

The Primacy of Regional Transformation: US Strategy in the Post-Disengagement Era

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A Swing in Policy?

At the core of the US decision-making process – on Middle Eastern issues as on others – it is often the president and the small group of influential people around him, the so-called "presidential elite," who determine the broad outlines of policy.¹ True, the basic currents of Congressional positions and public opinion have a role to play, and at times, create an important input. The professional class of Foreign Service officers and others in vast Washington bureaucracies who deal with the region (some of whom still tend to be "Arabists," promoting a close linkage between the Palestinian issue and US standing in the Middle East) can likewise leave their mark on implementation. However, it has consistently been the White House that called the key shots, ever since Truman overrode the central figures of his own administration and recognized Israel within minutes of its inception; and it will certainly be so in the second term of the present administration, which enjoys a partisan hold on both houses of Congress.

This presidential dominance has led at times to remarkable, personalized swings in mood and mode of action. For example, the deliberate inaction of the Reagan administration on the peace process replaced Carter's intensive involvement; in 1989, George Bush and James Baker took a radically fresh look at their options; more recently, George W. Bush turned his back decisively on Clinton's last-gasp "parameters" – and on Arafat as an interlocutor – and soon became a close ally of Sharon's strategy. Moods can change even in the lifetime of one

administration: the attitudes towards Israel that marked the late years of the Eisenhower administration bore little resemblance to the earlier conflicted relationship.²

Can such a sharp swing in US policy occur again at this time, as some of the right-wing opponents of Prime Minister Sharon's policy steadily warn, and some voices on the Israeli left openly hope would happen? Throughout much of 2005, Israel enjoyed a diplomatic "free ride," so as to make it easier for Sharon, beset by severe internal challenges, to ac-

complish his goals. Will this pattern persist after the completion of disengagement from the Gaza Strip and northern Samaria?

No simple predictions are possible in the extremely complex dynamics now at work in Israel itself, in Washington, among the Palestinians, and in the region as a whole. Present calculations may need to be redrawn – if a violent internal conflict engulfs Israel and acts as a restraint on future government decisions; if the unwieldy Sharon coalition comes unglued and early elections in 2006 change the

political landscape; and/or if a major terror attack, let alone a sustained outburst of Palestinian violence, brings an end to the present attempts to achieve calm and to promote confidence-building measures. Moreover, the long shadow of the troubling situation in Iraq and the setbacks in the war on terror as a whole taint all hopeful visions for the future.

Still, the short answer is no. Broader considerations may indeed compel the US to adopt a course of action that would lead to growing friction with Israel – particularly if the Israeli leadership chooses to exercise a "move to the right" after the disengagement – but not to a fundamental departure from the present strategy of stages. To understand why, it is necessary to take a closer look at the internal dynamics of current US policy in the region, which follows a pattern already familiar from previous Republican administrations.

The Predominance of Strategy

When the ebb and flow of US policies is assessed over time, it appears that Democratic presidents, of which there were only three since the Six Day War, tended to value the pursuit of Arab-Israeli peace as a strategic goal in its own right, reflecting, among other considerations, the strong sentiment of many of their liberal Jewish supporters. It was Johnson who set the stage for future events, by stipulating that Israel's gains in 1967, unlike 1956, should be used to achieve peace agreements, and by letting UN Security Council Resolution 242

be worded so as to leave some room for territorial compromise. Carter invested immense efforts in negotiating the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty (made possible, paradoxically, by Sadat's effective rebellion against Carter's initial policy of cooperation with the Soviets). Clinton, enticed by the possibilities offered by the active and audacious pursuit of peace under Rabin, Peres, and Barak, was equally involved and engaged: Arab-Israeli peace, for his administration, was

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not only a vital goal but the very cornerstone of his regional strategy, the pillar upon which all else depended (with tragic consequences).

