

# A Second Term, A Second Chance

In one week, President George Bush will take 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, the president chose not to be actively engaged in trying to end the Intifada and bring the two sides back to the negotiating table. Despite sporadic efforts at weighing in, President Bush was not consistently involved with this issue, pointing to Yasser Arafat as a prime reason for not doing more.

But the situation in the region at the start of the second Bush Administration is much different from what it was at the start of the first. Yasser Arafat has passed from the scene, and has been replaced by Mahmoud Abbas through democratic elections. A new Israeli governing coalition will concentrate on carrying out the evacuation of settlements from Gaza and the northern West Bank. And the international community is working hard to make disengagement succeed in the framework of a broader peace process.

In the weeks immediately after Arafat's passing, President Bush made some good statements about hoping to see a two-state solution evolve over the next four years, and 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 remains hesitant about doing more. He's insisting on a full-blown democracy taking hold in the Palestinian territories before pushing for Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, as if a similar condition was necessary for Israel to reach lasting peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan.

A second term is the time for the president to get off the sidelines and get into the game. Holding both the Palestinians and the Israelis accountable for their commitments under the Road Map would be a good place to start.

Palestinian democracy is a worthy goal, and the U.S. should continue to help the Palestinians create a viable democratic system as required under Stage One of the Road Map, along with pushing them to do more to fight terrorism. But these aims should not be an excuse for American inaction on other fronts. The value of dismantling some settlements under the disengagement plan is diminished if more outposts and settlements are allowed to grow in the West Bank at the same time. Israel is obligated under Stage One of the Road Map to dismantle settlement outposts created since March 2001, and hasn't done so. It is also obligated to freeze settlement expansion, including natural growth, and not only hasn't done so, but has actually increased settlement construction. Unless Israeli settlement expansion is brought under control, there is little hope of achieving a viable two-state solution in the future.

President Bush can be successful during his second term in advancing the cause of Israeli-Palestinian peace-but only if he is more energetic than in his first term in encouraging the two sides to simultaneously meet their responsibilities.

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