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NEXT STEPS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

By Harvey Sicherman

The American war against terrorists and the states harboring them achieved a notable victory in Afghanistan. A politically isolated Taliban-Qaeda regime was overthrown by an American-led coalition (notably Pakistan and Russia) that used primarily American and local forces. The United States also benefited from a moral clarity about the identity of the enemy, the perpetrators of the September 11th attacks. But, in the process, a terrorist assault on India's parliament nearly led to an Indo-Pakistani war, narrowly averted by heroic American diplomacy.

The lesson here was clear enough. War against terrorism had to be waged in a way that did not make regional conflicts worse, lest the gains be swallowed up in a more general catastrophe. When the Bush Administration turned its full attention to the Middle East, however, this lesson proved far more difficult to apply. Washington's attempt to recreate South Asia's favorable conditions by focusing on Saddam Hussein's Iraq unexpectedly overheated the Israeli-Palestinian war already underway. This, in turn, forced the United States to enter the bloody test of wills between Israelis and Palestinians, uncertain of its direction and goals. George W. Bush would have to change the strategies of these protagonists, or at least contain their conflict, even as he prepared the way to remove Saddam.

1. THE IMPACT OF SEPTEMBER 11

Prior to September 11, the Bush Administration's policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict had been distinguished by a

lack of result rather than a lack of effort. Its major initiatives -- the Mitchell and Tenet plans -- could make no headway in the absence of a critical element: two leaders determined to make a deal, who would look to the U.S. to reduce their risks. This was how it happened between Sadat and Begin, between King Hussein and Rabin, and even between Arafat and Rabin at Oslo. Internationally-sponsored peace plans had never gotten anywhere alone.

Washington clearly viewed Arafat as the villain. Earlier, Arafat had rejected the Barak and Clinton proposals and had broken a string of promises to control violence while allowing incitement for more. Arafat's apparent strategy was to make enough mayhem to compel international intervention on behalf of his declared goals: Israel behind the June 4, 1967 lines; a Palestinian state in all of Gaza and the West Bank; its capital in Jerusalem; control of the Old City; and a return of refugees to pre-1967 Israel.

Israel had its own strategy. Unlike the 1982 Lebanon disaster, Sharon would pursue this war of attrition in coalition with the Labour opposition, and he would do so with American toleration if not outright support. The Sharon-Peres government also reflected popular Israeli disillusion with Oslo; while reoccupying the Palestinian cities was not in Israel's interest, Arafat's duplicity and Palestinian violence made peace unlikely. Israel would therefore answer terrorism and guerrilla war through closures, roadblocks and the controversial policy of killing key commanders of the intifada, hoping to force a change in Palestinian strategy, if not its leadership.

After September 11, the U.S. expected that both Arafat and Sharon would be more amenable to new directions. Arafat could not afford to become America's enemy in the war against terrorism (repeating his error of siding with Saddam in 1990); while Sharon could be expected to follow Shamir's precedent of lying low to facilitate an American war, from which Israel was sure to benefit. Sure enough, the Palestinian leader suppressed popular celebrations of Osama bin Laden and denounced terrorism; and Sharon offered his full cooperation.

Bush and Powell followed this up by announcing on November 19 that for the first time America would support "a viable Palestinian state," (diplo-speak for a state larger than the one conceived by Sharon). Thus, the U.S. offered Arafat a plausible political achievement to justify calling off the war while Sharon complained about appeasement.

Powell then sent retired Marine General Anthony Zinni,

lately head of the U.S. Central Command and an intimate of Persian Gulf politics, to open the road for the Tenet and Mitchell plans. To Zinni's (and Washington's) surprise, he found Arafat rather than Sharon the main obstacle. The Palestinian leader was simply not prepared to make the "100 percent effort" demanded by the U.S. to prevent violence and terrorism, especially the increasing use of suicide bombers against Israeli civilians. After multiple attacks on December 2, 2001, Zinni made a last effort to arrange two days of quiet; this failed when members of Hamas attacked two Jewish settlements on December 12th. The next day, Sharon led the Israeli Cabinet in declaring Arafat "irrelevant" and confined Arafat to Ramallah, in a kind of house arrest.

