Egyptian Minister Lauds Powell Speech, Warns Against Clash Of Civilizations

by William Jones

Speaking at an event organized by the Brookings Institution on Nov. 28, Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Maher El Sayed gave high praise to the Nov. 19 speech of U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell at the University of Louisville, in which Powell enunciated the Bush Administration's policy on the Middle East.

Foreign Minister Maher is no stranger to the Washington scene. Having served as Egypt's ambassador to the United States (1992-99), he is well acquainted with the *dramatis personae* in the Bush Administration. He is therefore keenly aware of that group in the Administration, led by neo-conservative ideologue Richard Perle and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, who are closely allied to the right wing of the Israeli political scene, and intent on bringing the United States into a new "clash of civilizations" against the Muslim world.

While diplomatic protocol would not permit him to name names, Foreign Minister Maher demonstrated a clear understanding of the war going on within the Bush Administration over the direction of U.S. Mideast policy—where currently the initiative is held by a moderate Republican grouping led by Secretary of State Powell. "Early on, there was an attempt to confuse the problem of terrorism with other problems," Maher said. "There was this idea propagated that this was an Islamic crime attributed to Islam, or to the Muslims, or to the Arabs. There was this attempt by—again, at every turn, we encountered the Israeli government—the Israeli government to equate—and I remember statements by high officials in Israel that Arafat is bin Laden and the Palestinian Authority is the Taliban.

"This was an attempt to create the very clash of religions and civilizations that we wanted to avoid," Maher continued. "And here, I must pay tribute to the attitude of President [George] Bush and the administration in the very early days, when they took steps to avoid turning this tragedy into another tragedy that would harm the very tissue of the American society; when they took steps to indicate that there was no clash of civilization; that this is not a crime that is attributable to the Arabs or Muslims as such, but to certain individuals who have committed these crimes."

While President Bush, during his first months in office, had not decided which of the disparate voices in his administration he would heed on foreign policy, there was a de facto "hands off" policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, at least as far as direct high-level U.S. involvement was concerned. For Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who didn't want the United States "mucking about" in what he considered an Israeli issue, that was just dandy. The increasingly heavy-handed military operations by the Israeli Defense Forces also precluded any major engagement by the United States. Former Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell, who had helped mediate the Northern Ireland peace agreements, was, however, sent to the region by President Bush to map out a strategy for getting the parties back to the negotiating table. CIA Director George Tenet was also sent to the region to work out security arrangements which would preclude major Israeli operations in the West Bank or Gaza.

Although Tenet and Mitchell both came up with concrete proposals pointing the way back to the negotiating table, Sharon insisted that there must be seven days without any violence before he would even discuss them, a condition which guaranteed that the talks would never begin. Unprepared to play hard-ball with the Israeli leader, the administration bided its time, quietly mulling over its own policy proposals.

Praise For Powell's 'Vision'

And then, on Sept. 11, the attacks on the World Trade Center towers occurred, disrupting everybody's game plan, demonstrating that a veritable coup against the President was in process, and presenting the danger that Bush would launch a flight-forward move toward war on many fronts, as the "clash of civilization" fanatics were urging. The call of Russian President Vladimir Putin to Bush, saying that he would not put his forces on alert, effectively threw a monkey wrench into the Perle-Wolfowitz crowd's plans. The Sept. 11 events served to bring the brutal Israeli crackdown on the Palestinians into stark relief. Bringing Arab nations on board a coalition against terrorism would be a Sisyphian task while Palestinians were being slaughtered by Israeli military forces, using some of the most heavy-duty U.S. weaponry.

After the first meeting of the Bush cabinet following the destruction of the World Trade Center, Secretary Powell briefed reporters that the Administration considered progress on Mideast peace to be part and parcel of its newly announced

"war on terrorism." Speaking to reporters at the State Department on Sept. 12, Powell said, "I might mention that in the context of my discussions this morning with [Israeli Foreign Minister] Shimon Peres and [Palestinian Authority President Yasser] Chairman Arafat, and also Prime Minister Sharon, I encouraged all sides to do everything they can to get this process of meetings started that we have all been waiting for, for Mr. Arafat and Mr. Peres to find an opportunity in the very near future to meet and not have protracted discussions about where to meet," Powell said.

On Nov. 10, nearly two months later than scheduled, President Bush delivered a speech to the UN General Assembly, in which he rallied the nations of the world to his "war on terrorism," and also gave his unequivocal endorsement to the creation of a Palestinian state. The Powell speech on Nov. 19 filled out a program only hinted at by the President. "The vision expressed by Secretary Powell is a vision that we can share, that the Palestinians can share, that the Israelis can share," Foreign Minister Maher said. "Despite some recrimination and some resistance, I believe that there's a consensus around the general ideas of the speech in which Secretary Powell expressed the vision of the United States, which is a continuation of other visions, but it took them a few steps farther."

In Louisville, Powell had said, "We have a vision of a region where Israelis and Arabs can live together in peace, security, and dignity. We have a vision of a region where two states, Israel and Palestine, live side by side within secure and recognized borders. We have a vision of a region where all people have jobs that let them put bread on their tables, provide a roof over their heads and offer a decent education to their children. We have a vision of a region where all people worship God in a spirit of tolerance and understanding. And we have a vision of a region where respect for the sanctity of the individual, the rule of law, and the politics of participation grow stronger day by day."

Of particular importance, the Egyptian Foreign Minister stressed, was the fact that Powell had begun to refer to the Israeli "occupation" of the West Bank and Gaza in his speech. "For the first time, in my memory at least, the United States has officially put the finger on the source of the problem we are facing, and that is occupation," Maher said. "For the first time since a very, very long time, the United States has used the word of 'occupied territories,' of 'occupation of territories.' This is, in my opinion, the most positive element in this speech."

Powell also announced that he was sending Marine Corps Gen. Anthony Zinni (ret.) to the Middle East as his envoy, to beef up the State Department team already in place there under Assistant Secretary of State William Burns.

Warnings Against Moves On Iraq

Foreign Minister Maher was also intent, in his meetings with Secretary Powell, on underlining the importance of not

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allowing the "war on terrorism" to metamorphose into an expanded war against Iraq or some other Arab state, which the Perle-Wolfowitz crowd has been calling for. "It would be a mistake in this moment for any use of force against Iraq or any other Arab nation," Maher told his listeners at Brookings. "We must deal with the problem of terrorism itself. It is important not to break ranks with those who are now acting in solidarity on that issue." He confidently added, "And I can tell you it won't happen."

At a joint press conference with Secretary Powell the next day, that confidence seemed to be justified. In response to a question on Iraq, Powell said, "There is no difficulty in reconciling our two positions; they are the same. . . . Both the United States and Egypt support the United Nations resolutions that require Iraq to give up weapons of mass destruction and to allow inspectors in. . . . Both of us have a common understanding of the nature of that regime and what a danger that regime presents to the region and to the world. And we all want to keep Iraq contained. But at the moment, there is nothing for us to disagree about, in my humble judgment. We will stay in close touch in consultations with our Egyptian friends and our other friends in the region as we go forward."

"I think we have made our position very clear," Foreign Minister Maher said. "Among friends, we had frank discussions about this matter. As the Secretary said, friends and allies of the United States are advising caution, and I think he has heard us, we have been heard. And this has been under discussion and we will continue to discuss this matter."

Dialogue Of Cultures?

In addition to the Mideast initiatives, there are also significant moves afoot to counter the "clash of civilizations" desired by such types as Harvard Prof. Samuel Huntington and Carter National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, at an even more elevated level.

During the question and answer period at Brookings, For-