Middle East Policy Update:

Where Are We Going? How Do We Get There?

by Dennis Ross **(/experts/dennis-ross)** , Patrick Clawson **(/experts/patrick-clawson)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dennis Ross (/experts/dennis-ross)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.

Patrick Clawson (/experts/patrick-clawson)

Patrick Clawson is Morningstar senior fellow and director of research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Brief Analysis

On March 1, 2002, Dennis Ross, Patrick Clawson, and Matthew Levitt addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Dr. Clawson and Ambassador Ross are, respectively, director for research and counselor/Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Institute. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks. **Read a summary (templateC05.php?CID=1488)** of Mr. Levitt's remarks.

DENNIS ROSS

The Arab-Israeli Arena: The Need for a New External Factor

Neither Prime Minister Ariel Sharon nor Chairman Yasir Arafat could have foreseen a year ago what is happening today -- namely, an escalating spiral of terror and reprisal. Sharon believed that by insisting on "no negotiations under fire" and increasing pressure on the Palestinians, he could stabilize the situation. By sending his son to meet with Arafat, he also sought to convey that he would indeed negotiate once the violence stopped. Arafat believed that fissures would grow within Israeli society, or that a worsening of the situation would bring international intervention that either imposed a solution or enabled him to maneuver more freely. Neither leader got what he had hoped for.

The danger of such an impasse was very clear to the United States even before the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada on September 28, 2000. To some degree, the Camp David talks were an attempt to see whether the Clinton administration could capitalize on Barak's willingness to go far in negotiations before such an eruption occurred. Two schools of thought have emerged within the current Bush administration: 1) no negotiations are possible or likely to work before both sides feel exhausted; and 2) waiting for exhaustion is too dangerous, risking a situation in which peace becomes impossible to achieve.

Unfortunately, the situation is unlikely to change on its own. In Israel, the Sharon government seems generally stable in the short term, although there is growing long-term pressure on the prime minister from both right and left. In particular, there is new ferment in the left wing -- which has been silent for over a year -- based on the feeling that the policy of the current government is leading nowhere. On the Palestinian side, Arafat is unlikely to be rescued, even though he may feel that there have been favorable developments, such as internal debate in Israel, a European intention to advance an initiative, and the recent Saudi proposal.

Change will come only if a significant new external factor enters the picture and gives all parties a reason to step back, pause, and alter their behavior. Is the Saudi proposal that new factor? It offers full normalization with Israel in return for full withdrawal to the June 4, 1967, borders. The proposal is not substantively new, but it is psychologically new. Substantively, its offer of peace for land is the same as that underlying the 1991 Madrid conference. Psychologically, it is significant because of its timing. The Saudis are sending a signal to Israelis that peace is still possible, but that there is a price to pay. To the Palestinians, the Saudis are offering a political umbrella under which they could justify stopping the violence so as to explore the political pathway. Even then, the Saudi idea must be seen as a departure point for negotiations, not a new principle or slogan to be implemented.

The limitation of the Saudi idea is that it is divorced from the day-to-day reality of violence. One possible bridge between the Saudi proposal and the daily reality is to have the United States call for a new effort to stop the violence, asking Israel to halt attacks against the Palestinians for ten days. That would enable the Palestinians to do what they in fact know they must -- enforce a true ceasefire, rein in the armed groups, make serious arrests, and begin the process of dismantling the terror organizations. If this attempt at a ceasefire were to fail, the United States could suspend ties with Arafat, although not necessarily cut them off permanently. If such an attempt were successful, however, the Tenet-Mitchell mechanism could be initiated and a political process could be launched after an agreed period of time.

PATRICK CLAWSON

Iraq: A Dangerous Regime Obtaining Dangerous Weapons

In his January 29, 2002, State of the Union address, President George W. Bush said, "The United States of America will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons." Those two criteria -- dangerous regimes with destructive weapons -- are most readily applicable to Iraq. Iraq has the only regime in the world that has not denounced the September 11 attacks, and also the only regime in the world that the United Nations Security Council has ordered to give up weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The president further emphasized, "I will not wait on events while dangers gather. I will not stand by as peril draws closer and closer." The focus of counterterrorism efforts throughout the U.S. government is on preventing new attacks, not simply responding to attacks that have occurred. President Bush's stance on these issues has drawn strong support from such leading democrats as Senator Joseph Lieberman and former Vice President Al Gore. All of these factors -- the analysis of the threat, the focus on prevention, and the bipartisan support -- lead to the conclusion that the time to deal with the Iraq problem has arrived.

It is still largely unclear, however, what exactly will be done about Iraq. Those who wish to avoid the use of force still have an opportunity to show that the Iraqi WMD threat can be eliminated peacefully. Yet, time is short, and so far, little has been done to this effect by the parties so inclined, such as the French or the Russians. The Security Council is set to discuss Iraq by May 30, and the role of arms inspections should be a key issue in these discussions. There are several problems with relying on inspectors:

• Were inspections to resume, there would be no concrete results for months, during which time the Iraqis could create many obstacles to the inspectors. This problem is made worse by Security Council resolutions that offer Iraq a

suspension of sanctions as soon as it begins cooperating with inspections. Once the sanctions are suspended, Iraq would have little incentive to allow further inspections.

• Saddam Husayn has shown no intention of cooperating with any form of inspection, as was made clear in his response to Turkish prime minister Bulent Ecevit's recent letter calling for the return of the inspectors. Allowing the inspectors to return threatens Saddam: his rule depends on his all-powerful image, which would be dented if he has to bow to U.S. demands.

• The Bush administration is not as dedicated to international arms-control agreements as its predecessors have been, and it is sure to reject the suggestion that some inspections, even if imperfect, are better than none.

When Vice President Dick Cheney visits the region in the coming weeks, the central point he should convey is that the United States intends to act on the Iraqi question while working with its partners on the operational modalities and addressing their concerns as best as possible. It would be premature to discuss the specifics of how the United States would use force if need be. Tough decisions about the general strategy of any such military operation remain, in particular:

• Move slowly or quickly? Patience would provide an opportunity to organize Iraqi opposition forces and replenish ammunition stocks. Swift action, on the other hand, could shorten the time Saddam has to prepare countermeasures, such as the use of WMD.

• Go heavy or light? A large U.S. ground force would maximize the prospect for quick victory, increasing the chances that many Iraqi soldiers would desert or defect. However, relying on Iraqi opposition for ground forces would enable the victory to appear more as a liberation of Iraq from within, adding credibility to the post-war Iraqi government.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Natan Sachs.

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