The Clinton Legacy in the Middle East: Preliminary Lessons

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The Cold War in the Middle East

The global international system which President Clinton encountered when he entered the White House on January 20, 1993, was fundamentally different-in terms of structure, the rules of the game and the nature and characteristics of its main powers-from the bipolar-confrontational system, which had been consolidated during the Cold War era. For forty years (excluding a brief interlude at the beginning of the Carter Presidency), American policy in the Middle East had been patterned on the belief that international crises were seldom local, isolated phenomena, but rather elements within the worldwide communist effort to disrupt the global balance of power and thereby to threaten the security of the US. Convinced that events halfway around the globe automatically had a direct impact on America's core interests, the architects of American diplomacy during the Cold War years underscored the need to stand firm and resist any attempt at encroachment, whatever its origin or location might be.

Perceived as critical because of its geopolitical importance and the value of its oil resources to Western Europe, the Middle East was looked upon by such American presidents as Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Nixon, Ford and Reagan, as a major front in the global, omnivorous effort to contain Soviet penetration and encroachment. Thus, it was essential for Washington to induce such regional powers as Egypt and Iraq to align themselves with the US as a bulwark against Soviet designs by providing them with military and economic support.

Notwithstanding this overriding need to contain the Soviet expansionist drive into the Middle East, American diplomacy-throughout the Cold War-was keenly aware of the dangers of escalation, inherent in the linkage between the regional and the global facets of the superpower rivalry. Fearing that, under the conditions of unabated rivalry between Israel and its Arab neighbors, any crisis in the Arab-Israeli sphere could easily escalate into a highly dangerous global conflagration engulfing the superpowers, successive administrations sought to resolve, or at least to mitigate, various aspects of this predicament. (It was also believed in Washington that the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict would eliminate from the scene a major obstacle on the road to effective strategic cooperation between the Arab world and the US).

The collapse of the Soviet Empire and the end of the Cold War fundamentally altered the structure of the international global system. The disappearance of the Soviet superpower that, for decades, had provided Arab regimes in the Middle East with political support and military and economic assistance considerably broadened Washington's margin of maneuverability and latitude of choice in approaching the region. The ability of the Bush Administration to consolidate a broad-based strategic coalition against Iraq in the Gulf War of 1991 and to convene, in Madrid later that year, a peace conference (in which Syria, who boycotted the Geneva Peace Conference in December 1973, agreed to participate), further reinforced the expectation that the new hegemonic superpower would indeed be successful in translating its power potential into effective influence, both globally and regionally.

One year after the Madrid Conference had convened, the Democratic candidate Bill Clinton defeated President George Bush in the presidential elections of November 1992. Today, as the second term of the Clinton Presidency is approaching its end, the time has come to offer a preliminary and partial assessment of Clinton's legacy in the Middle East.

Did the hegemonic nature of the global-strategic international system indeed enable the Clinton Administration to maximize, in the region, the opportunities for American diplomacy inherent in the post-Cold War setting? What are the main characteristics and tenets of the Clinton era, and in what ways are they different from the operational code of previous administrations, which functioned in the shadow of the Cold War?

The Clinton Administration and Israel: The Strategic Setting

During the early years of the Cold War, the American desire to consolidate a broad inter-Arab coalition led Washington to adopt a highly reserved posture toward Israel and – in the process – to refuse (until 1962) to sell arms to or establish extensive strategic ties with the Israeli Government. Fearing that any effort to make Israel a strategic ally of the US was bound to drive major Arab actors into the Eastern bloc and thus jeopardize the all-important containment enterprise, American policy tilted toward the Arab position on a variety of issues (including the status of Jerusalem and the Israeli strategy of retaliatory raids) while resorting from time to time to the weapon of economic sanctions and coercive diplomacy *vis-à-vis* successive Israeli governments.

With the end of the Cold War, all remaining residues of this incessant dilemma subsided into the background of the American-Israeli framework. Indeed, in an era where it was no longer essential to solicit the goodwill of the Arab world in order to accomplish the goal of containment, and where the umbrella of Soviet support and backing of such powers as Syria no longer existed, the very logic and basis of the prior vision of Israeli as a strategic liability to American interests also receded into the background of the American-Israeli dyad. Hence, during Clinton's tenure in the White House, the network of strategic ties between Washington and Jerusalem continued to develop and expand. Not only were such programs and frameworks for assistance and cooperation as the prepositioning in Israel of weapons and ammunition for use during wartime and the development of anti-missile systems including the Arrow and Nautilus maintained, but along with the Wye River accords of October 1998, the US and Israel signed the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) on strategic cooperation, which was designed to enhance Israel's defensive and deterrent capabilities against the threat of ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction. Clearly, even a tense political background during much of Benjamin Netanyahu's tenure as Israel's prime minister could not erode the administration's determination to reinforce Israel's strategic deterrence in the face of potential unconventional threats, primarily from Iran, nor did it prevent the further proliferation of strategic ties between the two allies.