Republicans, on the other hand, tended – fairly consistently, despite their own profound variance in ideological orientation and operational style – to subordinate the pursuit of peace to a broader regional agenda. This divergence should not be overstated: Democrats are mindful of broad strategic concerns, and Republicans are attentive to the moral imperatives of the quest for peace. The

resulting policies on both sides are marked by complexity and nuance, and often influenced by public and political pressures. Nevertheless, different points of departure do produce distinct policies. Ironically, those most ardently committed to the pursuit of peace "for its own sake" ended up by making it less likely, and vice versa.

For the Nixon and Ford administrations, guided by Kissinger's focus on the Soviet challenge, the Arab-Israeli process was above all an important arena of the Cold War, in which they were able to make significant gains, not least by making good use of Israeli military achievements. Reagan's attitudes towards Syria and the PLO were very much a function of the latter's Soviet affiliations. For Bush in 1991, Madrid was part of the broader effort to create a stable regional "architecture" in the aftermath of the Gulf War. With "Bush 43," despite the radical difference (the father was the enforcer of stability, the son an ardent advocate of democratic destabilization and change), this aspect of policy reemerges, after years of Clinton's "peace first" attitude: efforts to promote Israeli-Palestinian accommodation can be expected to move ahead only in the context of a much broader and extremely ambitious vision for the future of the Middle East.

The Decisive Issues

What are the key goals of US policy, from which we can expect to deduce the present and future priorities of the Bush administration? Two purposes stand out as the pillars of policy, even

though many suspect they may be fatally contradictory.

On the one hand, there is the drive for creation of what should be carefully defined not as "democracy" (too fast, too soon) but rather as the building blocks necessary for the emergence of civil society. This "generational" project, as defined by Bush and Rice, requires a broad range of initiatives – from the encouragement of a free press to the aggressive promotion of women's rights – ultimately leading to the establishment of democratic norms and institutions. The administration proudly points, even now (despite tragedies and losses in Iraq and elsewhere, including the London attacks) to the dramatic rise of new, participatory political patterns in the Arab and Muslim world, after generations (if not eons) of repression. It can be expected to hold on to this "defining" vision even at a time of severe adversity.

On the other hand, the US actively seeks the defeat of all attempts by totalitarian Islamists to come to power anywhere in the Arab or Muslim world. After all, these movements, Sunni and Shiite alike, are the specific enemy in the war on terror. The neo-conservative core of the present administration may have come to the conclusion that only a basic change in regional politics would be a real guarantee against such totalitarian bids for power, but until this long-term remedy does its work, the short-term challenge is to prevent the exploitation of the democratic process by totalitarian parties of any color (i.e., to avoid the

phenomenon of one man, one vote, one time).

It is yet to be seen whether both seemingly incompatible purposes can be served. After all, a dramatic shift towards democracy, while true liberal institutions and social forces are yet to mature, could easily play into the hands of the organized Islamist movements; while on the other hand, an extensive attempt to repress the latter could easily lead to the reversal of the (delicate and limited) gains made so far towards introducing the

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building blocks of civil society and democratic culture. In both cases, the entire rationale of Bush's vision, as emphatically stated in his second inaugural address and in his 2005 State of the Union Address – and more recently, by Karl Rove,³ who signaled no retreat, despite the difficulties in Iraq – would be cast into serious doubt, and with it, the central tenets of American policy in the post-9/11 era. It is therefore necessary for the administration to prove to its critics, at home and abroad, that US efforts are indeed capable of promoting both democratization and the containment of the Islamist threat.

The crucial testing grounds for

this strategic challenge will not be in the Palestinian arena. Above all, Iraq is the key battleground at this time, and for the foreseeable future the outcome there will continue to hang in the balance. Developments in Iran, particularly in light of Ahmadinejad's election to the presidency, could soon add to the drama. So will the response of the Syrian system to the recent, resounding setbacks in Lebanon. Egypt – and even more so, Saudi Arabia, which is fast becoming the target of angry pressures in Washington⁴ – may be subjected to steadily mounting American pressures for change. The future orientations of the emerging Palestinian polity cannot be expected to shape these broader patterns, and indeed, they are more likely to be shaped by them.

