America and the Middle East:

The Search for a Regional Strategy

by Dennis Ross **(/experts/dennis-ross)**

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In-Depth Reports

Robert Satloff, The Washington Institute: Let me open, Senator, by turning to you. It is, as they say, approaching the 100-day mark. How would you evaluate the direction that the Bush administration has taken so far vis-Ã -vis the Middle East?

Sam Brownback: I really don't think that the Bush administration should be judged yet on its first 100 days because they got a late start. I think they ought to get another thirty days before they are measured on their first 100 because of all the determinations and court challenges that took place in Florida. Having said that, where are we today? There has been striking movement. When you look throughout the Middle East, you see a new U.S. administration that has backed up and said, "We should let this area cool off a little bit -- let's let the concerned parties sort through their problems, and let's reappraise our own role as well." We have tried to change our approach to Iraq, for instance, and I want to throw this in as an illustration of a broader question about the Middle East: what do we do to move away from this drift that we have had for a period of time? Part of the answer lies in the reassessment of sanctions taking place and a reassessment of how the United States may involve itself in a potential regime change in Iraq. These have been fairly positive moves, and I am hopeful that the United States can find a way to engage all of the countries in the region so that the peace process does not define U.S. involvement there. Yes, this process is strategic -- a key part of our overall involvement -- but it is not everything. Instead, the new administration has said, "Okay, we are involved with these other countries for these additional reasons." I actually think that these changes have been pretty striking for the first seventy days.

Satloff: General, do you have something to add on this issue?

Brent Scowcroft: I agree with the senator. The administration came out with a plan -- not a 100-day plan -- to begin focusing on domestic issues where they could make a positive impact and create some dynamics, some momentum. On foreign policy, especially with regard to the peace process, they wanted to back away and let things sit for a while. One of the motivating factors in this administration is a policy of doing things differently, of visibly moving away from the Clinton pattern. The overwhelming sense of this administration is that Clinton, as a person, was too intimately involved in the peace process, and they are not going to follow that pattern. Besides, this is not an issue

that you turn to for a "quick success" in the first 100 days. Yes, the first trip that Secretary of State Colin Powell made during the first 100 days was to the Middle East. Yet, the primary purpose of this trip was to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the end of the Gulf War, to talk about the sanctions regime in Iraq, and to get some feel for where regional leaders stood on this issue. What the secretary found was that nobody there wanted to talk about the sanctions; they wanted to talk about the peace process. And he understood their concern. So what we have now is a "rebalancing" within the administration, a recognition that reality often intrudes on your best-laid organizational plans, and I believe that they are now starting to refocus.

Satloff: Jim, how would you look at the first three months?

Jim Hoagland: Yes, the "100 days" concept is a very artificial one, but I see it as useful in this case because it highlights the limits of basing policies and decisions on the slogan, "We are not Clinton." That is a fair enough strategy for the first 100 days, but now is the time for the administration to really begin putting its own imprint on U.S. Middle East policy, which is not yet completely discernible. Most of us have things in our lives that keep us humble -- children, perhaps, or spouses. The Middle East serves the same purpose: it keeps coming back, demanding our attention. People can observe whether we are saying today the same things that we said ten years ago about the region, but I hope we are not -- it would mean that we have not been paying attention.

With this in mind, I think that we have reached the limit of saying, "We are not going to engage." Non-engagement is a fairly sensible proposition when there is nothing to engage with, but the situation in the Middle East is certainly not getting better; it is getting worse. For instance, clear decisions have yet to be made with regard to Iraq, and I hope that they will be made soon. Senator Brownback has been at the forefront of this issue, trying to get a very sensible policy implemented.

I have also seen a lot of welcome, serious discussion about what to do with Iraq other than simply finding ways to keep it off the front page and television news -- the strategy that basically guided our Iraq policy for the last eighteen months of the Clinton administration. These problems have not yet been resolved, and it remains to be seen exactly what kind of policies -- and I emphasize the plural nature of what has to be done -- will emerge concerning the Middle East.

Satloff: Dennis, do you agree that we are about to exhaust the anti-Clinton period, and that there is a need for defining a new Bush policy in the Middle East?

Dennis Ross: The United States is going to have to be engaged because the region will impose itself on us. The initial period of the Bush administration was not a case of disengagement: it was a case of assessment. Obviously, any new administration is put under a microscope; inevitably, there is a tendency to want to look at the new leaders and figure out who they are, what they are about, and what they are going to do. I was reminded of this fact earlier this week when I met with a couple of European visitors. They were bemoaning what they saw as a general lack of engagement on the part of the new administration, and I said to them, "If you had come to see me three months into the Clinton administration, you probably would have been saying the exact same thing, regretting the loss of the previous Bush administration, which had been engaged in ways that were familiar to you." Any new administration needs time to get its own bearings, form its own judgments, and make its own assessments.

On the Arab-Israeli issue in particular, there is one fundamental, striking difference between this administration and the last one. For this administration, no longterm solution is currently foreseeable. In the last year of the previous administration, we were preoccupied with finding such a solution. Now the focus is going to have to be on managing, defusing, and, at times, firefighting -- bringing things under control. Stabilization is very different from conclusion.

Scowcroft: I would just add that you are being too modest, Dennis, because the Clinton administration's initial

handling of the Middle East generally, and the peace process especially, was defined by continuity. You stayed on and did not lose a beat in terms of policy and where the situation was going. Now that you are gone, the process of staffing up, which is always slow, has hit more acutely than it did in the Clinton administration.