The Clinton Administration lacked both the motivation and the perceived margin of maneuverability for resorting to forceful and assertive measures, particularly in the Arab-Israeli sphere.

The Clinton Administration and the Peace Process: Mediating Tactics

The abatement of the world-wide Soviet threat and the end of the Cold War enabled the Clinton Administration to approach the remaining facets of the Arab-Israeli conflict with relative equanimity (albeit not complacency). With the danger of escalation of regional crises into acutely threatening global conflict subsiding into the background of the new hegemonic international system, Washington's policy elite was less concerned now, under post-Cold War circumstances, with the repercussions of continued stalemate (or even increased tension) in the Palestinian-Israeli sphere or in the Syrian zone. Thus, while regional accommodation was still considered a highly desired goal, it was not depicted as a core objective of utmost importance, to be

pursued regardless of the costs and risks to American diplomacy. Although, in American thinking, the Arab-Israeli front was not perceived as completely decoupled from other parts of the Middle East, this regional linkage did not lead the Clinton entourage to adopt a more assertive posture toward the Arab-Israeli conundrum. Specifically, notwithstanding the American conviction (as articulated repeatedly during the Netanyahu era) that the continued stalemate in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations on a second further Israeli redeployment in the West Bank was the main source of the American inability to forge a regional coalition against Iraq, the administration remained largely committed to its non-coercive approach toward Israel, continuously preferring the carrot of inducements, promises and incentives to the stick of warnings, threats and punishment. Not only did it continue to adhere to the premises of the "ripeness" theory (according to which, for a settlement to be stable and viable, it had to originate in the desires and predilections of the protagonists themselves), but it opted to largely acquiesce in such Israeli policies and actions as the decision, of September 1996, to open the Hasmonean Tunnel in the Old City of Jerusalem; the incessant procrastination in the negotiations on a second further redeployment; Netanyahu's courtship of Clinton's domestic opponents (including the Christian Evangelic leader, the Rev. Jerry Falwell and several Republican leaders in both houses of Congress), and his decision to unilaterally suspend the implementation of the October 1998 Wye accords.

Although these decisions and moves greatly infuriated and incensed President Clinton and his foreign policy advisers, they did not precipitate any punitive measures of the sort that Presidents Eisenhower, Ford and even Reagan adopted in previous decades under different global and regional circumstances.

In seeking to explain the reasons for this persistent American reluctance to resort to tactics of coercion and punishment in order to modify Israeli positions and *modus operandi* in the Palestinian (or Syrian) zone, it is clear that in addition to the disappearance of the Soviet patron from the scene as a power which had a vested interest in the perpetuation of the Arab-Israeli conflict, a cluster of domestic constraints – and primarily the unabated Congressional support of Israel – also affected the administration's calculations and contributed to its decision to predicate its relations with Israel upon the premises of persuasion, compensation and guarantees, rather than of denial, threats and punishment. Such Congressional actions as the endorsement, by 81 US senators, of the strongly-worded letter, drafted by AIPAC in April 1998, which called upon Secretary of State Madeleine Albright not to pressure Israel, repeatedly demonstrated the fact that unlike the growing division of the American Jewish leadership over Israeli peace policy (which became particularly evident during the period of June 1996-May 1999), the US Congress continued to function, during the Clinton era, as a bulwark of defense for Israel which constrained the administration and prevented the inauguration of forceful negotiating tactics. An exception to this posture was the broad congressional support of the administration's position in the "Phalcon Crisis" of 2000.

And indeed, with American behavior in the "Phalcon Crisis" comprising a major deviation from its *modus operandi vis-à-vis* Israel, the Clinton Administration avoided, by and large, the use of assertive or coercive tools in approaching the Israeli Government and the other parties to the peace negotiations. This behavioral pattern was maintained even in the face of the wave of violence that swept the West Bank in the autumn of 2000, when the president avoided, by and large, the stick of punishment or threat in the negotiations which culminated in the Israeli-Palestinian October 17, 2000, accord. Instead, it based its bargaining behavior upon the belief that the offering of "positive sanctions" to the parties constituted the most effective means of reducing the costs embedded in the progress toward peace. The separate commitments and guarantees

which the US provided to Israel and the Palestinian Authority as an integral part of the Hebron Agreement of January 1997; the role assigned to the CIA as a monitor and arbiter on security issues in the Wye accords; the special assistance package to Israel which augmented the Wye agreements; and the American-Israeli MOA on strategic cooperation which supplemented the October 1998 Wye agreements were but a few manifestations of a mediating approach which evolved around the need to induce and entice the partners to the peace-making process to abandon pre-existing and irreconcilable positions.

