

Jerusalem-Ramallah-Cairo-Amman:

A Trip Report and Policy Update

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Brief Analysis

On November 23, 2010, Robert Satloff and J. Scott Carpenter, along with David Makovsky, addressed a special Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. The speakers offered fresh observations from the Institute's 25th anniversary study tour to Israel, the West Bank, Egypt, and Jordan in mid-November. Dr. Satloff is executive director of the Institute. Mr. Carpenter is the Institute's Keston Family fellow and director of [Project Fikra: Defeating Extremism through the Power of Ideas \(templateI02.php?SID=24\)](#). The following is a rapporteur's summary of Dr. Satloff's and Mr. Carpenter's remarks; Mr. Makovsky's remarks were published separately as [PolicyWatch #1729 \(templateC05.php?CID=3279\)](#).

Robert Satloff

Throughout the recent Institute study tour to the Middle East, Israeli and Arab officials conveyed one overriding message to the participants: the need for clear and bold American leadership to confront regional threats, particularly with regard to Iran. Despite the unexpectedly powerful impact of increased sanctions against the Islamic Republic, Washington's ultimate goal of halting Tehran's nuclear efforts remains elusive and not well understood. Regional leaders are counting on the Obama administration to communicate a clear policy on the issue. In the meantime, in their common view, Washington does not have a well-considered, well-executed strategy to prevent the spread of Iranian influence around the region.

On a more positive note, we found the people of two historically authoritarian countries -- Egypt and Jordan -- beginning to engage in the back-and-forth of real politics. In Egypt's case, real politics proceeds despite both the regime's best efforts to stifle it and the considerable politicking inside the ruling National Democratic Party. Still, our traveling group was heartened by meetings with an array of domestic anti-Islamist reformers offering a message of liberal change. In Jordan, where we arrived shortly after parliamentary elections, we were pleased to learn about not

only the solid voter turnout but also the open access for international observers. Such political reform deserves to be nurtured.

For its part, the dominant theme in Israel was the umbrella of an eerie security calm despite the constant threat of missile or rocket attack from Syria, Hizballah, and Hamas. The number of attacks against Israelis emanating from the West Bank is at an all-time low, and the 2006 and 2009 wars in Lebanon and Gaza, respectively, seem to have deterred Hizballah and Hamas. In the event of another war, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) believe they are well prepared to deliver the swift, crushing blows they were previously unable to land.

Specifically, the security calm is the result of four factors: the success of Israel's security fence, the continued (but reduced) IDF presence, ongoing Palestinian economic improvements, and the development of professionally trained Palestinian security forces committed to cooperation with Israel. Meetings with Palestinian leaders -- including President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayad -- projected confidence about the internal political and economic situation in the West Bank as well as the process of institution building, even in the absence of diplomatic progress. Across the board, however, Arabs and Israelis -- on both the political and security levels -- agreed that peace diplomacy must begin to catch up with this on-the-ground progress to give the latter any chance of long-term success.

Regarding the peace process, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu clearly believes that a U.S.-Israeli understanding on the settlements issue is paramount to preventing the sort of flare-ups that have already disrupted bilateral relations four times over the past eighteen months. At the same time, his expectation of what can be achieved in Israeli-Palestinian talks during the proposed ninety days of settlement moratorium is low, particularly given his view that much remains to be done on the security front. He does believe, however, that if there is a commitment to achieving real results, the opportunity presented by the proposed moratorium should allow for enough progress to keep both parties at the table, even if a historic breakthrough is unrealistic.

More generally, the Institute delegation was struck by two comments, one delivered by a senior Israeli intelligence officer and the other by Egyptian prime minister Ahmed Nazif. The officer expressed serious concern that the continued delegitimization of Israel in the international arena poses a strategic threat to his country; in fact, he placed the problem near the top of his overall threat assessment. And Prime Minister Nazif warned that a dangerous development is under way in the Arab-Israeli arena -- the transformation of the longstanding nationalist/territorial conflict between Arabs and Israelis into a religious-based conflict between Muslims and Jews. In that scenario, he feared, the problem may evolve beyond the collective power of the parties to resolve it.

J. Scott Carpenter

Egypt's recent parliamentary elections kick off what is likely to be a drawn out political transition in Egypt -- the country's first in more than thirty years. Understandably, this anticipation is creating a certain level of anxiety in Egypt, which was reflected in our meetings in Cairo. Despite their best attempts to convey a sense of normalcy and stability during our discussions, Egyptian officials projected weakness and insecurity on both foreign and domestic matters. As the transition deepens over the next couple of years, these insecurities will likely prove mutually reinforcing.

A meeting with parliamentary speaker Fathi Srour and several committee chair members revealed the extent of such sentiments. Even on the threshold of national elections, they steadfastly avoided discussion of domestic affairs, focusing instead on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and America's failure to exhibit leadership in the region. Worth noting in this context is the degree to which official Egypt seems to hold Washington responsible for marginalizing Cairo in the region. Such critiques are based, in part, on their belief that the United States was responsible for Iran's rise following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Implicit in these arguments is a warning that

Washington should not make the same mistake in Egypt that it allegedly made in Iran -- that is, undermining the Mubarak regime as it undermined the shah.

Despite using the Israeli-Palestinian issue to deflect attention from sensitive domestic matters, Egyptian officials seemed to lack creativity and dynamism when recommending solutions to the current impasse over settlements. For instance, the Egyptians indicated they planned to endorse the Arab League's plan to seek UN Security Council recognition of a Palestinian state, knowing that an endorsement would kick up dust and serve no practical purpose other than embarrassment of President Obama. This attitude seemed to reflect a naive belief that the Obama administration is so relatively weak it can be pressured into further arm-twisting of Israeli prime minister Netanyahu on the settlements issue.

In contrast, Egyptians not affiliated with the government offered a sharp critique of the regime's narrative. According to them, the government is completely disconnected from the people. In particular, they believe that Cairo's focus on the peace process is a reflection, not of genuine concern for the issue, but of a desire to deflect U.S. attention from Egyptian human rights and political reform. These and other reformers are doing what they can to challenge the government. Most recently, they have requested to observe the parliamentary elections and have called for improvements in the electoral process; thus far, however, the regime has rebuffed them. Despite the apparent lack of U.S. leadership on these issues, Egyptian reformers remain confident that change is coming, and they are no longer relying on Washington to usher it in.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Sheli Chabon. ❖

Policy #1728

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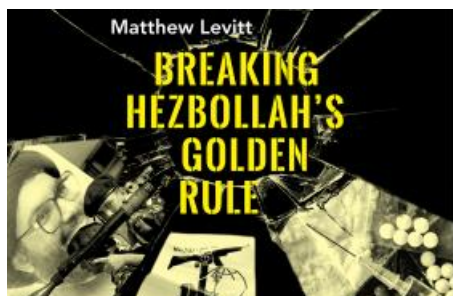
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