

The Bush-Shamir Meeting

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Brief Analysis

Israeli Prime Minister Shamir meets with President Bush next week for their first discussions since well before the Gulf crisis. This meeting offers a critical opportunity to repair their personal relations, coordinate approaches to the Gulf crisis and the peace process, and address Israeli security and economic concerns. If Bush and Shamir use this chance to make some headway on these issues, it will assist both nations in confronting today's crisis in the Gulf and tomorrow's developments in the region as a whole. Failure to exploit this opportunity may lead to further misunderstandings, hampering American policy.

"The Best of Times, the Worst of Times"

The past few months have witnessed the best and worst of times for American-Israeli relations. On the plus side, U.S.-Israeli strategic cooperation has grown significantly. The U.S. and Israel have agreed to continue the Arrow ATBM program and to increase the prepositioning of American military stocks in Israel. U.S.-Israeli military cooperation during the Gulf crisis has included significant intelligence sharing and provision of the Israeli HAVE NAP system to the U.S. Air Force -- a long-range attack capability not present in U.S. inventories.

Early on in the Gulf crisis, the Bush administration recognized the increased threat posed to Israel by Iraqi ballistic missiles, and moved to meet Israel's requirements by providing the Patriot air defense missile system. At the end of the legislative session, Congress expanded aid to Israel into new areas -- such as authorizing funds for a petroleum stockpile. The United States has also helped Israel provide for a wave of Soviet immigrants with \$400 million in housing guarantees and additional refugee assistance. The net result is that U.S. assistance to Israel climbed to new highs during a year in which most analysts expected it to drop.

Yet, this period has also witnessed the worst of times in U.S.-Israeli relations. The United States has treated Israel almost as a "stealth state" during the Gulf crisis, neglecting its longstanding policy of working with both Arab states and Israel in pursuit of U.S. interests. American and Israeli leaders have disagreed vocally about all aspects of the peace process, ranging from Israeli settlements and Jerusalem to the appropriateness of an international conference. Proposed U.S. arms sales to Saudi Arabia have alarmed Israelis while improved American relations with Syria -- including acceptance of Syria's military intervention in Lebanon -- have caused uneasiness in Jerusalem. Finally, the Bush administration's proposal to conduct direct talks with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein has stimulated Israeli fears that the United States might agree to a deal with Saddam leaving Israel exposed to Iraq's military might.

Such differences have led to the deepest chill in U.S.-Israeli relations since the 1982 war in Lebanon. President Bush and Prime Minister Shamir have not spoken for many months -- during a period when the President has contacted leaders across the globe for their support. The reason for this hiatus in contacts is clear. President Bush blamed Shamir for the breakdown of the peace process last winter and saw little reason for personal contact under those circumstances. This situation was compounded by the Gulf crisis. The administration viewed Israel as an inconvenient ally, and part of its "low-profile" strategy for Israel was the avoidance of Yitzhak Shamir.

A Chance to Clear the Air

The Shamir visit offers an opportunity to put aside past differences and focus on future cooperation. Apart from the effort both are expected to make to overcome the bad chemistry between them and put a good face on the U.S.-Israeli relationship, a number of concrete issues are likely to arise.

The Gulf Crisis. Israel accepts the U.S. approach that it should take a "low profile" in the crisis. But this cannot turn into "no profile"; Israel cannot remove itself from the map of the Middle East to suit the convenience of coalition politics. Moreover, Israel and the United States would be wise to begin a high-level dialogue about how they would address Iraqi threats to Israel. To this point there has been insufficient coordination between the American and Israeli political and military echelons; each side could surprise the other if the military situation deteriorates. At the very least, the United States and Israel should come to an understanding about how they will deal with an Iraqi attack on Israel.

In the long run, because of Israel's position and military capabilities, it will have to be part of any post-crisis security arrangements. In the event that the crisis ends with Iraq's army intact, Israel and the United States will need to reach an understanding about security guarantees the United States can offer and how they will cooperate to counter Iraqi threats to Israel and the region. President Bush and Prime Minister Shamir are likely to agree on the firm course which the administration is taking toward Iraq and on the need to reduce Iraqi military capabilities in order to increase stability in the region. If they reach an understanding, this should reduce criticism from Israel about the upcoming U.S.-Iraqi discussions.

The Peace Process. President Bush and Prime Minister Shamir are unlikely to reach any agreement on the substance of the issues that separate them, including settlements, territorial compromise, an international conference, and Jerusalem. But both will agree that it is important in the aftermath of the Gulf crisis to move forward in the peace process and that new ideas are needed. Any indication of mutual understanding between them will better enable the United States to rebut Saddam's claim that he is the only one doing anything about the Palestinians while enabling Prime Minister Shamir to confront the hopelessness and frustration that marks Israeli public discourse today.

There may be some grounds for understanding on process, if not on substance. The administration may have come around to the Israeli view that negotiations should include a state-to-state element, and may alter its approach accordingly. Certainly in the near term -- given the position of the PLO and Jordan in the Gulf crisis and the growing violence within Israel and the West Bank/Gaza -- it is hard to imagine reconstituting an initiative directed solely at Israelis and Palestinians. The creation of a U.S. coalition with Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia and the improvement in Soviet-Israeli relations may offer new opportunities to develop an effective peacemaking strategy.

Bilateral Relations. Shamir reportedly will not bring any direct requests for more assistance. But he and President Bush will undoubtedly discuss the problems Israel's economy faces as a result of the increased burden of absorbing hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews as well as the increased military burden imposed on Israel by the Gulf crisis and its aftermath.

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