

# From Beirut to Jerusalem: The Arab Summit, Zinni, and Cheney

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Mar 26, 2002

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## Brief Analysis

**T**he Saudi initiative for Israeli-Palestinian peace—soon to be presented at the upcoming Arab Summit in Beirut—is in part a tool to address tensions in Saudi relations with the United States after the September 11 attacks. A more important motivation for the initiative, however, is that the Saudi ruling family is concerned about the Saudi public's reaction to the escalation of violence in Israel and the Occupied Territories. In a recent poll, 63 percent of the Saudi public named the Palestinian situation as the single most important issue for them, and an additional 20 percent placed it among the top three most important issues. These statistics should not be taken too literally, but they are an indication of the growing influence that the Palestinian issue has on Saudi and other Arab perceptions of how the Arab world is treated by the West.

Two other poll questions revealed the Saudis' negative perceptions of U.S. policy and their general perceptions of Arab leaders. One question asked respondents whether their attitudes toward America were based on its policies or on its values. Among the elites, 86 percent chose policies and 6 percent chose values, while among the general public, 59 percent chose policies and 19 percent chose values. This suggests that Saudi attitudes toward the United States are not influenced as much by values like democracy and human rights as by U.S. policies toward, for example, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

The second question asked respondents to list the world leaders (outside of Saudi Arabia) whom they admired most; they were not prompted with any suggested names. The elites favored Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak (10 percent), French president Jacques Chirac (9 percent), and Malaysian prime minister Mahathir bin Mohamad (9 percent). The general public favored Syrian president Bashar al-Asad (11 percent), Mubarak (10 percent), and Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi (9 percent). Neither the elites nor the general public mentioned many Islamists in response to this question; in other words, their answers showed the strength of Arab nationalism.

The Arab-Israeli conflict is the most humiliating development for the collective Arab psychology, which explains the importance given to the issue by Saudis and other Arabs. For that reason, the successes that Arabs experienced in the 1973 war were felt keenly, and it was against this background that the Arab leaders met in Rabat, Morocco, in 1974. Celebrating the new power that Arabs felt, the Arab leaders decided to recognize the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the sole representative of the Palestinian people, which meant that Palestinians represented their own cause.

The Rabat designation of the PLO was the product of a new dynamic, a movement from "pan-Arabism" to self-determined "statism"—that is, to an emphasis on the role of the state (including the hoped-for Palestinian state) rather than that of the Arab world as a whole. This was an important advance in the road to peace with Israel. But that "statist" dynamic has changed since the end of Camp David II in July 2000. Arab discussions about Israel have increasingly exhibited religious and pan-Arab rhetoric in place of the political language of the state system. This is an unraveling of the paradigm that had stood since 1974, and it is a development that has not improved the prospects for peace.

The Saudi plan may be an act of desperation, but it reflects a genuine desire for peace, and thus deserves a response. The plan has some promising elements. For instance, Saudi leaders have said that the exact borders between Israel and the future Palestinian state are negotiable; specifically, if the Palestinians agree with changes to the 1967 borders, the Saudis will not object. And no one in the Arab world is going to openly oppose a plan that has the backing of Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

This peace is possible only if the U.S. administration makes it a priority issue. Arabs are trapped in a cycle, with leaders not wanting to be seen as weak, caving into pressure. Outside intervention is crucial. Yet, it is difficult to imagine the Bush administration agreeing to continue its active commitment, due to three specific assumptions: President Clinton "tried hard and failed hard," the Israeli-Palestinian issue is not ripe for settlement, and the Arab-Israeli conflict is not vital for U.S. foreign or Middle East policy.

DAVID MAKOVSKY

What Is Likely To Be Achievable?

In terms of defining an endgame, the Arab summit in Beirut may be useful. The real test of leadership in the Middle East is not what an Arab leader will tell a foreign leader privately, but what he will say to his own people, in his own language. In that regard, Crown Prince Abdullah's initiative is a signal not just to the Israeli public, but to his own public as well. Unfortunately, public involvement has been missing from the peace process, which has been dominated by backdoor diplomacy. Truth telling is important, and there are no shortcuts.

Yet, violence on the ground seems disconnected from lofty aspirations. Contrary to European and Arab perception, the problems over the last eighteen months have not been due to a lack of U.S. engagement. In fact, there has been a succession of initiatives by the United States. The October 2000 meeting in Sharm al-Shaykh was supposed to stop the violence. Then came the May 2001 Mitchell Commission report and the June 2001 Tenet plan, which were also supposed to stop the violence. President George W. Bush then made a speech referring to a Palestinian state, followed by Secretary of State Colin Powell's November 2001 UN address; and then Gen. Anthony Zinni made two trips to the region in December 2001 and January 2002, both without success. Now Zinni is back in the Middle East—and the fighting continues unabated.

