participation of the US Ambassador in Tel Aviv. Once the Government of Israel (GOI) halted military actions in the PA areas, the PA would announce a commitment to halt the production, possession, and smuggling of illegal weapons. Clear instructions would be emerge formally or informally to or by Palestinian operatives to end armed operations against Israelis, especially by Palestinian security services. The GOI and the PA would likely take measures against all parties that remained engaged in incitement against the other community; the GOI would lift the closure on agreed-upon locations. The PA could then take control of security in places from which Israel withdrew, and if necessary and determined by the trilateral committee use a specified number of outside observers to secure local security as infrastructure reconstruction ensued in the territories. Then after a period of reduced tension, the GOI would complete its withdrawal from Area A territory, continue to lift local blockades, and redeploy its troops; Israel would take steps to ease economic restrictions and allow freer movement of Palestinian civilians. Down the road, one could see a return to the pre-September 2000 status quo, a reopening of the Gaza seaport and airport, and the PA would institute legal measures against known terrorists, with all these steps overseen by the trilateral committee. Then a conference and continued negotiations flowing from it.

Stark facts remain: the Palestinian quest for self-determination just like the State of Israel cannot be physically destroyed; Israel can not absorb 3 million Palestinians and still be a majority Jewish state. Separating the two communities, the partition of the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean and the creation of two independent states remains as it has been for over sixty years the only viable options for a political solution. A regional or international conference would

provide Arafat and Sharon protection for tough political concessions that might have to be made down the road in dividing land and prerogative. This negotiating process is not just about stopping the violence and reaching a contractual understanding with a mechanism of enforcement; it is about putting in place firm and long term financial commitments and security undertakings which will make a real difference in the daily lives of Palestinians and Israelis. From an international conference can flow renewed bilateral Lebanese-Israeli and Syrian-Lebanese discussions that could lead to the long sought period of a comprehensive environment of non-war.

If Israeli withdrawal ensues, a cease-fire holds, pressure on the Palestinians alleviated, a pathway to a conference found, and bilateral political discussions following, then the Powell visit will have succeeded in buying time, giving gas in neutral, ready to shift to a higher gear before or after the 2002 congressional elections for a continuing assessment about the status, benefits, and liabilities of removing Saddam Hussein from power. Where will the coalition partners align if the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is not deflecting political and emotional attention?

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