

Is democracy a pre-condition for peace?

President Bush thinks so.

But Israel's peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan show otherwise.

Last week, President George Bush took the oath of office for the second time, marking the start of a new administration and a new opportunity to reevaluate his approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Over the past four years, President Bush has been hesitant to become involved in Palestinian-Israeli peacemaking, pointing to Yasser Arafat as a prime reason for not doing more. The president chose not to be actively engaged in trying to end the Intifada and in bringing the two sides back to the negotiating table.

But the situation in the region at the start of the second Bush Administration is dramatically different from what it was at the start of the first.

- Yasser Arafat has passed from the scene, replaced by moderate Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas through democratic elections.

- A new Likud-Labor governing coalition in Israel will focus on carrying out the evacuation of settlements and IDF forces from Gaza and the northern West Bank.

- Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is considering coordinating the disengagement with the new Palestinian government.

- Egypt and Israel have conducted a bilateral prisoner release, reached a new trade agreement and Egypt has promised to secure the Egyptian-Israeli border against Palestinian arms smuggling after an Israeli disengagement in Gaza.

In the weeks immediately after Arafat's passing, President Bush made some praiseworthy statements about his hope to see a two-state solution evolve over the next four years. He took a positive step in giving financial aid to the Palestinians for their elections. But as he begins his next term in office, the president seems reluctant to do more. "Meaningful American involvement at this critical time will require more

than words and dollars," as former Secretary of State Warren Christopher and leading Republicans have recently urged.

Without active, ongoing hands-on involvement by the President and the appointment of a high-level presidential Mideast envoy, a rare opportunity to transform the Palestinian-Israeli reality could be lost.

A key myth, that democratization is a pre-condition for peace, is holding the president back. President Bush believes that he should insist on full-blown democracy taking hold in the Palestinian territories before pushing for Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

Yet, democratization was hardly necessary for Israel to reach lasting peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan. Had Israel insisted on "democracy first" with these Arab countries, it would never have achieved a peace treaty with Egypt which has provided the Jewish state with over 25 years of security, or an agreement with Jordan that just marked its tenth anniversary.

If President Bush fails to pay adequate attention to the concrete issues at the heart of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict until he's satisfied with the level of Palestinian democracy, developments on the ground will only exacerbate the points of contention between the two sides, making it far more difficult to resolve them later. The unchecked growth of settlements alone could make a viable two-state solution—and the end of the conflict—nearly impossible, no matter how many votes are cast in the Palestinian elections.

Palestinian democracy is a worthy goal, and the U.S. should continue to help the Palestinians create a viable democratic system as required under the first stage of the Road Map, while pressing them to do more to fight terrorism. But these aims should not be used as an excuse for American inaction on other fronts. Israelis and Palestinians need the hands-on involvement of the Bush administration to help realize the hopes of their moderate majorities for peace and security.



Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, US President George Bush, Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas
Akaba, Jordan, June 4, 2003

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