

2008 State of the Union Address

Attendees (without distinction):

- From The American Consulate: Micaela A. Schweitzer-Bluhm, Douglas J. Apostol, Heather E. Kalmach, Suzan Nammari, and Naser Ideis.
- Palestinian Civil Society Representatives: Azmi Al Shuaybi, Samia Bamieh, Abdelqader Al-Husseini Mohammed Ishtayyeh, Abedel Rahman Al-Tamimi, and Sahar Qawasmi.
- From MIFTAH: Lily Feidy, Bisan Abu-Ruqti, Reem Wahdan, Mohammad Abed Rabbo, and Maysa Hindaileh.

On January 28, 2008 the United States President, George W. Bush delivered the “State of the Union” address, in which he drew the outline of his political agenda for the coming year. The President addressed domestic issues and foreign policy of the United States towards several parts of the world, including the Middle East, and specifically the Palestinian- Israeli Conflict.

What was the President’s perspective in dealing with the Palestinian- Israeli conflict and the peace process in the Middle East? What were the references he made to the Middle East? How does this speech differ from the addresses during his earlier years in office?

“State of the Union” address into context

The “State of the Union” address is required by the United States’ constitution, not necessarily every year. However, since 1966, it became a practice that the President orally delivers the speech annually, stating the agenda for the coming year, what type of legislations he expects the congress to pass, the budget proposal; explaining the budget items, domestic policy, treaties, and appropriations for overseas expenses. In general, the speech aims at setting the tone between the President and the Congress specifically on items of the budget.

Main Points in 2008 Address

This year, President Bush used the speech to set forth his political agenda for the coming year, specifically focusing on the economy as the prominent issue. He tried to explain his near future measures to boost the economy and improve education. These two aspects notably featured his early years in office.

He addressed domestic issues of entitlement expenditures, provision of grants for failing schools, re-approval of tax cuts, social security reform, education initiatives, scientific

research, approval of judicial nominees, and electronic monitoring of terrorist organizations.

On the foreign policy perspective, the largest chunk of about half the speech was about Iraq. The President tried to justify the US policy there, in an effort to produce more funds for the military operations, and to boost the morale of the country. In the part where he touched upon the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he expressed his own feeling towards the issue, especially after his visit on January to the Palestinian Territories and Israel, and he re-affirmed his vision of two states, Palestine and Israel, living side by side in peace and security.

Palestinian Perspective

The President explained his personal feelings based upon his recent visit to the region, but did not and has not explained any practical mechanism to pursue his vision of two states. He pointed no timeline to achieving a Palestinian State, and his speeches in Jerusalem and Ramallah do not go in harmony with his statements in this speech.

The United States did not define its role in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and the measures it would take to push the peace process towards achieving a Palestinian State. There is a general sense among Palestinians that President Bush is not exerting his political weight behind his political visions.

Moreover, there is a great doubt among Palestinians that the President's vision would come into effect by the end of his presidential term this year and whether there is any systemized mechanism within the United States' administration after he leaves office that would empower the new American President to pursue the vision.

It is not clear in President Bush's address the exact terms of reference of what kind of a State will the Palestinians have, when Israeli measures on the ground (expansion of settlements, especially in East Jerusalem and daily incursions to Palestinian towns and cities) are not going in harmony with the prospect of achieving a viable Palestinian State.

The United States' policy in Iraq and its continuous support to Israel undermined its credibility as an impartial arbitrator in the Palestinian Israeli conflict. The United States has been playing a double standard policy in the region and has been always showing Israel the "Carrot" rather than the "stick" when it did not abide by international legitimacy and previously signed agreements. Therefore, it is important that the United States begins to recognize the necessity of presenting itself as an impartial arbitrator in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and restore credibility in the region by taking solid actions on the ground.

Failing to reach a comprehensive peace to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has driven the Palestinian society to more extremism, and raised many extremist forces in the Palestinian politics. In Iraq, the United States invasion has led to strengthening Al-Qaeda in Jordan and North Africa. This raises a very important question: what criteria did the President follow for considering the invasion of Iraq a success?

On a different level, the address did not mention anything about climate change, and the US policy in that field.

United States perspective

To achieve the vision of two states, the United States has been working on putting the negotiations back on track, and encouraging both parties to meet and discuss issues that would contribute to a sustainable Israeli-Palestinian peace.

The United States will not dictate on the Palestinians and Israelis how peace will be achieved, it rather takes upon its responsibility to support any initiative made by the Palestinians and Israelis to solve the conflict and push the negotiations forward, towards achieving a sustainable peace.

After President Bush's term is over, we do not know who the new president will be, and we do not know what his/her agenda would be, especially towards the Palestinian Israeli conflict. However, there is a general recognition within the United States that the time has come to strongly push towards the establishment of a Palestinian State.

This recognition has been shown very well in the President's recent visit to the region and Secretary Rice's regular visits, and the latest visit of David Welsh to Israel and the Palestinian Territories. This also shows well in President Bush's efforts to pass an assistance package through the Congress to the Palestinians for economic reform and security, and that is exactly why Prime Minister Fayyad is in Washington. The United States government has been always providing assistance to the Palestinians, contributing to their efforts in building their institutions and developing their capacity towards establishing a viable Palestinian State.

It was thought that the President was tough on Israel when he visited Jerusalem as it was also thought that US Inspector General Frazier has been tough in monitoring Israel. What the United States is trying to do, is push both parties towards achieving peace.

When it comes to Iraq, there are several benchmarks to the success in Iraq: the number of attacks has significantly decreased, civilian killings are down, and Iraqis are returning to their original houses in Baghdad and other towns and cities after they have fled.

On other global matters, it is true that President Bush's speech did not mention the issue of climate change, but did indeed mention creating a new international clean technology fund that will help countries like China and India make use of clean energy resources.