Contrary to President Bush's decision, of February 1992, to link Israel's request for $10 billion in loan guarantees for immigrant resettlement to an immediate freeze of all construction in the West Bank, the Clinton Administration in general avoided the use of coercive tools and tactics in its effort to promote regional accommodation.

The Clinton Administration and the Middle East: Maintaining a Low Profile

Whereas during the Cold War era most American peace-making initiatives in the Middle East originated in Washington's desire to avoid a dangerous superpower confrontation or an energy crisis, during the 1990s it was the regional setting which provided the impetus for progress toward resolving the Arab-Israeli dispute. Thus, contrary to the intensive negotiating drive that was initiated exclusively by Secretary of State Kissinger during the period October 1973-September 1975, the intricate diplomatic process that culminated, in September 1993, in the first Oslo Accords, did not even marginally involve the hegemonic superpower. Similarly, President Clinton's personal involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in late 1996 and early 1997, which precipitated the Hebron Agreement of January 1997, evolved as a response to Prime Minister Netanyahu's urgent request that the administration accelerate its mediating activity in the wake of the widespread violence which swept the West Bank in the wake of the opening of the Hasmonean Tunnel in the Old City. Evidently, unlike such peace-making initiatives as the Rogers Plan of December 1969, or the Reagan Plan of September 1982, which were conceived in Washington, the Clinton era – particularly its early phases – was characterized by an American willingness to leave the diplomatic initiative to the regional protagonists themselves. While seeking to assist the parties in a variety of ways in their quest for peace (by providing the venue, reassurances, guarantees and compensation), the administration avoided, during the last decade, the inauguration of unilateral plans or efforts to shape or enforce the desired parameters of peace. Thus, although it viewed the Palestinian positions at the Camp David Conference as irreconcilable and inflexible, the administration, in the summer of 2000, opted not to deviate from its basic conciliatory approach toward the Palestinian Authority. Unlike the dynamics of superpower competition, which had occasionally led the architects of American diplomacy to embark upon forceful tactics in an effort to control the risks of escalation or to impose the parameters of their desired settlement upon the recalcitrant protagonists, the more benign global landscape, which emerged in the 1990s, dictated a considerably more acquiescent pattern of behavior, with the administration prepared to assist the parties in the process, but without attempting to impose upon them its own preferences, priorities or visions of peace. This non-coercive pattern remained essentially intact during the violent Israeli-Palestinian crisis which started to unfold in late September 2000, and which threatened to abort the entire Oslo structure. Still, the US did manage to ultimately induce the parties to agree, on October 17, 2000, to a ceasefire.

President Clinton and the Gulf: An End to Dual Containment?

Whereas, in the Arab-Israeli sphere, American diplomacy was characterized by relative equanimity and lack of urgency even in the face of

a prolonged impasse, the picture was markedly different when the Gulf area was approached. Although the Clinton Administration did not remain invariably and irreconcilably committed to all the parameters of its initial strategic doctrine, namely the dual containment of Iran and Iraq, it is in the Gulf area that its major strategic effort unfolded. In essence, the doctrine of dual containment originated in the American desire to safeguard and protect friendly regimes while securing the flow of oil from the Gulf against Iranian or Iraqi aggression or encroachment. In view of the proven capacity of both regimes to disrupt the flow of oil and threaten the survival, stability, and security of the countries with which the US has maintained close ties, it was essential to maintain a continuing naval presence in the Gulf and to preposition weapons and ammunition in a number of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, notably Kuwait and Oman. This containment posture was further augmented and reinforced by direct economic and military assistance, designed to support and enhance the capacity of GCC states to deter and defend themselves against external threats and thus to help maintain the regional balance of power.

Beyond these basic tenets of the Clinton strategy in the Gulf, it is clear that American diplomacy underwent significant modifications in the aftermath of Khatami's rise to the presidency in Iran. Seeking to strengthen and bolster the domestic forces and factions in Iran's political system which are open to dialogue with the US and which support the process of internal moderation, the Clinton Administration, since 1998, has been actively engaged in an indirect negotiating process *vis-à-vis* the Khatami regime. In the process, it opted to acquiesce in the continued transfer of ballistic missile technology by Russian firms to Iran (including technologies based on the 1600-mile range SS-4 surface-to-surface missile) and, in January 2000, decided to lift the embargo which had for two decades prohibited the importing of Iranian goods and merchandise to the US. It also decided, when formally referring to Iran, to replace the term "rogue state" with a less derogatory and offensive categorization: "country of concern." In the same way that Washington preferred the carrot of inducements to the stick of threats and punishment in its relations with regional partners and allies, so did it become increasingly predisposed in its relations with such adversaries as Iran to rely upon accommodative gestures and moves as the most effective means of inducing moderating change in both the domestic structure and foreign policy of the Iranian political system.