Nevertheless, the Palestinian "experiment" is important in and of itself. It seems to be authentically viewed and is certainly paraded by the Bush administration as "exhibit no. 3" (beside the elected governments of Iraq and Afghanistan), attesting to the transformative role of US policy in the region. For this very reason, it serves its purpose better when it can be presented and perceived as a successful work in progress, rather than be driven again, as during the catastrophic sequence of events in 2000, into a "make or break" corner. This implies that the administration would prefer tactics enabling Abu Mazen to survive in power, despite his shortcomings, over attempts to push him, and Israel, towards a permanent status agreement.

After all, the present administration is unlikely to find an Israeli government that would agree to Palestinian requirements; nor can it coerce Israel on issues such as Jerusalem or the refugees' "right of return" against the basic positions of the Israeli electorate, the sentiments of many in the American public domain, and the broad majority in both houses of Congress. Thus, any attempt to follow Clinton into the realm of laying down markers on the key components of the permanent status would be avoided, and even seen as an active threat to broader US interests.

The April 2004 Commitments

US options for dramatic progress towards Phase III of the roadmap are further curtailed by the formal commitment the US entered into in the exchange of letters between President Bush and Prime Minister Sharon on April 14, 2004. Much has been written of late – most of it politicized and misguided – to the effect that the more recent promise made to Mahmoud Abbas, namely, that no permanent change in the 1949 armistice lines can be made other than by mutual agreement, has rendered the April 2004 commitments irrelevant or meaningless. This is not the case. Israel itself is committed to the notion of an equitable and negotiated two-state solution (although this was hardly imaginable from a Likud leader until a few years ago); but the formal American assessment of what might be the outcome of the permanent status negotiations has taken away the mainstay of the Arab

position in advance of such negotiations. Bush "explained," and in effect asserted, that the latter are indeed unlikely to lead to a full return to the armistice lines. He did not even adopt the preferred Arab term, the "June 4, 1967 lines," which implies the "undoing of the outcome of Israeli aggression." By doing so, he took issue, directly and openly, with the Arab interpretation of "international legitimacy" – and with the expectation that this interpretation would sooner or later be imposed on Israel, not least by the US itself.

This American position negates the Palestinian assumption that there can be no peace process, unless its terms of reference are those they presume – namely, that 1967 was a war of aggression that entitles Israel to no gains at all; and that UN General Assembly Resolution 194 of December 1948 grants them, at least in theory, the right of return. The only prospect for a successful permanent status negotiation depends on the emergence of a Palestinian leadership willing to enter into open-ended negotiations without this "cover." There is little if any reason to assume that Mahmoud Abbas, despite his genuine rejection of terror, can transcend his domestic and inter-Arab limitations and make this choice.

The Long and Winding Road(map)

None of this, however, promises smooth sailing for any Israeli government, let alone one that may choose, after the disengagement and its trau-

ma (or after the 2006 elections), to opt for a sharp turn to the right and a hard-line stance on the future of the West Bank. The crucial issues, on which Israeli behavior might roil the Bush administration, are above all expansion of settlements and retention of outposts, and the mode of reaction to ongoing terror activities. While Bush has no intention of satisfying Abu Mazen's forlorn hopes of abandoning the elaborate mechanism of the roadmap and thus forcing Israel into the permanent status negotiations, he is equally unlikely to allow Israel to humiliate and break the Palestinian Authority (PA), in a manner that would ease the way for a Hamas takeover, with disastrous consequences for US regional policy.

