The Bush Administration, the Middle East and Israel: In the Shadow of September 11

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The present analysis will attempt to examine and elucidate the changes that have taken place in the Bush Administration's foreign and Middle East policies in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, with an eye to their immediate ramifications, particularly in the Israeli-Palestinian sphere.

A review of the diplomatic and strategic history of the US since the outbreak of the Cold War has often revealed a degree of tension between the initial predispositions, beliefs, and preferences of the architects of American diplomacy and the dynamics and forces of the global and regional environment. In general, however, these tensions have ultimately been resolved in favor of the latter. That is, American leaders have frequently had to revise or abandon major policy preferences or priorities when it became apparent that their beliefs regarding the 'nature of things' were out of joint with a recalcitrant or defiant international order.

This recurrent discrepancy between the perceived and the actual, or between the psychological environment and the operational environment, is well illustrated by the policy shifts that characterized President Jimmy Carter's tenure in office. Notwithstanding Carter's initial desire to downgrade superpower rivalries in favor of developing US economic and diplomatic relations with developing nations and the third world, he was gradually forced to abandon visions of American-Soviet accommodation and ultimately – in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 – embarked upon a strong and irreconcilably confrontational course *vis-à-vis* Moscow.

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Similar shifts could be observed in Carter's approach to the Arab-Israeli sphere. The administration's initial approach was predicated upon the notion of comprehensive peace, to be accomplished in an international conference. Less than two years later, however, it found itself shifting gears to play a leading role in the September 1978 Camp David Conference. The result was a bilateral – rather than multilateral, comprehensive – Israeli-Egyptian peace, whose very logic and essence was incompatible with the administration's initial concept.

A similar shift of priorities emerges when examining the first year of George W. Bush's presidency. However, previous administrations had enjoyed the luxury of coping with an uncooperative strategic landscape in an incremental and gradual fashion. The Bush Administration, by contrast, was not so fortunate: its behavioral changes were precipitated by the September 11 terrorist attacks, and were much more pronounced and far-reaching. What, then, were the administration's pre-existing visions of the world, and what changes in policy and strategy can be discerned in the wake of September 11?

The Bush administration differed sharply in its initial predispositions with that of its predecessor. The basic worldview of the Clinton Administration, which was predicated upon notions of political and economic multilateralism, combined with an unabated willingness to

intervene diplomatically and even militarily in such areas as the Balkans, Haiti or Somalia. By contrast, Bush foreign policy elites were initially predisposed to pursue a unilateralist, largely exclusionist foreign and defense policy. This policy, which reflected a generalized skepticism toward international organizations and frameworks, sought to minimize the risk of military entanglements in third-world areas, preferring instead the tools of deterrence and coercive diplomacy. The "big stick," inherent in the pursuit of coercive diplomacy, was therefore intended by President Bush to serve as a less costly alternative to his predecessor's posture of selective diplomatic and military engagement. Furthermore, contrary to the "special relationship," which had developed gradually between President Clinton and Russia's President Vladimir Putin, the American-Russian framework (as well as the American-Chinese dyad) during President Bush's first eight months in office was fraught with tension and uncertainty. These tensions came to a head with the administration's determination to advance its plans for National Missile Defense (NMD), even at the cost of withdrawing from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. NMD proved to be the major factor clouding American-Russian relations during the spring and summer of 2001.

As noted, the events of September 11 brought about an instant change in American priorities and preferences, with the initial cluster of unilateralist visions quickly receding into the background. Not only was Washington prepared now to set aside its exclusionist strategy (seeking, instead, to rely upon such mechanisms as the UN and NATO as appropriate tools for effectively combating international terrorism) but its relations with such powers as Russia, Pakistan, Iran and China underwent significant change.