Another manifestation of this pragmatic approach, which is inherent in a recognition of the limits of power (even under the conditions of strategic hegemony) and the difficulties surrounding any renewed American effort to consolidate a broad coalition designed to contain the major sources of ideological or military threat to regional stability, has been the emerging American posture toward Iraq since early 1999. While falling considerably short of a full-fledged, manifested accommodative policy toward Baghdad, this restrained and cautious course *de facto* acquiesced to Saddam Hussein's resistance to the intrusive inspections of Iraqi facilities by the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM). Thus, since the beginning of 1999, the US has avoided any major military operation in an effort to compel Iraq to withdraw its opposition to the inspections, while seeking to maintain the two main remaining tenets of its Iraqi policy, namely, the enforcement of the no-fly zone and the sanctions regime. However, even on these fronts it has adopted a largely acquiescent posture in the face of the blatant challenge posed by Russia and France in September 2000 to the very essence of the sanctions regime against Iraq. In sharp contrast to the American *modus operandi* in the Iraqi theater during the years 1992-1998 (which was manifested in Washington's repeated willingness to resort to punitive military action in order to guarantee that Iraq fully complies with the United States Security Council resolutions), the last two years of the Clinton Presidency were characterized by an abatement of its combative spirit and a growing reluctance to confront such recalcitrant

actors as Russia and France.

In conclusion, although the beginning of the post-Cold War era promised to open a wide window of opportunity for American diplomacy to accomplish a broad spectrum of highly-desired policy objectives such as the effective and comprehensive dual containment of Iran and Iraq, it became increasingly evident in subsequent years that the new era was by no means devoid of international constraints such as those embedded in Russia's emergence as a defiant actor upon the Middle East stage and as a power capable of initiating independent policies and moves, particularly on the Iraqi front. In other words, the fact that the US became the sole hegemonic power in the global international system as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Empire did not entail that it would be capable of avoiding Gulliver's troubles and chains. The growing difficulty of mobilizing American public opinion in support of a strong coercive policy *vis-à-vis* the rogue regimes in the region (Iran, Iraq and Libya) in an era characterized by the breakdown of the national consensus concerning the magnitude and severity of external threats; the growing difficulty of mobilizing the international community in support of the continuation of the sanctions regime against Iraq; and the new global agenda which subordinates the strategic sphere to a broad cluster of economic, industrial, monetary and ecological considerations have been but a few of the factors which made it exceedingly difficult for the Clinton Administration to translate its vast power resources into tangible and effective influence.

With the abatement of the acute and immediate Soviet threat to global stability and to core security interests of the US, a major unifying and defining factor – that for four decades had provided significance and meaning to American foreign policy behavior – disappeared from the scene. Serious as they were, such threats to regional or global stability as those embedded in Islamic fundamentalism or even in the development of weapons of mass destruction in the post-Cold War era, could not overshadow, outweigh or downgrade the immensely complex and multifaceted agenda that confronted the American policy-making apparatus in an era dominated by such factors as growing economic interdependence rather than by traditional strategic rivalries. In accommodating itself to this changing environment, the Clinton Presidency was in general predisposed to rely, in its attitude toward its regional allies, upon a broad complex of "positive sanctions" rather than upon the weapons of coercive diplomacy as the preferred means of engendering progress toward conciliation. Even in its approach toward such adversaries as Iran, it did not remain oblivious to the window of opportunity created by Khatami's reforms and opening to the West, and has been engaged, since 1998, in an effort to broaden this window by pursuing an increasingly pragmatic and accommodative posture toward Teheran. In the Iraqi zone, while hoping to keep the sanctions regime against Baghdad intact, the administration refrained from directly challenging the increasingly defiant course adopted by Russia and France. It similarly acquiesced in the face of Saddam Hussein's intransigence and unwavering opposition to the continued mission of UNSCOM.

In conclusion, against the backdrop of these external and internal constraints, and in the absence of any acute and immediate threat to global stability, the administration lacked both the motivation and the perceived margin of maneuverability for resorting to forceful and assertive measures, particularly in the Arab-Israeli sphere. It remains to be seen whether this behavioral pattern will be maintained in the aftermath of the presidential elections of November 7, 2000, and whether the new administration will embark upon a more forceful and determined posture in the Middle East designed, in its essence, to accomplish an objective which has eluded American diplomacy for five decades – a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace.