

Beyond Summit Pageantry: Requirements for Bush's Middle East Success

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Brief Analysis

President George W. Bush will be holding three summits next week that will have a strong Middle East orientation. A G-8 summit will be followed by a meeting with Arab leaders in Sharm al-Shaykh, Egypt, and a summit of Israeli and Palestinian leaders in Aqaba, Jordan, representing a new phase in the administration's approach to the Middle East.

Upgrading presidential involvement solidifies an institutional shift in U.S. engagement from a State Department-dominated approach (seen at the start of the Bush presidency) that was averse to President Bill Clinton's Middle East peacemaking to a more White House-dominated approach, which emerged after the September 11 attacks and has only intensified since. Although national security advisor Condoleezza Rice may orchestrate the appointment of an envoy to the region, she herself is expected to be the driving force in U.S. Middle East policy in the months ahead, just as she has been the lead negotiator behind the scenes in leading the parties to accept the Roadmap.

The timing of Bush's involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian issue is a result of potential opportunity in a region often known for tragedy and conflict. Bush seeks to maximize changes resulting from his altering the regional landscape with the vanquishing of Saddam Husayn, the traditional standard-bearer of Arab radicalism. (One can only speculate whether the administration made quiet promises to Arab leaders—not to mention Europeans—in the run-up to the war in Iraq, trading their support for intensified engagement in Arab-Israel issues.) Yet, apart from regional opportunity, the engagement comes amid the partial transition to a new leadership among the Palestinians. With Bush having branded Yasir Arafat an illegitimate interlocutor in his June 24, 2002, speech, Palestinian legislators became more cognizant that Arafat has no strategic direction on the road to statehood. This helped spur the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) to name Mahmoud Abbas (known by patronym Abu Mazen) to the newly created position of prime minister last month.

These two achievements make the timing of Bush's trip particularly propitious. Also working in his favor, next week's summits have a more modest immediate objective than his predecessor's vaunted task of conflict resolution (i.e., tackling the heretofore intractable core conflict issues such as Jerusalem, refugees, etc.). Bush will be focused on crisis management: halting the difficult situation on the ground, which is a prerequisite to peacemaking. Bush is

not going to the Middle East to make peace, but rather to serve as a catalyst for creating a new environment that could at least help make peace possible. This objective may sound too modest, but it remains formidable given the two-and-a-half years of violence and heightened mistrust between Palestinians and Israelis. Moreover, given Bush's standing in the wake of the victory in Iraq, the parties will have at least a tactical interest in immediately declaring support for his wishes. Nevertheless, the president will face challenges, and several variables will determine his enduring success.

Israeli and Palestinian Leadership

One key variable will be whether both Israeli and Palestinian leaders are beginning to condition the public discourse so that the two peoples begin to develop common assumptions. For example, the Israeli decision to accept the Roadmap constituted the first official Israeli government endorsement of Palestinian statehood. Critics charge that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's acceptance was driven not by a belief that peace is possible, but rather by extraneous factors, namely, a desire to avoid a split with the Bush administration, place the onus for peacemaking failure on the other side, and steady a worsening economy. (Even Finance Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, whose rivalry with Sharon has been predicated on opposition to Palestinian statehood, abstained from the cabinet decision, ostensibly due to the same concerns.) Yet, Sharon made two sets of statements this week that have an impact beyond such factors. Going into the lion's den of his own Likud parliamentary faction meeting, Sharon stated that Israel must have the courage to say that "occupation" of areas containing 3.5 million Palestinians is "bad for Israel and the Palestinians" and cannot continue indefinitely. In the past, Sharon has utterly rejected the term "occupation," so this statement was truly remarkable. Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein complained because he thought Sharon was characterizing the legal status of the land in a way that would have juridical ramifications, but Sharon reiterated his remarks before the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, clearly suggesting that he considers occupation the unsustainable control of a foreign people. This idea has resonated among Israelis; according to a poll published today, 62 percent of them want to end occupation over the Palestinians. This comes against the backdrop of other statements wherein Sharon publicly expressed the link between Israel's economic fortunes and a renewed peace process and said that Israel may have to part with settler strongholds in Beit El and Shilo. Indeed, during the same Knesset committee meeting, Sharon made clear that he has worked out understandings with Washington on settlements and outposts, broadly hinting at concessions on this score. Also working in Sharon's favor is his unofficial parliamentary safety net among those in the opposition, accentuated by the clear willingness of the Labor Party to wait in the wings to broaden the base of his coalition, thus reducing his dependency on his fiercest critics on the right.

For his part, Abu Mazen has begun to condition his own public in a way that Arafat never did during the Oslo process. Last month, he stated in the PLC that there is no military option against Israel, and that terrorism goes against moral and religious teachings and undermines Palestinian aspirations for statehood. It is critical that such an approach is sustained in order to sever the tacit tolerance and even explicit affinities that the Palestinian public has demonstrated for suicide bombing. Thus, it will be interesting if reformer Nabil Amr, the new information minister, seeks to tackle the anti-Israel incitement broadcast on state-run media. The new leadership approach seems to be generating some small dividends. For example, in the period since government statements against violence, Palestinians in the Gaza area of Beit Hanoun held an unprecedented demonstration against militants who were shelling Israel.

