

# After Bush's Speech, Tony Blair Would Be Well Advised to Stay Home

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To read President Bush's speech of July 16 in which he sought to inject new life and a new direction into the Middle East peace process is to understand why his policies in Iraq have been such an unmitigated catastrophe. He is completely out of touch with the most fundamental realities of the Israel-Palestine conflict.

## President Bush:

"In Gaza, Hamas radicals betrayed the Palestinian people with a lawless and violent takeover."

## The facts:

The Palestinian people were betrayed not by Hamas, whom they elected to run their government in the first truly democratic elections in the Arab world, but by Bush and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert who, with a typically colonial mindset, planned to overthrow the Palestinian people's democratic choice by financing and arming Fatah, the party that lost the elections. The terms employed by Bush - "aggression", "lawless" and "betrayal" - accurately describe Bush's unsuccessful effort to get the party expelled by Palestinian voters to carry out a putsch against Hamas, the party that won. Hamas outflanked the would-be insurrectionists, led by Mohammed Dahlan, Gaza's leading warlord and Abbas' national security adviser, and expelled him and his militias from Gaza.

## President Bush:

"Hamas has demonstrated beyond all doubt that it is more devoted to extremism and murder than to serving the Palestinian people."

## The facts:

The Palestinian people elected Hamas, overwhelmingly, because the organisation "demonstrated beyond all doubt" its devotion to the Palestinian people through a network of social institutions - educational, medical and economic - which the dominant Fatah party was unable to match. Indeed, the Palestinian public was convinced that a corrupt Fatah leadership was simply using the peace process to enrich itself.

The savageries committed by Hamas during the course of a legitimate preemptive action merit unqualified condemnation. What they do not merit are the hypocrisies of Bush and Olmert. Did Bush and Olmert imagine that Dahlan and the militias under his control, whom the U.S.

and Israel were training and arming, would have treated Hamas activists any more gently than Hamas treated Dahlan's people had they succeeded in mounting their putsch? Olmert knew exactly what to expect from Dahlan and his militias, but did anyone bother to tell Bush about the prisons run by Dahlan in Gaza in which Hamas militants were tortured and killed in the 1990s?

**President Bush:**

"We will continue to send a firm message to Hamas. 'You must stop Gaza from being a safe haven for attacks against Israel. You must accept a legitimate Palestinian government.'"

**The facts:**

What is President Bush smoking? Fatah, the party that lost the election, is the "legitimate Palestinian government"?

As for its attacks against Israel, Hamas declared a unilateral end to terrorism and violence, and largely observed it for a year and a half, despite Israel's refusal to reciprocate and its continued resort to targeted assassinations.

**President Bush:**

"We are strengthening our political and diplomatic commitments. Again today, President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert sat down together to discuss priorities and resolve issues...[Secretary Rice] has worked with both sides to sketch out a 'political horizon' for a Palestinian state."

**The facts:**

Olmert has rejected every effort by Secretary Rice to get him to discuss with Abbas any of the elements that might define a political horizon. He has flatly refused to allow any of the permanent status issues - borders, settlements, Jerusalem, refugees - to be raised by Abbas, and Bush has consistently failed to back up his secretary of state's efforts. Rice's most recent proposal for an Israeli commitment to certain "benchmarks" for progress toward permanent status negotiations were dismissed by Olmert as if flicking off an annoying fly, without the slightest demurrer from Bush.

**President Bush:**

"The Palestinian government must arrest terrorists, dismantle their infrastructure and confiscate illegal weapons - as the road map requires."

**The facts:**

The road map also requires that Israel not only halt the expansion of settlements in the West Bank but dismantle them. Furthermore, it explicitly obliges each side to implement its obligations, within each of the three phases of the process that it established, without regard to the pace of implementation of the other. Thus, Palestinians cannot delay measures to end violence until Israel stops settlements, and Israel cannot delay ending the expansion of settlements by demanding that Palestinians first complete their efforts to end all violence. While Bush has imposed draconian sanctions for Palestinian violations, he has failed to do the same for Israeli violations. And Bush has actively prevented the Security Council from dealing with the parties in a balanced way.

**President Bush:**

"[By supporting Hamas], the Palestinian people would surrender their future to Hamas' foreign sponsors in Syria and Iran."

**The facts:**

Hamas is not the creation of Syria or Iran, nor is it a natural ally of either country; Iran is Shiite and Syria advocates a secular Arab nationalism that is anathema to Islamists. Bashar Assad's father slaughtered thousands of members of the Islamic Brotherhood in the city of Hama for their opposition to his government. Hamas has never expressed support for violence directed against U.S. and Western interests by Iran and Syria, much less by Al Qaeda. Hamas turned to Iran and Syria for support only in reaction to Bush's efforts to strangle it economically. It is the U.S. and Israel's boycott of Hamas that is driving the organisation into Iran's arms. Hamas has rejected Al Qaeda's urgings to repudiate the Mecca accords and to end its self-imposed hudna when it observed a unilateral ceasefire.

**President Bush:**

"The U.S. will provide Prime Minister Salam Fayyad's government additional financial support and will urge Olmert to provide Palestinians with further goodwill gestures."

**The facts:**

The day of the President's speech, Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, in an interview in Ha'aretz, declared that "it would be a grave mistake, even 'pathological', to focus the Israeli-Palestinian agenda on these gestures." He said "there was no point to goodwill gestures, as welcome as they are, without negotiations."

The one potentially hopeful element in Bush's speech was his statement that negotiations must lead to a "territorial settlement with mutually agreed borders reflecting previous lines and current realities, and mutually agreed adjustments". It is possible to read this passage as U.S. endorsement of the principle enshrined in previous resolutions and in the road map that no territorial changes can be made unilaterally by Israel without Palestinian agreement. Unfortunately, while Bush is painfully precise when it comes to spelling out conditions that Palestinians must meet to get their state, he remains painfully imprecise when dealing with Israel's obligation to return to the pre-1967 border.

The distortions and misinformation in the President's speech aside, this latest initiative has no chance whatever of advancing the peace process. For all of his gestures to Abbas, Olmert has not the slightest intention of getting "trapped" in a peace process that might oblige Israel to dismantle a significant part of its settlement enterprise. As in the past, he will never find himself at a loss for pretexts to postpone the beginning of negotiations.

More importantly, there is not the slightest chance that a peace process from which Hamas is excluded will get anywhere; certainly Olmert is banking on it.

President Bush's proposal for an international conference in the fall has all the hallmarks of a last minute, half-baked idea that no one at the White House or the Department of State thought through. Clearly, none of the "neighbours" Bush plans to invite to this conference were consulted in advance. And if, as Bush said, only those who recognise Israel's right to exist and accept all previous agreements will be invited, then not only most of Israel's neighbours but Israel itself would not qualify. Having exhorted Israel in his speech - however gently - for the umpteenth time to stop expanding settlements and to dismantle "illegal" outposts, Bush should

know that Israel is in flagrant violation of virtually all previous agreements and UN resolutions.

Had Bush consulted beyond his immediate circle of sycophants, he might have been advised that if Israel were to comply with previous agreements, including the obligation to withdraw to the pre-1967 border - except for territories swapped by agreement between the parties - there would be no need whatever for one more international conference. If Israel continues to refuse to comply with those agreements, then the conference will be a complete waste.

If, as Bush apparently expects, his speech will define Tony Blair's mandate as the Quartet's emissary, the former prime minister would be well advised to stay home.

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