

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03119-7 - Tested by Zion: The Bush Administration and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Elliott Abrams

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

For all its eight years, the administration of George W. Bush struggled to end violence between Israelis and Palestinians and lead them forward toward a peace agreement. The effort to help Israel end the intifada and then stop terrorism against Israeli citizens largely succeeded, and to this day the number of violent incidents remains low. Yet the effort to get a final status agreement that would bring a permanent peace failed, despite the immense amount of time and energy spent on it.

Many readers will wonder about or simply disagree with these statements, but the narrative that follows will, I hope, persuade some. The usual complaint about Bush policy – that the president and his staff paid little or no attention to the Middle East (or, in another version, paid no attention until the last years in office when it was simply too late to achieve much) – is nonsense, and this account will show, trip by trip and meeting by meeting, what we were up to and how much energy we devoted to this region.

At least it will show what happened from one vantage point. A memoir of years spent in the government is always the tale of what the author saw, and the full picture will be available only to historians, writing decades later when all the memoirs have been published, the memos declassified, and the emails opened to public review. As a deputy national security advisor and the NSC staff member at the White House who handled Israeli-Palestinian affairs day in and day out, my vantage point was pretty good. I do not doubt that I missed some events, but I doubt I missed much that was very consequential when it came to the Israelis and Palestinians. The account here is as complete as I can make it, thanks to dozens of former colleagues here and in the Middle East who helped me reconstruct events. Some of the telephone calls and meetings recounted here are painful to recollect even at the distance of 5 or 10 years; others are a source of lasting pride.

But this book is not a defense of all we did in those eight years. President Bush's key insights were keen and abandoned previous policy in critical ways. He believed that separation of Israelis and Palestinians into two states would

benefit both – but only if the Palestinian state was peaceful and democratic. He therefore treated Yasser Arafat not as an honored guest at the White House but as a terrorist and failed leader who had to be removed from power. He believed that Israeli security was essential to any hope for peace in the region and strongly backed Israel's right to defend itself even when international criticism was deafening. He understood – and understood the need to say aloud – that in any peace agreement, Israel would keep the major settlement blocks and that Palestinian refugees would have to settle in Palestine rather than “return” to Israel.

Yet too often, diplomacy became the goal rather than the means, and building the institutions of a future democratic, peaceful, prosperous Palestine was subordinated to illusory efforts at the negotiating table. There was remarkable progress in the West Bank, where competent governance and decent security forces appeared for the first time and gave hope of what a Palestinian state might someday look like. Yet far more could have been accomplished had progress on the ground, in the actually existing Palestine between the Green Line and the Jordan River, been our central target. It seemed to me that too often we forgot that reality on the ground will shape an agreement, not vice versa.

In the Middle East and in Europe, the usual criticism of Bush's policy (after saying that we did nothing for eight years) was that we tilted to Israel. I am inclined to plead guilty, but it depends of course on what is meant by “tilt.” President Bush was dedicated to helping the Palestinians escape the despotic, corrupt Arafat rule and create a fully democratic state that would be a model for the entire region. In his view, “supporters” of the Palestinians who were indifferent to the nature of the Palestinian state and focused only on its borders were doing the Palestinians no favors. He was well aware that, despite their endless speeches about Palestinian rights, most Arab leaders treated resident Palestinian populations badly and placed their own interests far above those of the “Palestine” they claimed to protect. Nor did he believe that staunch solidarity with Israel when its security was at risk meant he was favoring Israelis over the Palestinians. He knew that only a secure Israel would ever take the risk of withdrawing from the West Bank, so Israeli security was an essential step toward Palestinian self-government. He did not believe that endless pressure on Israel for concessions would yield as much as a partnership with its leaders, so he built one. He “tilted” to Israel but to the Palestinians as well, confident that he could do both and help both sides move toward peace and security in the process.

