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Who's in Control?
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This past week President Bush gave his long-awaited policy speech on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. The pundits and the experts have provided their considered opinions, and in many cases their un-considered opinions. Tempting as it is to jump into the discussion, most of my insights and observations already been brought up. So instead, let me take a different approach and ask a simple question, who is in charge of the peace process?

Is it the Palestinian people? Not when their political machinery has failed to function in recent years. Not when their infrastructure has been destroyed by invasion. Not when they are subject to curfews and blockades.

Is it the Israeli people? Not when they are afraid to attend their friends' weddings and bar mitzvahs, or even to eat a pizza at an open air restaurant. Not when the government ignores the opposition peace rallies. Not when the government's own party goes against the government's policy by voting against the idea of a Palestinian state.

Is it Yasser Arafat, the head of the Palestinian Authority? Not when he has spent much of the last half-year imprisoned in his headquarters by Israeli tanks. Not when the offices, records and equipment of the administrative departments of the Palestinian Authority have been destroyed. Not when the suicide bombers continue bombing, despite his calls to end them.

Is Ariel Sharon, the prime minister of Israel, in control of the peace process? Not when his invasion of Palestinian territory failed to stop the bombers. Not when a new bomb makes him cut short a visit with President Bush. Not when recent suicide bombs "cause" him to reoccupy towns and villages in the West Bank.

Is President Bush in charge of the peace process? Not when he and his subordinates cannot talk to each side equally. Not when even his policy speech on the

Israeli/Palestinian crisis is put off because of the explosion of a suicide bomber.

So who is in charge? The bombers. Their agenda is not to forward the peace process but to disrupt it, not to build bridges but to tear them down, not to promote trust through confidence-building measures but to promote distrust and hatred. They are succeeding quite well in accomplishing their "peace agenda." There is no trust on either side, nor is there trust among non-involved nations (such as the United States or the European nations) that might broker a peace with both sides.

In short, the bombers' peace agenda is to destroy the peace process, and they have done just that. It does not matter what policies Arafat, Sharon or Bush adopt. As long as they dance to the bombers' tune, there is no way forward. For the first time in 25 years of watching and studying this conflict, this is the first time I see no way out of the current situation.

And that's bad. For despite the ongoing press focus on the Palestinian suicide bombers, the Israeli army, the victims they kill and maim, and the damage they cause, this conflict is not about them. It is instead about the millions of people on both sides who wish to live in peace and prosperity. They want safe neighborhoods for their children to play in, they want their young people to go to college and not to battle, they want to have their garbage collected, to have good jobs, to have good medical services, and so on. They don't want to live under threat from the other side. The angry rhetoric spouted by each side against the other, which the news services delight in showing us, comes from the frustration generated by the inability to pursue these normal, everyday desires.