In the context of the American-Russian framework, the American desire to solicit Russian logistical support for its operations in Afghanistan (particularly with reference to Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, where Russia still enjoyed considerable influence) led Bush, in November 2001, to couple his NMD initiative (to which he continued to adhere) to deep unilateral cuts in the American strategic nuclear stockpiles – from 7,000 nuclear warheads to between 1,700 and 2,200 over the next decade. Similarly, during the period before September 11, relations between Washington and Moscow were characterized by incessant skirmishes and intermittent crises over such issues as continued Russian crackdowns in Chechnya and the transfer of ballistic missile technology by Russian firms to Iran (including technologies based on the 1,600-mile range SS-4 surface-to-surface missile). After September 11, US-Russian relations improved dramatically, with most controversial issues receding into the background.

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The October summit between Bush and Putin revealed the totality of the American administration's about-face *vis-à-vis* Russia, with the American president refraining from any reference to Chechnya or to Russian technology transfers. Instead, the two leaders pledged to work jointly for the purpose of defeating the forces of terrorism and militancy.

But the US-Russia dyad was not the only one in which Washington strove to set aside or mollify past disagreements for the sake of consolidating a broadly-based international anti-terrorist coalition. Such efforts were manifest in numerous statements and actions, which Washington initiated in the context of its relations with China, Pakistan and even Iran. Within the parameters of the American-Pakistani dyad, for example, the administration was even prepared to abandon its traditional and deeply-rooted policy of imposing economic sanctions upon states which had unilaterally and demonstratively crossed the threshold of nuclearization. Evidently, an entire cluster of logistical and strategic considerations (pertaining to Pakistan's operational and intelligence

capabilities and infrastructure) outweighed this screen of "nuclear policies," which in turn quickly paled against the far more pressing need to uproot the Taliban regime. A similar course of *rapprochement* (albeit of a more limited form) was inaugurated by the administration *vis-à-vis* China and Iran, which had been repeatedly labeled—even on the very eve of the attacks – as strategic adversaries of the US.

The events of September 11 also precipitated change in US policy on Iraq, albeit not in the same direction. Specifically, the rapid collapse of the Taliban regime changed the balance of inter-departmental power within the administration. Proponents of the "Iraqi option," emboldened by US successes in Afghanistan, grew in influence, seeking to use the Afghani success as a springboard for making a major onslaught against Saddam Hussein's regime the next phase of the "War on Terror." While the Bush Administration was highly critical of President Clinton's *de facto* acquiescence to Baghdad's rejection of intrusive, on-site inspections of its weapons-making facilities, this criticism was not accompanied – prior to September 11 – by measures designed to restore the inspection regime or to implement its policy of "smart sanctions." Now, against the backdrop of this revised strategic setting, a window of opportunity was suddenly opened for advocates of the hard-line approach to win the president's support. President Bush's strong demand, issued in early December, that Iraq agree forthwith to reopen its strategic facilities for inspection, can be viewed as an indication that the hard-liners have indeed made progress in pushing for their advocated strategy.

The Israeli-Palestinian Arena

Turning now to the Israeli-Palestinian sphere, it is clear that September 11 provided an impetus for accelerating processes that were already in the offing. The initial preference of the Bush Administration in assuming office was to refrain from any intensive entanglement in the Israeli-Palestinian sphere of the sort that had followed the abortive Camp David II Conference. The Bush administration had sought to remain detached from the day-to-day ebb and flow of Israeli-Palestinian violence. However, the ongoing violence between Israelis and Palestinians had forced Washington to increase its level of involvement in April 2001 – well before September 11. Fearing that, if continued, this posture of "benign neglect" would likely be interpreted in the Arab world as *de facto* support of Israel (and thereby reduce the willingness of America's allies in the Arab world to cooperate with Washington on a variety of issues), the administration opted to abandon its low-profile policy and embarked upon a determined effort to secure a stable Israeli-Palestinian cease-fire.

Washington's desire to consolidate an international coalition against terrorism was largely responsible for the new accommodative nuances in its Palestinian posture.