I believed in this policy – and fought for it even when at one moment of crisis or another the administration and its representatives seemed to me to sway from these principles. President Bush inherited a collapsed peace process and an Israeli-Palestinian conflict that during the intifada was killing hundreds on each side. He left behind a far deeper American relationship with Israel and the beginnings of state-building in Palestine. These pages follow the course of those events: how policy developed after 9/11, the struggle against Arafat, the

Introduction

3

partnership with Sharon, the Hamas electoral victory and takeover of Gaza, Israel's wars in Lebanon and Gaza, the reform of the Palestinian Authority, and the repeated but unsuccessful efforts to negotiate peace. In this book I also trace the struggles, sometimes emotional and tough, within the administration over Middle East policy.

Whenever I speak about my experiences in the White House and in Jerusalem and Ramallah, I am asked whether there is really any chance for peace. I often respond by telling this story. Visitors to Israel know that every Israeli now appears to have a Blackberry and an iPad, and hard data show there actually are more than one cell phone per person. But not long ago Israel had a telephone system that was best described as Balkan or Levantine. A central bureaucracy in the Ministry of Communications controlled everything and worked with all the inefficiency one would expect. The phones were clunky and black, lines were too few, repairs were always late, and getting a new line was a major challenge.

An American of my acquaintance made *aliyah* to Israel and set up there as a translator. When business became good enough he moved out of the place he had been sharing, rented an apartment, and went to the Ministry office to fill out the forms to get a phone. He lined up at the window and pushed his forms under the glass to the clerk, who briefly perused them and dropped them in a box. Before the clerk could say "Next," the American said, "Please wait. I'm new. I just made *aliyah*. I'm not sure I filled the forms out right, and I don't want to delay getting a phone because of some error I made. Please take another look." The clerk frowned, but did so and told him the forms were fine. "Great," said the American. "So when can I get a phone? I mean, I know you don't give appointments, but roughly when?" "I don't know," the clerk replied, "but roughly it should just be four months."

"Four months! Four months!" the American called out. "That's impossible. People have to call me to translate things. If they can't call, I'll starve. And my mother – my mother is sick. I call her every day and she has to be able to call me at any time. Four months! It's not possible. Isn't there any hope it can be less than four months?"

The clerk smiled through the glass and replied slowly, "Sure. Sure. Sure there's hope. There's no chance – but there's hope."

That seems to me the best summary today of the Middle East peace process: There is hope, but no chance. At least there is no chance for a magic formula conjured up in a diplomatic salon that will end decades of conflict. A peaceful, democratic Palestinian state will be built in the West Bank slowly, step by step, or it will not be built at all. How the Bush administration set about to help Israelis end the violence and help Palestinians build that state is the center of this story.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03119-7 - Tested by Zion: The Bush Administration and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Elliott Abrams

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I

Early Days

No one suspected, on the day George W. Bush was inaugurated in 2001, that his presidency would become deeply entangled with events in the broader Middle East. He had no foreign policy expertise, and as a former governor of Texas his interests lay with domestic issues. “Compassionate conservatism” was a stronger message during his campaign than pledges to solve any international problem. Nearly eight years later, Bush explained to a gathering of American Jewish leaders at the White House that “[y]ou know I didn’t campaign to be a foreign policy or a national security president. I didn’t campaign to be a wartime president. I ran on a domestic agenda, but events happened.”¹

During the campaign Bush had said little about the Middle East, and his broad statements of support for Israel’s security gave little insight into what he would actually do as president. Nor did he have the normal 10-week transition that might have provided time to focus on foreign policy matters: Because of contested ballots and “hanging chads” in Florida, the election results were not decided until the Supreme Court ruled on December 12, and a truncated transition process followed.