Then, on January 3, 2002, the Israelis captured the "Karine A," a Palestinian vessel chartered by Arafat's closest aides and loaded with fifty tons of Iranian arms. Both the United States and Israel concluded that Arafat had been planning an escalation while negotiating a cease-fire. Evidently, despite September 11th, Arafat was still pursuing his original strategy at higher levels of violence, threatening all-out war.

2. SIEGES, VISITS, AND PLANS

At this point, the U.S. opened another phase in the war on terrorism. Bush singled out Iraq as a prime target and began building the case for action. Saddam, like the Taliban, was an isolated political figure and the UN Security Council remained resolved that international inspectors, expelled from Baghdad three years earlier, should return to their work. In early February, the White House announced that Vice President Cheney would tour the area, apparently to convey Bush's determination to unseat Saddam, lest he acquire nuclear weapons.

Cheney's impending visit stimulated an unexpected initiative. The cautious rulers of Saudi Arabia were badly disturbed by September 11. Crown Prince Abdullah had been gradually preparing his country for a revolutionary idea: the estimated 42 percent of Saudis under age 15 would have to work when they grew up, not simply rely on oil revenues alone to sustain the kingdom. He had spent several years mending relations with all of his neighbors, while standing clear of the sputtering Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. But the attack on America -- 15 of the hijackers were Saudi citizens and bin Laden himself was the scion of a prominent family -- threw unwanted attention on the Kingdom. Americans did not like what they saw: Saudi funding of schools and groups hostile to Western culture and breeding grounds for anti-Americanism.

Stung by media criticism that some Saudi leaders attributed to Jewish influence, the Crown Prince offered The New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman a peace plan on February 17, which put the Saudis squarely among those who did not think a treaty with Israel to be a mortal sin. Abdullah's offer of "normal" relations, however, was coupled with the old Arab insistence that Israel withdraw to the pre-June 1967 war line, yield Jerusalem, and accept the "return of refugees." The United States promptly hailed Abdullah's "vision of peace" while noting that the local parties had to negotiate the details.

Cheney began his tour on March 10, and was soon drawn into the vortex created by the Saudi plan, the upcoming Beirut Arab League Summit, and Arafat's confinement in Ramallah. The Vice President offered to meet the Palestinian leader in Cairo once he fulfilled certain conditions related to terrorism, but once again Arafat failed the test. The Vice President's disappointment was compounded when, at the Summit on March 27-28, the Crown Prince, after securing support for the Saudi peace plan, bestowed a kiss on the newly berobed leader of the Iraqi delegation while arranging a resolution opposing a U.S. attack on Saddam. Thus, the Kingdom positioned itself one foot in the U.S. camp, and one foot in the anti-U.S. camp.

3. BUSH INTERVENES

It was at this moment that Arafat's strategy of forcing international intervention finally appeared to succeed. One hundred Israelis were killed in a month's time, culminating in the Passover bombing of a Netanya hotel on March 27, 2002. Thereupon, the Israelis waged "Defensive Shield," in reality an offensive intended to attack the terrorists' weapons factories, and their arms caches. The speed and ferocity of this assault on "Area A," under Palestinian control since Oslo, shocked the Palestinians, who did not think the Israelis would venture into their cities with a big ground force. Arafat's compound was wrecked, and he was confined to a few rooms along with suspects wanted by Israel for the murder of the Israel Cabinet Minister Rahavam Zeevi, the previous October. In Bethlehem, armed Palestinians were besieged after taking refuge in the Church of the Nativity, the traditional site of Jesus' birth.