Zinni's persistence is laudable, and he should be commended for his professionalism. However, the problem rests on the ground, not with mediators. Barring serious external Arab pressure—which has not occurred to date—Yasir Arafat is unlikely to show any interest in sustaining a ceasefire even if one is reached. The Palestinians perceive that Israel is weary, that Sharon's campaign to make Arafat irrelevant has not succeeded, and that their own threshold of

pain is higher than Israel's, especially since Palestinians are not the targets of suicide bombs. Moreover, some Palestinian statements suggest that they believe they have new leverage with Washington amid U.S. efforts to galvanize Arab support against Iraq. Taken together, they think time is on their side. Currently, there is an overall feeling among the Palestinians that violence works.

It is difficult for Israelis to see light at the end of the tunnel. Suicide bombings come not just from Hamas and Islamic Jihad, but also from the Fatah-related al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades; these bombings have occurred within the borders of Israel itself, not in the West Bank and Gaza. This only exacerbates concern that the violence may not be about occupation, but about the existence of Israel. If the issue is existence, there is no doubt that Israel will continue to fight as if its back is up against the wall. This is bound to occur, especially when there is no clear definition of goals. There may be some misconception about Israeli public debate amid crises. Some in the Arab world may see this debate as a sign of weakness, which reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of Israeli political culture. Tougher military action is likely to follow if Zinni's efforts to reach a ceasefire fail. And the polling data do not offer much prospect for hope or common ground. In respectable Palestinian polls, Palestinians were repeatedly asked how they would act if peace were achieved, including the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. Consistently, some 90 percent of Palestinians during the recent period (including December 2001) opposed or strongly opposed adopting school curricula that teaches children not to demand the return of all of Palestine to the Palestinians. In Israeli polls, 71 percent favor separation from the Palestinians, and many in recent surveys even favored an idea considered virtually taboo until now: expulsion. The unifying element in both surveys is that coexistence is dead. Lack of definition of final goals has also been a problem for Israel. Sharon—beset by Likud party rival Binyamin Netanyahu, who leads the prime minister among the right—has not articulated a coherent political strategy that would enable the Palestinians to define Israeli objectives. Yet, the situation is not symmetrical, since Israeli voters have swung behind a Rabin or a Barak when Palestinians do not engage in violence.

Although there can be no grand deal in this environment, this should not mean an abandonment of crisis stabilization, including some confidence building as outlined in the Tenet and Mitchell plans. Other steps are also required. Israel has failed to attain Sharon's goal of creating political distance between the Palestinian public and the militants. This is partly due to the lack of a humanitarian strategy.

The United States needs to realize that there are no shortcuts to full peace; rather, a peace strategy must be directed at both publics, not just their governments. The United States, Europe, and the Arab states should seek to discern for both sides what is realistically possible and what is a fantasy. In the land-for-peace formula, the Palestinians need to be far more explicit about principles and deeds that would govern peace with Israel at a time when Israel is being asked to be very explicit about territorial withdrawal. Demonstrating to the parties what principles are required is the best hope to rebuild the trust shattered on both sides during the current violence.

ROBERT SATLOFF

Motion without Movement?

In mid-January, the debate about U.S. policy in the Middle East included such questions as, "Should the U.S. government cut off relations with Arafat?" Two months later, much has changed. For the first time in twenty years, the United States has proposed a UN Security Council resolution on Arab-Israeli issues, and that resolution for the first time put the Security Council on record as envisioning a Palestinian state. The Bush administration has openly referred to the Israeli military action as unhelpful, without mentioning Palestinian terrorism. Another important opening is that Vice President Richard Cheney has offered to meet with Arafat, given certain prerequisites—especially a ceasefire. And today, the United States portrays the Arab League as a positive player in the peace process.

While the Saudi initiative is certainly helpful and very useful, one must recognize the repercussions. If this becomes the new baseline of Arab-Israeli peace negotiations, it would take both sides back to the situation before Camp David I—that is, before 1978. Before 1978, the focus was on relations between the Arab world as a whole and Israel. But the great breakthrough that made peace possible was Egyptian president Anwar Sadat's agreement to negotiate on a state-to-state basis, which eventually allowed both Egypt and Jordan to make peace with Israel in the absence of a general settlement of all Arab-Israeli issues. The Saudi initiative instead says in essence that Arab-Israeli peace requires a settlement of all issues at once. And there is a real danger in this formulation. While the Saudi initiative emphasizes the positive—if Israel returns to the 1967 borders, there will be full normalization—it can also be seen negatively: that is, unless Israel returns to those borders, there will be no peace. Furthermore, in the Saudi plan, peace and normalization come only after full withdrawal from occupied lands. Such an all-or-nothing proposal is a step backward from the Madrid conference, which established multilateral talks that were to promote normalization as something to be accomplished simultaneously with the bilateral talks. That formula—normalization as parallel to peacemaking, not subsequent to it—is much more likely to be successful at creating the conditions for a lasting peace.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Alan Lowinger.

Policy #372

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