Yet on Inauguration Day itself, January 20, 2001, the Israeli-Palestinian crisis began to intrude on his presidency. Bill Clinton had ended his own years in office with a determined, sometimes desperate, effort to forge a peace treaty. He had devoted days and weeks of personal effort, meeting face to face with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and his team and with PLO leader Yasser Arafat and his. Although Clinton may have believed he was close to success several times, an agreement was impossible because of Arafat’s unwillingness to sign any treaty. Clinton had invested in Arafat, and the investment went bust; as one of Clinton’s top Middle East aides put it, “There is a common belief that ‘we came close’ to agreement at Camp David, but the truth is we were not close at all. After eight years, Clinton and our team surely should have known with whom we were dealing. Clinton had become dependent on the statesmanship of Yasser Arafat.”² Clinton gives his own view of the Camp David negotiations in his memoir, *My Life*: “On the ninth day, I gave Arafat

Early Days

5

my best shot again. Again he said no... I returned on the thirteenth day of discussions, and we worked all night again... Again Arafat said no... Right before I left office, Arafat, in one of our last conversations, thanked me for all my efforts and told me what a great man I was. 'Mr. Chairman,' I replied, 'I am not a great man. I am a failure, and you have made me one.'"³

In the Oval Office on January 20, Clinton used the brief and usually ceremonial meeting with his successor to vent his frustration. He told Bush and Vice President-elect Cheney that Arafat had torpedoed the peace process; Cheney often repeated later how bitter Clinton had been and how strongly he had warned the new team against trusting Arafat. As one of Cheney's top foreign policy assistants described it, "in the vice president's recounting, they couldn't get Clinton off the subject. I mean, it was the only thing Clinton wanted to talk about and it was, 'That son of a bitch Arafat,' you know, 'Don't, can't trust him,' 'I put too much weight on him,' 'Biggest mistake I made in my presidency,' was the way that they described it."⁴ The day before, on January 19, Clinton had called Colin Powell, the incoming secretary of state, to deliver the same message.

Stop the Intifada

The last gasp of the Clinton-era effort came in Israeli-Palestinian talks held January 21 to 27, 2001, in Taba, Egypt. Yet Clinton was no longer president; it seemed clear that Israel's impending elections would bring Ehud Barak's time in office to an end; and there was no reason to think Arafat would agree to conditions he had rejected just months before at Camp David.

In fact, "[w]hen the forty-second president departed the White House in January 2001 the Palestinian-Israeli peace process lay in smoking ruins."⁵ After the collapse of the Camp David talks in July, Arafat had turned back to terrorism: He had launched a new intifada that was bringing violence to Israeli cities and settlements. In 2010, one of the top leaders of Hamas admitted that "President Arafat instructed Hamas to carry out a number of military operations in the heart of the Jewish state after he felt that his negotiations with the Israeli government then had failed."⁶ The Israeli military's effort to stop the wave of terror was front-page news. With the negotiations over and violence flaring, what was the Bush policy to be, and who was to lead it?

Bush and his team had no appetite for a Clinton-style personal role for the new president: It had brought nothing but grief to Clinton, Clinton warned adamantly against trusting Arafat, and no one believed the collapsed talks could be revived. There was, moreover, a desire not to raise expectations unduly, another mistake the Bush team believed Clinton had committed. The intifada had grown bloodier in the months before the transition in Washington, and the team saw its task as reducing the level of violence. "When we took office, our goal was simply to calm the region," Condoleezza Rice writes in her memoir.⁷ The very first National Security Council Principals Committee meeting, or PC (where all NSC Principals – the secretaries of state and defense, CIA director,

national security advisor, chairman of the joint chiefs, and the vice president – were present except the president; his presence would mean this was a formal NSC meeting), covered the Middle East. Bruce Riedel, a career CIA official who had been the NSC's senior director for the Middle East under Clinton and continued in that role in 2001 under Bush, described the consensus at that meeting:

Now is not the time for peacemaking; now is the time for conflict management. See if we can dampen this down. And my understanding of my responsibility was that: conflict management. There was a great deal of interest in what happened at Camp David, what were the offers and what were the counteroffers, but mostly from a “let’s understand the context of where we are” rather than “let’s pick up the pieces and do this” viewpoint. That’s the way I understood the administration in the beginning – conflict management. . . . The meeting was devoted to the question of Arab-Israeli, Israeli-Palestinian situation, what do we do about it, what’s our posture going to be, and Powell dominated the meeting and he came out very sober: You know, we have a big difficult issue, we’re not going to plunge into the negotiations process, chances of success there are very, very slim, we’ve already seen Taba was not going to produce a breakthrough, it was clear Barak was not going to survive as prime minister very long and that Sharon was going to come in. Our focus should be on trying to dampen down the fire and see if we can come up with a durable ceasefire and truce and then see, you know, what happens after that.⁸

