

# Albright and the Middle East:

## A Pre-Trip Briefing

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### Brief Analysis

**S**ecretary of State Madeleine Albright will find a Middle East of changing expectations and heightened vulnerabilities for United States interests. In Egypt, she will find a country that is facing potential cuts in U.S. foreign aid; Congress has given notice that economic assistance—the symbol of the U.S.-Egypt relationship—is legitimate fare for the chopping block. In Jordan, Albright will find a leadership eager to build a warm peace but a populace growing ever more outspoken, independent, and anti-peace. In Saudi Arabia, she will encounter four problems: the immediate issue of responding to the al-Khobar Towers investigation; the related issue of assessing political change in Iran; the ongoing, and apparently deepening problem with Iraq; and the region-wide issue of shifting alignments. Each of these issues has within it the raw material for a very serious problem for the administration.

### Albright, Assad, and Arafat

Secretary Albright may find some measure of solace and progress in the one place that evaded Warren Christopher: Damascus. Assad miscalculated by not taking up late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's offer to negotiate the 1967 lines on the basis of adequate security arrangements, and he has recently put out feelers that he is interested in returning to the diplomatic game. Assad's renewed interest comes in the shadow of prospects of tightened U.S. sanctions, and the recent announcement that the United States will participate in naval exercises with Israel and Turkey off the Syrian coast.

Yasser Arafat miscalculated in trying to accommodate his radical Islamist opponents, rather than confront them the way most other Middle Eastern leaders have dealt with them. For thirty years, Arafat chose unity of the revolution, but did not succeed in liberating an inch of Palestine. In 1993, he chose progress and in exchange, he won some territory and the potential for more. Today, Arafat faces the same decision: unity with Hamas and Islamic Jihad, or

progress, more territory, and more control. Arafat will only choose the latter if he is denied every other option. He is unlikely to do all that is asked of him unless he knows that the final status outcome will be more or less to his liking and neither Labor nor Likud are offering him what he wants. For Arafat, unity may be a better prospect than progress which would mean the likely outcome of this round will be more brinkmanship, violence and terrorism.

#### The Changing Purpose of Albright's Trip

When Secretary Albright first announced her trip, she articulated a new U.S. approach to the peace process. This approach shifted the equation of peacemaking in two respects. First, from a simultaneous emphasis on what Israel and the Palestinians needed to do with and for each other, to a sequential process, in which Palestinian efforts on security needed to be adequate before any serious discussions of Israeli concessions. Second, from a step-by-step process designed to build confidence, to a new process, focused almost exclusively on the final status talks. The agenda of her trip was not to be security, but the procedural aspects of fulfilling interim obligations and opening final status talks.

With the September 4 Jerusalem bombing, the calculus for Albright changed; the trip, formerly devoted to politics, will now be focused instead on security. Nevertheless, there will be more than just security on the agenda. The Israeli inner cabinet unexpectedly stated that Israel urged an accelerated movement toward final status talks, even in the current environment. Albright will most likely use that opening to inject considerable politics into the trip. Oslo—the process of incrementalism—is essentially dead. For any new process to work, Albright needs to quickly create a new set of negotiations on final status issues, and have those talks move very slowly, so that the parties don't reach deadlock on the key issues too soon. The two sides, though, do not appear ripe for a deal, and so the prospects for success are dim.

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#### Albright's Calculated Judgment

Secretary Albright's decision not to travel to the Middle East earlier in the year was a very reasonable judgment in view of higher priority demands in other regions and the low likelihood of achieving much progress in the Middle East. Since the first trip of a Secretary of State to the Middle East always raises enormous expectations, to have dashed those expectations might have diminished her ability to have an impact later on when conditions were more propitious. But as the impasse has become more dangerous, pressures on her to travel became overwhelming. Nevertheless, Albright's current trip is viewed with very low expectations. Secretaries of State generally make trips to the Middle East early in their tenures to be able to characterize the trip as a fact-finding tour and so avoid getting caught in the trap of exaggerated expectations. By deferring her visit, Albright gave up that argument and has made the first trip more politically vulnerable to failure.

#### Caught in a Political Trap

There have been many recommendations as to how Albright can get out of the trap that is waiting for her. One of the more perceptive is the August 24 piece by Henry Kissinger in the Washington Post. According to Kissinger, when the negotiating process resumes it should concentrate on four issues: Israel's final borders and a staged withdrawal to them; recognition by Israel of a more-or-less sovereign Palestinian state; security guarantees for Israel within that context; restrictions on Israeli changes of the status quo while final status talks take place, and deferral of the issue of Jerusalem until at least an agreement in principle is reached on borders and statehood. What this outline disregards is the dilemma the administration faces in marrying the advice of the policy community with the reality of the political world. Congressional leaders have made known to President Clinton that if Arafat does not shape up, support for the PLO in Congress will disappear. Analysts agree that the security issue needs to be addressed more seriously by Arafat and that has to be at the top of Albright's agenda, but most will agree that it is impossible for him

to respond adequately unless Netanyahu's government holds out more hope for Palestinian goals than it has of late.

### The Wild Card of Islamic Fundamentalism

While Arafat still has the ability to sell Oslo to the Palestinians, the wild card in the process remains the strength of Palestinian Islamic fundamentalists. Every other Arab regime has attempted to destroy these movements forcefully; Arafat, however, still believes that he can find a way to co-opt them and avoid the issue of civil war. So far, there is no evidence that the fundamentalists have been anything other than rejuvenated, and have become a longer range threat to Arafat as a result of his tactics. The Palestinians are a long way from dealing with this issue in a way that will lend any confidence to Israelis that a negotiated peace process will not be repeatedly disrupted by violence. Therefore, a resumption by Arafat of the war against terror and a signed final status accord between Netanyahu and Arafat in the foreseeable future remains highly unlikely.

### Prospects

The most Albright can hope for on this trip are some small cosmetic moves from both sides; no breakthroughs.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Eytan Fisch.

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