The main thrust of the effort to sustain Abbas in power and reverse Hamas' recent political gains would come in the economic and social realm. Using the Gaza Strip as a vital testing ground and the Wolfensohn mission as the key instrument of policy, the US and the other members of the Quartet (certainly the Europeans, for whom "soft" influence is the preferred tool of change) would seek to make the rewards of stability and calm – investment, employment, good governance, social supports that replace what Hamas now offers to the poor and needy – manifest to the majority of Palestinians. The latter's present sympathy towards the radicals, after all, flows from their anger over corruption and poor services, rather than from real identification with the fundamentalist religious and political

program and its warlike anti-Israeli agenda.

Still, not all can be done by contributions from outside. Israel should therefore be prepared to do its part, or it will otherwise be pressed relentlessly toward several measures, including:

■ Easing restrictions on everyday life, releasing more prisoners, and above all, going as far as prudence allows towards giving the Palestinians freedom of movement (in the West Bank, and possibly between it and Gaza). At present, nothing contributes more to the Palestinian grievance – and to the manner in which it is read in Washington – than the endless litany of complaints about the road-blocks and checkpoints that hamper Palestinians going about their lives. Bush has more than once expressed his personal concern on this, and so far it has been proven again and again that with him, "what you see is what you get." In other words, his concern is genuine and has been expressed well and beyond the need to "make noises" that would keep Abu Mazen happy. Thus, solutions to the problem of "transportational contiguity" should be found soon.

■ Avoiding actions deemed as blatantly prejudging the outcome of negotiations, and as such highlighting Abu Mazen's helplessness and inability to restrain his Israeli interlocutors. The expansion of settlements and "pushing out" the contour of the fence in the areas where it has not yet been built are likely to provoke a

sharp American reaction. Again, the question of enabling the PA to withstand the Hamas criticism would play a major role in determining US policy – and even more so in the dialogue with Europe – and is bound to create extensive disagreements with Israeli policies.

Painful as they may sound, the same considerations are liable to lead to a lenient American position towards Palestinian failures to deliver on counter-terrorist actions at this stage, as long as the level of violence is not a major disruptive factor. The best Israel could do is swallow this grievance, as against the requirements of Phase I of the roadmap, and possibly use it to ease American pressures to fulfill its own obligations.

Beyond these immediate concerns, the mounting difficulty of managing the tensions between the continued presence of settlements in the very heart of the West Bank, particularly along Route 60 (dissecting the access from Ramallah to the other key population centers in Samaria) is bound, sooner or later, to force the larger issue of further disengagements and the creation of Palestinian territorial contiguity – a key concept endorsed by Israel as early as December 2002⁵ and later reaffirmed at the Aqaba Summit, but not yet actualized.

Theoretically, the better way of achieving Palestinian contiguity, while avoiding the pitfalls of permanent status negotiations, would be for the US to press both sides to implement Phase II of the roadmap and

reach an agreement on the creation of a Palestinian state "within provisional borders." It remains uncertain, however, whether the present Palestinian leadership would be willing to take the risks involved – it certainly fears that Phase II would be the last – although it may become more amenable to American suasion once US power is more effectively demonstrated in other theaters in the Middle East. Until this happens (if ever), the one course of action that would best serve American purposes may well be to try and coordinate with the next Israeli government, which will emerge after the 2006 elections, further unilateral steps (i.e., disengagements and withdrawals) that would help rather than hinder Abu Mazen's ability to consolidate his power.

Notes

- 1 The authoritative text on this issue remains Steven Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict: Making America's Middle East Policy, from Truman to Reagan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).
- 2 See, for example, Abraham Ben Zvi, *Decade of Transition: Eisenhower, Kennedy, and the Origins of the American-Israeli Alliance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).
- 3 Speaking before the New York Conservative Party, June 16, 2005.
- 4 To sense how much the Saudi "Teflon" has peeled off, see Robert Baer, *Sleeping with the Devil: How Washington Sold Our Soul for Saudi Crude* (New York: Three Rivers, 2004).
- 5 Sharon's speech at the Herzliya Conference, which preceded the following year's disengagement announcement.