The Israelis were surprised by what they captured and soon began leaking seized documents and other evidence aimed at proving their contention that Arafat himself had allowed, encouraged, and ordered terrorism, especially through the Fatah Tanzim, the Aksa Martyrs, and even the uniformed security services. Much of this was overshadowed by the

ten-day battle of the Jenin refugee camp, a fierce struggle costly to both sides. "Jeningrad," as Arafat would call it, soon took its place in the pantheon of Palestinian drama, cited simultaneously for both a massacre by the "Nazi" Israelis, and heroic resistance by the victims. No massacre was proven but diplomatic embarrassment followed when Israel agreed to a UN Security Council investigation (sparing the U.S. a veto), but then balked on grounds of unfairness.

A week into the Israeli operation, the United States suddenly intervened. On April 4, saying "enough is enough," Bush made strong public demands of Sharon (withdrawal without delay), Arafat (cease-fire and suppression of terror), and the Arab states (end incitement). Alluding to regional pressures, he argued that the Israeli tactics were now harming the existing peace agreements. Bush also dispatched Powell to facilitate action.

This dramatic assertion of Washington's will reflected Egyptian, Jordanian, and Saudi fears that the conflict might upset public order, a fear inflamed by widespread television broadcasting of Palestinian suffering. Still, neither Israel nor the Arabs could afford to look like American puppets, and immediate compliance with the U.S. demands would have only guaranteed calls for more far-reaching dictates. "Immediate" and "cease-fire" suggested a haste and precision quite foreign to the Middle East. Moreover, Powell's trip allowed the Israelis more than a week before he arrived in Jerusalem, a timetable that clearly disturbed his Arab hosts.

Powell gained little from his Arab interlocutors: deliver Israeli withdrawal first, then they would see. In Europe, he assembled a "quartet" consisting of the U.S., the EU, the UN and Russia. Its first pronouncement was a remarkably jumbled plea to do everything: 242, Oslo, Tenet, Mitchell, the new U.N. resolution on a Palestinian state. Then, in Israel, he got a full exposition from Sharon of the operation but no promise of instant withdrawal. He did little better in Ramallah where Palestinian rejoicing proved premature. The American intervention, to Arafat's public anger, did not bring the Israelis to heel nor was Powell offering a detailed American plan for a Palestinian state.

By the visit's end, the U.S. diplomat did obtain a timetable from Sharon but not full withdrawal, and his demands from Arafat left the Palestinian fuming. Powell also temporarily arrested a dangerous situation on the Lebanese border where the Syrian and Iranian influenced Hizballah threatened a new front. This was his most important if least reported achievement.

4. NEXT STEPS AND COMPETING PRESSURES

Powell left the Middle East on April 17, after sketching new directions for U.S. policy. Washington sought a complete Israeli withdrawal; aid for the Palestinian people to rebuild; a secure cease-fire and suppression of terrorism; and a "political horizon" leading toward a Palestinian state living in peace and security alongside Israel. It took until May day to defuse the Ramallah situation and another ten days to evacuate the church. During this time, came visits to the U.S. by the Saudi Crown Prince, Prime Minister Sharon, and Jordan's King Abdullah.

The Saudi visit began with newspaper leaks depicting an imminent confrontation. Following the Prince's visit to Bush's Crawford Ranch, however, the President described something much less. He even allowed that on a tour of the property the two had seen a wild turkey, surely novel for his august visitor.

The Saudis complained that excessive U.S. sympathy and support for Sharon fuelled anti-Americanism and played into Iraq's hands. (Saddam's agents were indeed offering rewards for suicide bombers.) In the Crown Prince's view, unlike 1990-91 the Arab-Israeli issue could not be deferred until after Saddam's defeat. Riyadh insisted that the U.S. should pressure Israel to pursue a new diplomatic path -- the Saudi peace plan -- while the Arab side would push Arafat to end the violence. The Saudis argued that only the President could lead toward a settlement of the conflict, and only Arafat could lead the Palestinians.

Some in the State Department and among former President Bush's advisors sympathized with this approach and made the case for prudence. Do not press the Saudi, Egyptian, and Jordanian governments too hard while the images of Palestinian suffering played over the region's media. Give Arafat a way out of war: a detailed U.S. plan that the parties could not refuse.

