

This Is a Big Mideast Day for Bush

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President George W. Bush travels to two scenic Red Sea resorts this week. Today, in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, he meets a group of Arab rulers. Tomorrow, in Aqaba, Jordan, he will see the prime ministers of Israel and the Palestinian Authority. If you focus on Aqaba instead of Sharm, you may miss the big story.

In Aqaba, most journalists will wait anxiously for white smoke to emerge from the president's first foray into Israeli-Palestinian mediation. Will Bush create the elusive "breakthrough"? Will there be a joint declaration or just a sterile communique? Will the trio pose for a photo with hands clasped one atop the other or with a more businesslike handshake?

The reality is that both premiers, Ariel Sharon and Mahmoud Abbas, have decided the summit will be a "success" -- not least to avoid disappointing Bush -- and so it will be.

But that success is unlikely to change the balance of risk and reward that determines whether Abbas will actually disarm Islamist terrorists, as required by the "road map" to Mideast peace, and whether Sharon will actually end Israel's "occupation" of Palestinians, a word he used last week for the first time.

These questions will be decided not at Aqaba but by Israelis and Palestinians themselves.

The Sharm conclave, by contrast, will appear less dramatic; the personalities, less compelling; the issues, less pressing. But Sharm is Bush's first set of direct talks with Arab leaders since Saddam Hussein's overthrow. As such, it is his first opportunity to take his revolutionary ideas for Arab political change directly to the region's decision-makers. If Bush passes up the chance to press his case at Sharm, he may never have another.

That vision has three parts.

Part one is the transformation of Iraq, a job that today stands only half-done. While none of the Sharm leaders stood in the way of U.S. efforts to topple Hussein, only two -- the brave young kings of Bahrain and Jordan -- actually put their thrones at risk by hosting allied forces. Now Bush will give them all a second chance to join the winning side by asking them to play constructive roles in building a new, peaceful, tolerant and representative Iraq.

Part two is transformation of the Palestinian Authority. Ever since 9/11, Arab leaders have lobbied Washington to "engage" on Mideast peace -- code for pressuring Israel -- to compensate for the alleged anti-Arabism of U.S. foreign

policy. To his great credit, Bush both rejected that demand and recognized that peace can never be achieved by trying to coax Israel into accepting the peacemaker-cum-terrorist ramblings of Yasser Arafat. Instead, Bush declared that peace-process activism would await the emergence of a "new Palestinian leadership, not compromised by terror."

So far, some progress has been made. Though no more conciliatory than Arafat, Abbas is at least committed to achieving Palestinian objectives through diplomacy, not terror. But even from his bombed-out redoubt in Ramallah, Arafat is still able to stymie the reformist initiatives of his long-time second-in-command. That is in large part due to the fact that Arafat still derives influence from his status as the person recognized by Arab (and European) capitals as the Palestinians' pre-eminent leader.

In Sharm, Bush will urge the Arab leaders to invest in peace by ending their patronage of Arafat. He is likely to remind them that they stood idly by in July 2000, when Arafat dismissed Israel's peace overtures at Camp David, consigning the region to three years of terrorism and instability. Offering them a rare second chance on peace, he will urge them to anoint Abbas as the de facto Palestinian leader.

Part three will be the hardest for Arab leaders to swallow. It is a call for greater political freedom, more economic liberalism, and substantial improvements in women's and minority rights inside their own countries. It is, in short, a call to choose democracy. Bush will not impose a regime-threatening demand for "elections now!" but he can be expected to argue that Arab security -- no less than American security -- depends on Arabs solving their problems at home rather than exporting them in the form of terrorists abroad.

Not all the Sharm participants will like what they hear. They have all suffered from terrorism, most recently in Riyadh and Casablanca, and will argue that more openness only provides more opportunities for local Osama bin Ladens to take root.

But their protestations should not carry the day. If Bush holds firm, the Sharm summit -- not the higher-profile event in Aqaba -- could mark the opening chapter of a truly new and different Mideast. ❖

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