Given the situation on the ground, no one in the new administration argued for intense presidential involvement. The real issue was whether to try diplomacy at all: Would there be anything resembling a “peace process,” or was that effort a waste of time? The director of policy planning at the State Department, Richard Haass, later explained:

I came to think two things: that the instinct of the administration was not to place what you might call a traditional emphasis on what we used to call the “peace process”; but also analytically they had determined that there wasn’t much for them to work with. They essentially didn’t see a Palestinian partner. At most there was a very flawed Palestinian leadership. The administration was essentially prepared to let things drift until a better Palestinian leadership came along.⁹

Colin Powell opposed this drift and argued for *some* kind of diplomatic activity, no matter how slim the odds of success. After a trip to Mexico, Powell’s first overseas venture was to the Middle East, where he met with Israeli officials as well as Yasser Arafat. In his view, he was engaging with all the parties, protecting the president, exploring what the new Israeli leadership thought, and seeing what the collapse of the Camp David talks had meant to Arafat. As a former State Department official who was close to him put it, Powell believed that “you can’t be the American government without a process or without getting involved. . . . With no illusions about the personalities we were dealing with, and no illusions that process can be more than process. But frankly, that’s very often what diplomacy is and what politics is all about: process, and see if you can go somewhere with it. That was not the prevailing view

Early Days

7

within the administration.” Powell’s disagreement with the consensus view at that PC meeting and his trip to the Middle East were the first inklings of a problem that would grow over time: the split between Powell’s view of the region and his role in it, and the view of the White House. “State and the White House were not on the same page, and everyone in the region – and in Washington – knew it,” Rice later wrote.¹⁰ In Powell’s vision, the administration had to be – or at least to appear – active, and that meant travel to the Middle East by the secretary of state. The earlier mentioned source close to Powell explained,

The new administration cannot come in and pretend there is no Middle East problem, which would’ve satisfied most of the president’s other principal advisors. And so Powell did that and he asked George Mitchell to reengage. Remember Mitchell had started something for Clinton and then was wondering whether we wanted to continue. Powell called Mitchell in and said, “George, give me something to work with.” And Mitchell came up with his sequential plan and so Powell tried to make something happen with that, a number of different ways. . . . Over the next several months we tried Mitchell, we tried Zinni [retired Marine general Anthony Zinni was also named a special envoy in 2001], and a couple of other attempts to see if we could not get something going. And we were not successful in getting something going, but we couldn’t be accused of not being interested and not being engaged because Powell was, but he was the only one. The president had no theoretical or emotional engagement in this; nor did anybody else.¹¹

Whatever Powell’s vision of his activities, to many in the administration they seemed to be an unwanted continuation of the Clintonian approach: engaging with Arafat despite the terror he was fomenting, allowing him to pay no price for that terror, and supporting conventional plans (like Mitchell’s) that were heavy on Israeli concessions but contained no vision of how to transform a disastrous situation on the ground.

Issued on April 30, 2001, the Mitchell Report (formally, *The Sharm el-Sheikh Fact-Finding Committee Report on the Middle East*) provided no answers. In their joint statement presenting the report, Mitchell and former Senator Warren Rudman stated, “First, end the violence. . . . The cycle of violent actions and violent reaction must be broken. We call upon the parties to implement an immediate and unconditional cessation of violence.” Yet the report took a stance of total moral relativism between terrorists and those defending against them and was in that sense truly a product of pre-9/11 America. Moreover, it went on to equilibrate terrorism and Israeli settlements. The Mitchell-Rudman statement summarized that “[a]mong our recommendations are . . . the PA should make clear through concrete action . . . that terrorism is reprehensible and unacceptable. . . . The Government of Israel should freeze all settlement activity, including the ‘natural growth’ of existing settlements.” On one side, murder; on the other, housing: To the Mitchell fact-finding committee, the moral responsibility was equally shared. Where the new administration could go with this report remained unclear.