But George W. Bush was not prepared to impose such a plan on Israel, especially not a scheme that gave Arafat a great victory. High White House officials doubted that Arafat wanted an agreement or would keep his promises but recognized that he could not be cast aside. U.S. policy would therefore restrain Sharon from eliminating or exiling Arafat; still Bush would not deal with him until the Palestinian actually delivered a 100 percent effort on terrorism. Although confusing, the Bush Administration's tacking among these winds reflected genuine dilemmas and conflicting advice: the lack of a credible Palestinian

partner, questions about whether Sharon really wanted negotiations, and the desire to contain it all while preparing to finish off Saddam Hussein.

President Bush now faces two critical judgments. The first is the extent to which the Israeli-Palestinian conflict impedes the war on terrorism, specifically pressure on Iraq but also the suppression of other terrorist groups with "global reach." Over a decade ago, the U.S. found that Arab-Israeli tensions complicated but did not prevent an anti-Saddam coalition from going to war. Clearly it will be easier to put Saddam in U.S. sights if the Israeli-Palestinian issue is below sight, and less need of local allies if the planned military operation does not require the massive force of a Desert Storm. Nonetheless, the United States can still harm Saddam quite a lot even without much Arab cooperation. Moreover, the case can be made that, as in 1990-91, a further defeat of the violent opposition to peace with Israel, in Iraq if not elsewhere, is a necessary prelude to a successful diplomacy. The Madrid Peace Talks, after all, had been made possible by the American victory in the Gulf.

Even if the end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not a necessary prelude to heavy American pressure on Iraq, the U.S. has a strong interest in resolving it. The second critical presidential judgment will therefore be what can be done.

Eighteen months of warfare have turned the clock back to the pre-Oslo era when there were no partners on the Palestinian side, the violent status quo looked intolerable and a final status agreement appeared unattainable. Recent developments, however, may offer the potential for progress.

-- An "International Mandate for Palestine": Arafat's dictatorship has proved incapable in both war and peace, and the Palestinians have paid a high price in blood and treasure for a dead end. For many Palestinians, regional Arab governments, the Europeans and the U.S., the Palestinian Authority looks increasingly like a failed state in the making. At the very least, "reform" is necessary to rehabilitate the Palestinian partner for the assumption of its responsibilities before more money and effort is invested. The U.S. must be very clear, however, about reform. It means the effective loosening of Arafat's grip on the purse and the pistol: his total control of resources and his retention of the terrorist option. Elections are no substitute for real change in Arafat's rule which must include a heavy international oversight and joint willingness by the U.S., the Europeans and influential Arab

states to send the same message: negotiation is the only way forward and violence will bring sanctions, including the derecognition of Arafat himself.

-- "Statehood by Installments": the Palestinian partner will not be ready soon to inspire confidence in its capacity to govern or to fulfil basic obligations of a state, such as a monopoly on armed force. Moreover, this is the key to the revival of political support in Israel itself for the inevitable risks of Palestinian statehood. All plans for final status, whether Saudi, the Clinton-Barak ideas or even Sharon's professed readiness to recognize a mini-state with a long diplomatic delay in final status, are a leap too far until a credible Palestinian partner appears. Still, key steps forward can be taken even if final agreements cannot be reached. Many of these are listed in the Mitchell Plan. Practically, they amount to a kind of separation between the two to relieve the Palestinian situation on the ground while Israel regains confidence about the PA's performance. There is further room for change between "Area A" and whatever is negotiated on the final lines. Each of these moves can be justified as leading toward a Palestinian State even if the final borders of that state are not yet determined.

By pressing these two movements, the U.S. will draw upon the desire of both sides to alter the status quo even if neither can make the final leap to an overall settlement. It cannot be stated often enough that outside plans and pronouncements are helpful only when the parties are already inclined to look for the deal. The diplomatic history of Arab-Israeli peacemaking is littered with blueprints that missed this fundamental fact, just as the desire for the deal is so often stimulated by a bout of failed violence. In this case, the defeat of terrorism as a method for effecting change is crucial to peacemaking in the Middle East.

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