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AMERICAN MIDDLE EAST POLICY UNDER THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION: THE DILEMMA OF LINKAGE

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Twenty years ago, in April 1981, newly-appointed U.S. Secretary of State Alexander Haig embarked on a fact-finding trip to the Middle East. Seeking to impress upon the leaders of the region the overriding need to consolidate a broad multilateral security system ("the strategic consensus") that would effectively contain Soviet encroachment in the Persian Gulf, Haig urged the regional players to subordinate the Arab-Israeli predicament to the more compelling task of global containment. However, it soon became evident that this American vision and cluster of expectations could not be reconciled with the dynamics of the region. The unabated tension on the Israeli-Palestinian front soon forced the Reagan Administration to reconsider its priorities and ultimately to allocate much time and energy to such issues as the Lebanon War and its ramifications.

Twenty years later, in late February 2001, newly-appointed U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell toured the Middle East in an effort to rally regional support for the Bush Administration's order of priorities in the region. In the same way that Haig sought to induce the Arab Middle East to focus on the Gulf and to set aside or downgrade other sources of friction and

rivalry, so did Powell attempt to persuade Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia to assign priority to the dangers inherent in the development by Iraq of weapons of mass destruction. By emphasizing the need to revive the Iraqi leg of the "dual containment" policy, Powell appeared to endorse a posture of "benign neglect" with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. But in disavowing any intention of getting involved in the sort of micro-management that characterized the last phase of the Clinton Presidency, Powell risked falling victim to the very same fallacy which was exposed in the immediate aftermath of Haig's visit, namely, the belief that all the regional protagonists shared American concerns, priorities and preferences.

In the case of Powell's mission, it is unlikely that such parties as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Syria will be impressed with his argumentation. For one thing, circumstances have changed radically since the coalition against Iraq was assembled following the invasion of Kuwait. In 1990 and 1991, Iraq was seen, not just as a direct military threat to its immediate neighbors, but also as a danger to the regional balance of power and to the stability and legitimacy of many Arab governments. Since then, the regional setting has changed. The intervening years of

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international sanctions and isolation have drastically weakened Saddam Hussein and constrained his margin of maneuver. Most governments in the region now view Iraq more as an economic and trade opportunity than as a strategic threat. More importantly, Arab public opinion strongly sympathizes with Iraq, or at least with the need to relieve the distress of the Iraqi civilian population. As a result, the economic sanctions against Iraq had already been degraded even before the outbreak of the *intifada* and many Arab governments (as well as others in the international arena) were openly ignoring the sanctions regime. Even in the best of circumstances, there was therefore little chance that regional governments, attuned to their own domestic opinion, would support Powell's plans to "reinvigorate" the sanctions. His dilemma is bound to be further aggravated by any insistence on keeping a low profile on the Israeli-Palestinian track, because American passivity will be seen as complicity with Israel in perpetuating a situation that is intolerable for the Palestinians, hence, for much of Arab public opinion. The problem for Arab governments, hence, for Powell, is further complicated by Saddam's success in portraying himself as a leading champion of the Palestinian cause.

In 1981 and 1982, the escalating crisis in Lebanon eventually forced the Reagan Administration to become directly involved, politically and militarily. Today, the Bush foreign policy entourage appears to believe that it is possible to revive the Gulf War coalition (or even some significant part of it) in order to abort Iraq's programs to develop weapons of mass destruction without playing an active role in the Israeli-Palestinian arena.

It is understandable that the new administration would seek to distance itself from Bill Clinton's legacy and thus to embark upon new crisis-management and conflict-resolution strategies and tactics in its effort to stabilize or mitigate the highly charged Palestinian issue. Notwithstanding this desire, Powell's

determination to redefine and strictly constrain the parameters of American involvement in the process is likely to reverberate in other parts of the region, including the Gulf. The Administration may be correct in assuming that there is no "positive linkage" between different issues; there is not much reason to expect that active encouragement of progress on the Palestinian track could somehow be "traded" for Arab support of American objectives in the Gulf. But there is less chance that the U.S. can avoid a "negative linkage," because continued turmoil on the Israeli-Palestinian front will complicate even more the pursuit of those objectives, just as it will strain other policy frameworks. In other words, there is little likelihood that appeals for "decoupling" will succeed.

No American approach, however proactive, can guarantee that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will be removed as an irritant or complicating factor in broad regional policy; the experience of the Clinton Administration is proof enough of that. But step-by-step diplomacy that evades the core issues seems particularly ill-suited to promoting this goal, and the premise that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will, if left to its own devices, somehow subside into the background confuses the desirable with the probable. If the U.S. Administration continues on that course, it might well find itself replaying the 1982 scenario of unwitting involvement and unwilling entanglement in an escalating conflict.

Of course, U.S. policy under Bush is still in an embryonic stage and it will undoubtedly evolve in response to emerging realities on the ground. At this point, it is impossible to know whether the Administration will be able to remain committed to its initial order of priorities. But if the experience of the Reagan Presidency is any guide, there is at least a reasonable prospect that it will at some point be forced to replace or at least augment its role in the Israeli-Palestinian sphere with a more assertive and involved approach.