“Every Arab in the World Wanted Bush to Win”

What did the Arabs and Israelis make of the new Bush administration? Arabs and Israelis shared the view – actually, for Israelis, the fear – that the new president would follow in his father’s footsteps and would be far closer to Arab governments than to Israel. Clinton’s last assistant secretary of state for the Near East, Edward S. Walker Jr., recalled that “every Arab in the world wanted Bush to win” in the 2000 election.¹² This included the Palestinians: As one member of the Palestinian negotiating team analyzed it, “there is a recurring pattern in Palestinian political thinking and behavior: tending to personalize the problem. So, the problem was Clinton and his special relations with Israel and the Jews, and now here comes Bush from a Texan oil background who has a special affinity with the Arabs. And so there was a sense of totally naïve elation.”¹³

Powell’s special efforts at outreach to Arab leaders may have reinforced this perception. Jordan’s ambassador to the United States later described his first meeting with the new secretary of state this way:

At the start of the Bush administration we were actually hopeful that things will move on the Arab-Israeli conflict. And we were hopeful because the Bush administration signaled to us that it wanted to work with the region and not just, you know, with individual players. And I remember a meeting with Colin Powell a very few weeks after he started, when I was the ambassador. And our foreign minister . . . came early on to Washington to sort of gauge what the administration’s views were. And we were received very warmly by Powell at the time. And so the impression then was that this would be a fresh start and that the administration would indeed give it more attention.¹⁴

This was, of course, not at all the view in the White House, where “more attention” was the last thing officials had in mind.

Bush himself was aware of Arab expectations. On May 31, 2001, he held a small dinner in the residential part of the White House for visiting Israeli President Moshe Katsav. At the dinner, Bush approached the head of a major American Jewish organization and told him, “The Saudis thought ‘this Texas oil guy was going to go against Israel,’ and I told them you have the wrong guy.”

The Saudis and Arafat did think just that, as Bruce Riedel recalled:

Arafat had a different view which was that Bush II was going to be a replay of Bush I, and that he had gotten a good deal but he was going to get a *better* deal. And he looked at Powell, he looked at Bush, he assumed the father would have a role: “What’s the hurry? Since Camp David they’ve been moving closer and closer. Now I’m [Arafat] going to get the best deal of them all.” I also have a strong suspicion that the dean of the diplomatic corps in Washington, Prince Bandar, probably encouraged this belief: “I know the Bushies, I’ve been with them for a quarter-century, they’ll want to do this even more than Clinton, don’t be in any hurry.” If so, [it was] a disastrous calculation by Arafat.¹⁵

It is even likely that this “disastrous calculation” about Bush’s views played a role in the firing of the Saudi intelligence chief, Prince Turki, by the kingdom’s

Early Days

9

de facto ruler Crown Prince Abdallah at the end of August 2001 (after twenty-five years in that position) and in the great tension that developed later in 2001 between the Saudi and American governments.

The initial Arab belief that Bush would be closer to their views than to those of the Israelis was shared in Jerusalem. There were few lines of communication to Israel, and there was no clear message coming from the new team in Washington. Shalom Tourgeman, then the deputy to Sharon's new diplomatic advisor Danny Ayalon, described the situation: "It was in the middle of the intifada; the Bush administration didn't know how to cope with it. They didn't prepare their policy yet. Most of the people were new on both sides. And there weren't any deep contacts yet with the administration. And we felt the perception that the administration is in a way continuing the previous administrations."¹⁶ The quick Powell visit to see the newly elected Sharon and to meet with Yasser Arafat did nothing to dampen Israeli fears or Palestinian expectations about the Bush administration.

