

Nov 04, 2016 by **Gordon Robison**

The Secretary's Credibility ^[1]

Amman, Jordan

A friend from the state department called over the weekend to ask if I had a sense of how people here felt about the election returns. "I'd say everyone's disappointed, but nobody's very surprised," I replied. He did not ask about Condoleezza Rice's appointment as Secretary of State, but if he had I'd have said "ditto".

Interestingly Rice, her appointment having been announced, has largely vanished from the headlines (over here, at least) while the outgoing secretary, Colin Powell, has been all over the media. Amid the usual hand-wringing about America's credibility, or lack thereof, in the Arab World Powell last week paid his first visit to the region in 18 months, stopping off in Israel and the West Bank and attending a conference of Iraq's neighbors in Egypt.

Throughout this period one question stood out above all others: What was Colin Powell *doing* here?

It is pretty much a given over here that the US has paid far too little attention to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over the last two or three years. So what was the point of sending Powell out on the road almost immediately after his replacement was announced?

Power ebbs and flows even among members of the cabinet. James Baker was strong precisely because everyone knew he spoke for the president. Warren Christopher was weak because everyone knew he was not especially close to Clinton. It is hardly a secret that Powell has not been the key policy-maker of this administration. Now that he has resigned and his successor nominated what influence he still has is seeping away by the hour. In a region where power relationships are particularly important sending him in at this moment can only be embarrassing. Want evidence? Look at the final communiqué issued by the Iraq conference. It spoke of America's "excessive use of force" in Fallujah. Could there be a clearer sign that the 19 other nations at the conference did not much care what Powell thought? Wouldn't it have been better to send, say, an Under-Secretary perhaps accompanied by senior staffers from both Powell and Rice's offices as a way of indicating that the US took the conference seriously despite the State Department's being in the midst of a transition?

If you want to reduce the problem of the US image – the challenge faced by American public diplomacy – to a single sentence here's a good place to start: Most people in the Arab World think that the United States takes neither them nor their concerns very seriously. Powell's ill-advised trip will only reinforce this view.

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