The two main vehicles by which the administration attempted to stabilize and manage the highly-charged Palestinian-Israeli imbroglio were the Mitchell Report and the Tenet Plan. The Mitchell Report, which was released on April 30, 2001, was drafted by an international commission of five diplomats headed by former US Senator George Mitchell. Although the Mitchell initiative itself dated back to the Clinton Presidency, the Bush entourage quickly endorsed its main tenets, while hoping that Israel would provide it with the necessary space to ensure its implementation.

In essence, the Mitchell Report envisioned an incremental and phased process of conflict reduction, which was predicated upon notions of symmetry and reciprocity between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Specifically, whereas Israel was called upon (as part of the confidence-building measures which were to follow the cease-fire) to "freeze all settlement activity in the West Bank, including the 'natural growth' of existing settlements," the Palestinian Authority was required to "make clear through concrete action to Palestinians and Israelis alike that terrorism is

reprehensible and unacceptable, and to make a 100 percent effort to prevent terrorist operations and to punish perpetrators." Only after these measures were fully and successfully implemented, the report further stated, could diplomatic negotiations between the parties be resumed.

Whereas the Mitchell Report was composed of several separate stages, which were to culminate in the resumption of the negotiating process, the Tenet Plan (drafted by CIA Director George Tenet on June 9, 2001), dealt exclusively with the first stage of the Mitchell Report. That is, its sole function was to define the modalities by which a viable and stable cease-fire between Israel and the Palestinian Authority could be reached. In that vein, the Tenet document called upon the Palestinian Authority to immediately apprehend, question, and incarcerate terrorists, to collect illegal arms and to provide Israel with information on imminent terrorist actions. For its part, Israel was required to refrain from attacking military and civil institutions in 'A' areas (i.e., areas under full PA civil and military control), to redeploy its military forces to positions held before the outbreak of violence on September 28, 2000, and to lift the closure imposed upon Palestinian territories and cities.

The visit of Secretary of State Colin Powell, in late June 2001, was intended to establish both the Mitchell Report and the Tenet Plan as the operational vehicles for setting in motion a phased process of conflict reduction in the Palestinian-Israeli sphere, based upon an accepted timetable for proceeding from the cease-fire to the inauguration of the confidence-building measures. In the discussions held between Powell and Israeli Prime Minister Sharon in the course of this visit, the prime minister made his acceptance of the Mitchell Report contingent upon the acceptance, by the US, of his envisioned timetable. Specifically, according to Prime Minister Sharon's formula, the confidence-building phase (which required Israel to freeze all settlement activity) had to be preceded by seven days of complete tranquility, followed by a six-week cooling off period. Then, and only then, would Israel be prepared to confront head-on the emotionally charged issue of settlements.

Secretary Powell's decision to accept the Israeli preconditions and timetable for the Mitchell Report severely constrained American diplomacy following September 11.

Secretary Powell's decision to accept the Israeli preconditions and timetable for implementing the Mitchell Report (and the Bush administration's subsequent decision not to deviate from these parameters, despite growing reservations) severely constrained American diplomacy during the period which followed September 11. The US found that its margin of maneuverability was severely constrained in its attempts to mitigate and defuse the volatile Israeli-Palestinian front.

The September 11 attacks did not significantly modify the basic course and direction of American policy in the Palestinian sphere, which continued to be patterned on the premises of the Mitchell Report and the Tenet Plan (including the former's original timetable). Still, Washington's desire to consolidate a broadly-based international coalition (which was to include a major Arab component) against terrorism was largely responsible for the new accommodative nuances and elements that now appeared in its Palestinian posture. Seeking to remove any distraction or obstacle that might block such Arab powers as Egypt and Saudi Arabia from taking part in America's anti-Taliban alignment, the administration was now prepared to offer the Palestinians a number of blandishments. It was hoped that these might move the two sides, at least rhetorically, through the narrow parameters of the Mitchell framework. A major manifestation of this accommodative dimension was embedded in Secretary Powell's major Middle Eastern address, which was delivered on November 19, 2001. The speech, which elaborated and expanded on President Bush's address one month before to the UN General Assembly, envisioned the establishment of "a viable Palestinian

state" as an "integral part of the permanent settlement between Israel and the Palestinians, which will exist alongside the Jewish state." It also referred to the need to "end Israeli occupation" and called upon Israel to halt its "settlement activity."