Yet if those who expected a "tilt" toward the Arab states were wrong about Bush, they were even more wrong about Cheney. The vice president had no strong ties to the Jewish community from his days as a Wyoming congressman, secretary of defense, or businessman in Dallas; in fact, his work in the private sector had substantially been in the Arab world. It was not surprising that Arab envoys should expect him to be a reliable ally, but Cheney turned out to be a staunch and reliable supporter of Israel's security during his eight years as vice president. In his memoir, he sums up his attitude, writing that he "did not believe, as many argued, that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the linchpin of every other American policy in the Middle East" and that it "would have been wrong to push the Israelis to make concessions to a Palestinian Authority (PA) controlled by Yasser Arafat."¹⁷ Those views marked him as one of the most pro-Israel officials in the Bush administration.

"Sharon Was Very Concerned; He Was Very Worried"

Sharon was elected prime minister on February 6, 2001, formed a government in early March, and flew to Washington two weeks later. According to Tourgeman, Sharon was "very concerned; he was very worried about the Bush administration policy because in the perception in Israel, the Bush administration was the continuation of Bush the father, and this is after a very friendly administration of Clinton. I remember the preparation meetings to the visit where many experts told Sharon, 'Look, you are going now for four years of clashes with this administration.'"¹⁸

Sharon's March 20 visit was ill prepared by his new team and went poorly, as Tourgeman recalled:

We came to Washington, without real joint preparations, no real prior discussion on the agendas. The meeting and visit were not good also because everything was leaked to the press, including all the misunderstandings. These are the days of the intifada, many explosions in the streets of Israel, almost on a daily basis . . . and we fought terror

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03119-7 - Tested by Zion: The Bush Administration and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Elliott Abrams

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10

Tested by Zion

without real understanding of the Americans at that period. The contacts were about how to prevent misunderstandings between us and the administration, and Sharon was concerned; he was concerned.¹⁹

Initially, Sharon did not seem to trust his own official team and used as his key contact with the U.S. government a personal friend, the Israeli-American businessman Arie Genger. Genger met with Powell and Rice repeatedly over the first 18 months Sharon and Bush were in office, until Sharon gained confidence in Danny Ayalon, whom he sent to Washington as his ambassador in 2002, and brought in Dov “Dubi” Weissglas as his chief of staff and chief “handler” of the U.S.-Israeli relationship.

But that came later. In late June 2001, Sharon returned to Washington to speak to the huge annual convention of AIPAC, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, then and now the most significant pro-Israel lobbying organization. Once again the visit failed to establish a solid relationship between Sharon and Bush or between the two governments. In addition to Israeli suspicions about Powell, whom they saw as a representative of the classic State Department sympathy for Arab views, Sharon did not trust the new national security advisor, Condoleezza Rice. Sharon’s military secretary, Gen. Moshe Kaplinsky, described Sharon’s first impressions this way:

He was very concerned about the attitude of Condoleezza Rice. She was very, very tough with him at the first meetings. I believe that he didn’t understand deeply the relations between Condoleezza and Bush. And one of the famous stories that I got was about the fact that in a pre-meeting – she met Sharon before he met the president – she asked him, “Let’s see what we’re going to talk about.” And Sharon said, “I want to talk about releasing [convicted spy Jonathan] Pollard.” And Condoleezza told him, “You’re not going to raise this issue in the meeting.” So he wasn’t aware of their relations and he decided to raise it to President Bush. And Condoleezza shot him down immediately in the meeting, in the middle of the meeting. So he became aware after this meeting about the importance of coordinating with Condoleezza, but I believe for a long time he was suspicious about her attitude toward us. And he felt that between him and President Bush, he can manage it quite well. But he thought that Condoleezza is hurting the relations.²⁰

At this meeting, the Israelis mistook Rice’s assertion of control over their White House visit for an underlying hostility to Israel; later, they came to view Rice as an important counterbalance to Powell and the State Department.

It was after this visit that Rice decided to address the problem of communication with Israel herself rather than to leave it to the State Department diplomats. This was the first harbinger of her takeover of the Arab-Israel account, which started gradually in 2002 and was fully in place by 2003. Right after the Sharon visit, she initiated a channel to Danny Ayalon, which both allowed for candid conversations between these two top staff members and also permitted the quiet, confidential passing of messages between Sharon and Bush. This was the first direct channel between the Prime Minister’s Office and the White House.