

# Between Abdullah and Sharon: The Bush Administration Considers Middle East Options

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## Brief Analysis

A spate of visitors have been coming to the United States to talk with senior Bush administration officials about the Middle East. Perhaps the most prominent visitor has been Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah, the de facto Saudi ruler who last visited the United States three years ago. As a special gesture, President George W. Bush hosted Crown Prince Abdullah at his Crawford, Texas, ranch last week. Other recent visitors to see President Bush include Egypt's president Hosni Mubarak, Morocco's King Mohammed, and Lebanon's prime minister Rafik Hariri. Next week, President Bush will host Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon and, shortly thereafter, Jordan's King Abdullah. Today, the State Department will host senior diplomats who deal with the Middle East, hailing from the European Union, Russia, and the UN. These countries and organizations have been consulting with each other and with the United States more than in previous times.

As President Bush meets with these leaders and considers his options, there is already a noticeable change in the Bush administration's Middle East public focus away from a virtually exclusive September 11 counterterrorism agenda. From President Bush's speech to Congress last September and the State of the Union speech in January, the animating principle of this administration has been the war on terrorism. The violence in the Israeli-Palestinian arena, though, coupled with the Saudi peace initiative spearheaded by Crown Prince Abdullah at the Arab summit in Beirut six weeks ago, has succeeded in shifting President Bush's agenda.

## Saudis Change the Agenda

In the wake of September 11, there was much U.S. focus on the fact that fifteen of the nineteen hijackers came from Saudi Arabia. The spotlight consequently moved onto Saudi funding of Islamist extremists and anti-American madrasas, and anti-American hate material in the Saudi school curriculum and government-owned media. Yet, there is no evidence that these issues figured prominently, if at all, in the Crawford talks. To the contrary, Crown Prince Abdullah seems to have been successful in turning the tables, making the Arab-Israel arena the exclusive focus of his talks. Judging from reports, Abdullah made his very presence in Crawford a major concession in itself and insisted on being repaid in Arab-Israeli coinage. It is exceedingly hard to view Yasir Arafat's release from Ramallah yesterday, regardless of its merits, as anything short of an outcome driven by Saudi threats to distance

itself from Washington. Denials notwithstanding, it appears that Abdullah repeated his threats from last August at the talks, implying the Saudis could disrupt oil flows or embrace Saddam Husayn. This threat-driven approach has been successful for Riyadh. As the Washington Post reported on February 10, Crown Prince Abdullah threatened President Bush last August, saying, "You go your way, I go my way. From now on, we will protect our national interests, regardless of where America's interests lie in the region." This prompted the National Security Council in the beginning of September to ask President Bush to give a speech supporting a vision for a Palestinian state at the UN later that month, and to plan a meeting with Arafat at that time. The planned meeting with Arafat was aborted because of September 11, but President Bush did give the speech.

The subsequent release of Arafat after the Crawford meeting demonstrates the effectiveness of Saudi muscle. It raises the question of whether this pattern will be followed to the conclusion the Saudis proposed in their March Beirut initiative—namely, an imposed solution based on the 1967 ceasefire lines. The Saudi ability to drive this idea is no longer as fanciful as it may have seemed in the past. Saudi success to date in influencing the Bush administration is the first of four reasons that such an approach cannot be dismissed out of hand.

Second, the Saudis and other Arabs seem successful in persuading President Bush that continued tension in the Arab-Israeli arena would doom a central foreign policy goal of the Bush administration—i.e., toppling Saddam Husayn.

Third, according to reports, Crown Prince Abdullah appears to have been successful at Crawford in persuading President Bush that Riyadh's approach will be different than that of the 1990s, when the United States swayed Israeli governments toward a final-status deal with the Palestinians, but the Arab governments did not do anything comparable with Arafat. The Saudis evidently claim that they are ready for a "division of labor"—if the United States sways Sharon, the Saudis will press Arafat and ensure that the Palestinian Authority fights terrorism. Of course, it remains unclear whether Riyadh will follow through. Senior U.S. officials say that Arafat has proven skeptical of quiet diplomatic messages from Arab leaders if he believes that their purpose is to satisfy Washington. They say that Arafat would only be disabused of this skepticism if these leaders were to go public in their criticism, something they have virtually never done.

Fourth, the Saudi approach's momentum has been fueled by another force: the vacuum that has resulted from Sharon's refusal to publicly follow up his strategy of incursions in the West Bank with a political strategy of addressing the issues at hand. At the same time, in an interview last night with Nightline host Ted Koppel, Sharon insisted that he will come with a detailed plan during his meeting with Bush next week. Sharon also mentioned the idea of a peace conference during the recent Powell swing to the region, but gave very few details.

#### Conference Options

As the Bush administration debates whether to convene a Middle East peace conference, it should be pointed out that any conference will face many obstacles, including the role of Arafat, the linkage of any deal to Palestinian political and economic reform, and the role of the international community in relation to those talks. The greatest obstacle, though, is likely to be the scope of these talks. Here are the possible options:

Imposed deal: Israel would be told to return to the 1967 ceasefire lines, possibly with minor modifications such as the Clinton parameters of December 2000. This approach is certain to be opposed by Sharon, who would see it as an imposed plan to divide Jerusalem and jeopardize Israeli security by ceding over time its eastern frontier, the Jordan Valley. Sharon will believe that he can rally the Israeli public against the idea in the wake of a year and a half of violence, "homicide bombings," and a prevailing sense in Israel that the Palestinian leadership has evinced very little interest in reconciliation or counterterrorism—points that Israel saw as the cornerstone of the Oslo Accords.

Interim deal conference: The conference would be devoted to negotiating the establishment of a Palestinian state on

part of the West Bank and Gaza, along with an international economic effort to revive the Palestinian and Israeli economies. Sharon has accepted the idea of Palestinian statehood, but an interim deal could be opposed by the Palestinians. Believing the Saudi initiative and the Clinton parameters brought them tantalizingly close to the 1967 lines, and having been disillusioned with the Oslo gradualism in the past, the Palestinians are likely to oppose anything short of 100 percent of their territorial demands.

Partial deal plus final status timetable conference: Such a conference, which would be somewhere between the first two approaches, could focus immediately on an interim accord while putting forward a timetable to resolve deferred issues such as refugees and Jerusalem. Should the Palestinians be coaxed into accepting this approach, they will likely want a hard timetable which they will want enforced by the international community. In contrast, Israel will likely seek a soft timetable predicated on proven Palestinian performance over time in spheres of counterterrorism and reconciliation to ensure a sense of balance between concepts that have governed this peace process: land for the Palestinians and peace for Israel.

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