Forging a New Partnership and the Consequences of Failure

The absence of an Israeli-Palestinian partnership even during the Oslo years has been exploited by rejectionists. One toxic element of the peace process in the 1990s was the sense of a double game: the Palestinian leadership tolerated terrorism and thus used it as an instrument of negotiations. Israel's targeted killings of suspected terrorists, which

has triggered a reaction, resulted from this sense that there was no partner. Abu Mazen said in an interview this week that he would put forth "100% effort" to make sure the Palestinians fulfill their responsibilities; if this is indeed the case, Sharon has signaled that he will halt targeted killings in the areas in question. In an interview today, Israel Defense Forces chief of staff Moshe Ya'alon spoke of the importance of giving Palestinian Authority (PA) security chief Muhammad Dahlan the time he needs to bolster his forces.

In this context, Sharon and Abu Mazen met last night to discuss what practical steps can be taken on the ground that would demonstrate whether these commitments are genuine. It remains to be seen whether Dahlan will succeed in imposing security in northern Gaza, and whether reciprocal Israeli steps (e.g., taking down settlement outposts constructed since 2001 and not authorized by the Israeli government; increasing the amount of back taxes paid to the Palestinians) will succeed in building confidence. Sharon announced some easing of travel restrictions on the Palestinians, the release of some prisoners, and the authorization of 25,000 work permits inside Israel. If each side has a sense that the other will act in a predictable manner and make a good faith effort, this could have a salutary effect on peacemaking. Here, a U.S. mediator could be key. If disjointed gestures take the place of direct negotiation, the chances of misunderstanding will likely increase, with both sides engaging in recriminations and charging that the other is acting insufficiently or in bad faith.

In the absence of a partnership, critics will seek to pounce. An early test for Abu Mazen is how he will deal with Hamas. In today's edition of the Israeli daily Yediot Ahronot, he declared his confidence that he will reach a ceasefire with the group next week. Hamas has issued statements this week that it would agree to halting its killing of Israeli civilians, but made clear that this commitment is contingent on Israeli actions. Previously, Israel opposed the idea of a ceasefire, believing that it would just be a respite for weary terrorists. Over time, however, Israel has come to accept the idea of a temporary ceasefire that the PA could use to bolster its security capabilities in the West Bank, presumably as a prelude to a future showdown. Yet, it must be recalled that Hamas has agreed to no less than nine ceasefires since the start of the Oslo process, and all of them have been ephemeral. Moreover, each of these ceasefire offers has been presented at a time when Hamas sought to regroup after an organizationally exhausting confrontation with Israel or, episodically, with the PA.

While not to be compared to Hamas, Israeli settler leaders have decried the Roadmap as being "worse than Oslo" because it calls for dismantling outposts and freezing settlements. The settlers view the Sharon government's acceptance of it as nothing short of a betrayal, and they were equally infuriated by his statements on occupation and his contention that Israel will have to "part" with some settlements. They may seek to drive a wedge between Sharon and some of his supporters by holding street protests. Yet, they are hobbled by polls showing that two-thirds of Israelis are unsympathetic to the idea of expanding settlements. Moreover, Israel's economy is in such dire straits that right-wing members of the coalition have so far refused to part from the economic benefits of remaining in the government.

Europeans and Arabs: Providing a Political Imprimatur for Transition to a Post-Arafat Era?

A third variable that will determine the enduring success of Bush's trip to the Middle East will be the statements and actions of European and Arab states. Given the assumption that Arafat has been disreputable as a Middle East partner, the question becomes what these parties will do to facilitate the transition to a post-Arafat era and enable Abu Mazen to succeed. The meeting in Sharm al-Shaykh between Bush and Arab leaders is clearly designed in no small measure to provide a tacit Arab imprimatur for the Abu Mazen government as the only legitimate interlocutor of the Palestinians. It is worth noting that six Gulf states issued a communique this week voicing support for his government. Yet, no Arab governments have publicly distanced themselves from Arafat.

Indeed, Abu Mazen's control is partial at best. Arafat is said to control five of the seven Palestinian security services, along with half of the cabinet. According to reports, Arafat has vetoed any plans for Abu Mazen to crack down on

Fatah's al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades suicide squads, which claimed responsibility for an attack in Afula last week. Arafat has also ordered that regional governors report to him and not to Abu Mazen's government. One should not preclude Arafat brinkmanship as a muscle-flexing exercise in the run-up to next week's summits.

Over the last several months, European leaders have been vocal in calling for Bush to step up his engagement in the peace process. Now that he has done so, it is unclear whether the Europeans will use the G-8 summit as an opportunity to state unambiguously whether they stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the United States in voicing no confidence in Arafat's leadership. Failure to do so will make it easier for Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad to depict Abu Mazen as serving U.S. interests.

Beyond the Arafat issue, it is also uncertain whether the Europeans and Arabs will echo Bush's statements yesterday urging Arab states to stop facilitating those who fund rejectionists, an allusion to allegations that the Saudi government has rejected appeals to crack down on charities that have been funding Hamas. It remains unclear whether the Arab states will back Abu Mazen's initial effort to delegitimize terrorism. Their failure to condemn the Passover massacre of Israeli civilians in Netanya last year served to diminish the impact of an Arab peace initiative offered in Beirut that same day. It is important that a sustained approach be adopted that makes the Europeans and Arab states strive to do whatever is possible to support Abu Mazen's government financially. The Arab states in particular must reach out to Israelis and provide a sense that they will offer their own roadmap of normalization with Israel soon, rather than wait until after a comprehensive peace has been achieved.

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