Notwithstanding this accommodative rhetoric, Secretary Powell's November 19 address, when viewed as a whole, fell short of any major conceptual breakthrough. Indeed, not only did the secretary allude in his speech to "Israel's security needs," but he used particularly strong language to condemn the Palestinians' relentless use of terror and violence against Israel. "Whatever the sources of Palestinian frustration and anger under occupation," he stated, "the Intifada is now mired in the quicksand of self-defeating violence and terror directed against Israel...which must stop, and stop now."

The administration's initial desire was to proceed uninterruptedly toward the formation (and maintenance) of its multilateral coalition, notwithstanding its initial propensity to differentiate between "types" of terrorist activity (i.e., between that which was directed against American cities and institutions on the one hand, and other politically-motivated forms of terror, including Palestinian terror, on the other). However, it found that it could not remain oblivious to the fact that American public opinion remained highly critical of some of Washington's traditional Arab allies in confronting the challenge of international terrorism. The fact that an overwhelming majority of the American public continued to view Israel as a victim of terror – regardless of its intrinsic source, and in an era characterized by an almost exclusive preoccupation with its dangers and ramifications – further constrained the Bush Administration. In this fashion, US public opinion ensured that when considering the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Bush administration would not deviate from the parameters of Powell's November 19 speech.

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As a result of these conflicting needs and constraints, the Bush administration's Israeli-Palestinian stance after September 11 was largely (though not exclusively) patterned on traditional tenets and components of American diplomacy. There was no concrete or systematic effort to incorporate Mitchell/Tenet into broader, more comprehensive or more ambitious designs. Indeed, even the appointment of retired Marine General Anthony Zinni as Secretary Powell's special envoy (who was dispatched to the region on November 28 and then again in early 2002) was explained by the Secretary as nothing more than an effort to help achieve a durable cease-fire along the lines of the Tenet Plan.

As 2001 drew to a close, it became increasingly clear that the accommodative gestures offered to the PA in Secretary Powell's November 19 address did not engender the hoped-for changes in Palestinian activities *vis-à-vis* Israel. Faced with a new wave of terrorist activity (which forced Zinni to temporarily suspend his mediating mission), the administration resorted to harsh rhetoric in criticizing Chairman Arafat's lack of "adequate action" in the face of the accelerating violence against Israeli civilians. Concurrently, it softened its rhetoric *vis-à-vis* Israel, and thus acquiesced – in early December – to such Israeli measures as the re-entrance of Israeli troops into 'A' areas.

Notwithstanding this change, the Bush Administration remained irrevocably opposed to more radical anti-PA measures that Israel had reportedly considered, such as the expulsion of Arafat from the West Bank. Furthermore, beneath the facade of conciliatory rhetoric there remain a cluster of potential disagreements between Washington and Jerusalem, which are bound to assert themselves as soon as circumstances in the Israeli-Palestinian arena change. The settlement issue, Israel's use of US-supplied F-16 fighter planes against Palestinian targets, repeated Israeli incursions into 'A' areas – these are but

a few of the questions which hovered over the American-Israeli agenda over the course of 2001, and which remain largely unresolved. Thus, it is not unreasonable to assume that under different circumstances and against the backdrop of a determined and durable Palestinian effort to enforce the cease-fire, all of these sources of friction and disagreement within the American-Israeli dyad would resurface. The result would dictate policies and initiatives at variance with the very essence and logic of the special relationship between Washington and Jerusalem.

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