

THE POLICY OF G. BUSH-JUNIOR ADMINISTRATION TOWARD THE RESOLUTION OF THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT (2001-2005)*

The Arab-Israeli conflict is the regional crisis that has no analogue in the world. It is rather complex, caused by numerous contradictions of historical, ideological, religious, national, economic and territorial nature and now it represents the one of the main security challenges and courses of instability in the Middle East as well as in the Mediterranean basin.

During the whole second half of the 20th century the USA exercised immediate influence on the conflict as well as many times put forward the initiatives on its adjustment. The role of the USA in the Middle Eastern affairs becomes even more important at the present stage of the international relations and it makes the U. S. Middle Eastern strategy a pressing theme for research.

This article analyses the policy of G. Bush administration toward the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict with the special emphasis on the main shifts and transformations of American strategy toward the problem mentioned above in the beginning of the 21st century.

The collapse of the Middle East peace process in the end of 1990-is and the eruption of the second intifada in late September 2000 presented the United States with a difficult dilemma: should it persist with mediation aimed at a full peace settlement (as B. Clinton did in 2000) or just work to facilitate a cease-fire.

George W. Bush which succeeded Bill Clinton in the White House in January 2001 chose the second variant. Incoming U. S. president had witnessed the huge political capital which B. Clinton

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invested in trying to secure an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement and the very limited return on that investment. Having seen Clinton try, and fail, to achieve Palestinian-Israeli agreements in July, October, and December 2000, G. Bush had little desire to invest political capital in trying to solve the conflict. That's why Bush exercised «hands-off» policy toward the conflict during the first year of his presidency, along with the general "I'm not Clinton" approach.

According to this strategy, then Secretary of State Powell repeatedly emphasized the primary responsibility of the parties themselves to solve the conflict. The U. S. even sent no representative to the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations at Taba which took place at the end of January 2001. In this, G. Bush was hoping for a return to the situation that prevailed during the Oslo I and Oslo II agreements which were negotiated directly between Israelis and Palestinians without significant U. S. intervention.

Serious divisions at the top of the administration, especially the split between Secretary of State Colin Powell on one hand and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Richard Cheney on the other, created a certain amount of incoherence in Middle East policy. For instance, Rumsfeld and Cheney advocated a strategy that would undermine Arafat, and lead to an entire change in leadership. Powell and CIA Director George Tenet opposed this, arguing that there was no viable alternative to Arafat.

Another problem the Administration had to deal with was the significant degree of optimism in the Arab world, and especially among Palestinians, that Bush, following in the steps of his father who had clashed openly with then Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir would take a much tougher stance toward Israel than Clinton had done. In this they were to be sorely mistaken.

So, before September 11 the Bush administration's policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation consisted of minimal American involvement and even-handed calls for restraint on both sides. It was based on the «ripeness» theory which advocates no pressure on conflicting parties till the moment when the parties will be ready for compromise, when the conflict will be ripe for the resolution. In accordance with this, the main concern of Bush administration was not to bring the two parties back to the active

dialogue, but to contain the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation so as to keep it from splitting over at the regional level and negatively affecting the American policy in the Middle East.

But the terrorist attacks of September 11 and U. S. efforts to build a coalition for an invasion of Iraq were to significantly influence American policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict.

First of all, the trauma of September 11 reopened the question about the necessity assertive and active American approach toward the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Analysts stressed that if the United States hoped to halt the drift within the Arab world toward religious extremism, it had no choice but to move resolutely to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In connection with it, Bush changed his hands-off policy and the president did turn his eye to the Palestinian problem. He assigned Powell to the case and made statements in support of the Mitchell plan, undertaking by President Bill Clinton. He also sent CIA director George Tenet and Gen. Anthony Zinni to the region as emissaries. None of these missions, however, produced significant change in the field of the Arab-Israeli conflict resolution.

The al-Qaeda terrorist attack on the United States has worked to the disadvantage of the Palestinians. By June 2002, Arafat's links to terrorism had made him *persona non grata* to the Bush administration. In the contrast, the September 11 led to the significant improvement of the «special relationships» between the USA and Israel, because in the light of the new security agenda with the focus on the fight on terror, Israel became the one of the most reliable and experienced allies. That's why soon after terrorist attack Washington endorsed Israeli's right to act in self-defense and endorsed Israeli position that there is no partner for negotiation from Palestinian side.

Simultaneously, after the terrorist attacks, the U. S. sought to build a coalition, including Muslim states, against Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda terrorist organization. In an effort to gain Arab support as well as the support of international community? the U. S. announced its support of a Palestinian state and changed its foreign policy orientation from one of unilateralism to multilateralism. It was a crucial shift in the American strategy toward the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

During whole Middle east peace process in 1990-is the USA exercised the unilateral approach toward the resolution of the conflict. The Washington preferred to be the only one rather than main mediator in the negotiation between conflicting parties. That's why G. Bush-senior and especially B. Clinton successfully kept other influential international actors like the EU, Russia and the UN away from the peace process.

But the situation had changed and in the December 2002 Bush reached agreement with the European Union, Russia and the UN — together constituted as the Quartet — on a road map that imposes on the parties a series of steps leading to the establishment of the two states. The document's substance, with its focus on preventing terrorism and developing democracy in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, was largely a practical interpretation of the 2002 National security strategy.

The adoption of the road map in May 2003 was the Bush administration's greatest contribution to ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It stands out as the most substantive initiative undertaken by any American president toward resolving the conflict. But it was also very ambitious and unrealistic plan, because it didn't correspond with the situation on the ground. The road map soon became a declaration of intent rather than real road to the final resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Neither side wants to fulfill its obligation and the United States was unwilling to push them into doing so.

Nevertheless, the road map was a risky and rather brave step for the Bush administration. This has been the stark difference between Bush and his predecessors. The Clinton plan, the last American effort in Israeli-Palestinian peace-making cannot compare. The plan was released only weeks before Clinton's departure from Oval Office, while the road map will haunt the Bush administration throughout the rest of its first and follow it into a second.

And finally, the last stage of transformation of Bush policy toward the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict was complete endorsement of Israeli plan of unilateral disengagement from Gaza Strip and from the part of the West Bank.

In April 2002 Bush praised Sharon's historic and courageous in Bush words step and offered significant assurance in return for its implementation. But the most innovative aspect of Bush's response

to the Sharon plan was to depart from half a century American position on Palestinian right of return. Previously, the United States had avoided confronting this claim, deeming it an issue for final status negotiations between the parties themselves. Moreover, Bush determined that complete Israeli withdrawal to the pre-1967 lines was no longer realistic. This notion also represents the revelation change in American policy toward the issue. Finally, Bush reaffirmed Israel's right to self-defense against terrorism.

It's very important to stress that by endorsing the Sharon disengagement plan, the Bush administration has aligned itself with Israeli unilateralism. The official position of the United States as well as other members of international quartet is that Sharon's plan is a first step toward the implementation of the road map. But, in fact Israeli unilateralism is not accepted by the Palestinians, and the disengagement plan and especially security barrier could negatively affect final outcomes.

A final conclusion relates to the importance of domestic politics in the Bush administration's policy-making. Following his razor-thin victory in the 2000 presidential elections, Bush had to be concerned about 2004. Whenever he pressured Israel, Bush ran into a firestorm of domestic criticism that included large majorities in both Houses of Congress. Israel's supporters argued that Israel was fighting terrorism just as the U. S. was doing in Afghanistan. Finally, in the wake of the murder of numerous Israeli civilians, the vast majority of the American Jewish community rallied around Israel.

So, the U. S. policy toward the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the beginning of the 21st has evolved in a several important ways.

First, there were 3 major stages in Bush administration policy toward the Arab-Israeli peace process in 2001-2005. The official U. S. interpretation is that these stages complement one another. But in many important respects they contradict one another and there is a certain elements of incoherence in the policy of the USA toward the problem mentioned above.

Second, U. S. dismissal of the so-called Palestinian right of return and acknowledgement of Israeli's prerogative to remain in parts of the West Bank represent significant evolution in U. S. approach to the final resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Third, the notion of Israeli-Palestinian peace as the key to regional stability has been replaced by war on terror and the insistence on reform and democratization as preconditions for peace. The resolution of the conflict is no longer the aim by itself, its rather the tool for implementation of the other American

Now, the United States is facing an extraordinary moment of challenge in the Middle East. To overcome stagnation in the peace process, certain effective decisions of a break-through nature are needed. To adopt or not to adopt such decisions would depend mainly on the position of the USA. There is no doubt that nowadays only the USA is capable to cope with the burden of a mediator between the conflicting parties in the Middle East crisis. It is American cosponsorship with in the near future will predetermine dynamics in Arab-Israeli conflict resolution.