Satloff: Let's move on to specific issues within the Middle East. Senator, you have been forward on issues relating to Iraq. If you were to give advice to the new administration, what would you recommend as the overall objective in our Iraq policy? Should it be containment, deterrence, regime change, or some other goal?

Brownback: Change of regime. Our problem is not with the Iraqi people. Our problem in that neighborhood is Saddam Husayn. We have had a number of leaders from the Middle East visit the United States recently: the prime minister of Lebanon, the king of Jordan, the president of Egypt, and Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon, all within the past couple of months. If you discuss Iraq with these leaders, they will all agree that the problem is Saddam Husayn. They have told us for several years that when the United States comes up with a credible plan for regime change that it is willing to stand behind and see through, they will move on board. Yet, until we say that we are willing to stick with such a plan, they are not going to poke that hornet's nest. We must be willing to take the lead.

Clearly, though, there needs to be a regime change, and I would agree with Jim that it is a work in progress. The Bush administration is focused on it, and I have had a number of meetings with them on this issue. For now, they are working on getting the sanctions regime under control to the point where it is sustainable over a period of time and not a public-relations tool against the United States. That is their first step, and it is a legitimate one.

Step two: how do we engage the Iraqi opposition? Do we engage them in Iraq itself or elsewhere? Do we pursue lethal or nonlethal methods of removing Saddam? This is a legitimate series of options to review and assess. Step three: if there is a provocation from Saddam, what is our response? Do we give a direct, tit-for-tat response or a more large-scale response? The Bush administration must wrestle with a litany of pretty clear questions regarding Iraq, and I think that we will see their answers put into action, probably sooner rather than later.

Satloff: The overall objective in Iraq, General?

Scowcroft: Regime change is fine, but it is only a slogan at this point. We do not know how to do it in a way that will keep the coalition together rather than leaving us more isolated than we are now, which is pretty isolated. What worries me most about the idea of regime change is that it keeps us from doing the things that we can actually do. We are not going to change the regime right now because it would take too much of a toll. Some of the Iraqi Ã©migrÃ©s believe that all we have to do is give them a few AK-47s and deploy them out in the Iraqi deserts -- that Saddam's army will join them and march on Baghdad and it will all be over.

That is not going to happen, though. Saddam has demonstrated that he has as thorough control over the country as any autocrat can expect to have. Some individual assassin may get to him at some point, and hopefully that will happen, but we cannot base our Iraq policy on regime change. First of all, our Arab allies are not going to let us do so. We have a serious problem with the coalition due to the Palestinian dispute. Colin Powell hit a brick wall; he went to the Middle East and said, "We want to rejuvenate the sanctions, and we're going to refocus them so that they do not hurt the Iraqi people so much." The Arab response was, in effect, "We don't want to talk about Iraq. We want to talk about what you are going to do in the peace process. All we hear you say on Iraq is how we have to impose the United Nations (UN) sanctions and so forth, but when it comes to the peace process, you don't pay attention to the UN." So I think we have an immediate problem that comes before any thought of regime change -- the Arab world has now linked the peace process and Iraq in a way that we have tried to avoid and did avoid for many years. They are back together again.

Satloff: Jim, do you agree with this?

Hoagland: I agree with part of his analysis. Regime change is essentially a slogan at this point, and perhaps not the

best one upon which to focus. What is really missing in our Iraq policy -- and I understand the difficulties of filling this void -- is a clear model of what we want Iraq to be as the end result of our policy. So instead of regime change, I would think in terms of supporting the emergence of a democratic society in Iraq and explicitly gearing our policies to produce such a society. I understand the explosiveness of this notion in the context of the Middle East. The Arab states that Brent suggests we need in the coalition basically abhor democracy and will not support our efforts to promote it in Iraq. Yet, the fact that our support for the independence of the Baltic states from the Soviet Union was seen by most realpolitik people as totally unrealistic, as fantasy, did not prevent us from offering this support in very real ways and did not prevent independence from being achieved.

We do not know what will happen once Saddam is no longer in power, and the idea that we must therefore refrain from pushing ideas that could endanger stability -- that is, territorial integrity in Iraq -- is a real inhibition to our policies. After all, near the end of the Soviet Union, we were able to accept that tyranny could dissolve. We can accept this as it may apply to Iraq as well.

Satloff: Dennis, the general has raised the issue of linkage between dealing with Iraq and dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict. How do you see this connection, in terms of how it is perceived in the region and, perhaps more important, how our policy should form?

Ross: From a psychological point of view, it is not surprising that Powell encountered what he did when he went to the Middle East. For one thing, the reaction of our Arab friends was a way of deflecting an assumption of some responsibility on their part, so it was quite natural for them to say, "Look, you have to deal with one thing before we can even consider the other." A second consideration is the mood on the Arab street. David Makovsky talked about this factor recently after his trip to the Middle East -- the impact of regional television imagery on the intifada, the mood of the broader Arab street, and the "re-Arabizing" of the Arab-Israeli conflict. In addition, we have Saddam; Arabs are drawn to him not because they think that he is a model, but because he looks like a symbol of defiance -- of us, of the Israelis. When they are angry, they want an outlet, and Saddam becomes a channel of sorts.

We have to recognize this psychological dimension because it is part of the region. We live with certain realities, and so do they. Regardless of what they say to us, the fact is that the Gulf states are aware of the threat that Saddam represents to them; they know that we cannot save them at the last minute if we are not there planning with them, if we are not given access to their facilities, if we are unable to operate with them. When we deal with the Gulf states on this issue, we have to remind them that Saddam did not invade Kuwait -- nor does he continue to claim Kuwait -- because of the Palestinians. Of course we will not disengage from Arab- Israeli peacemaking, but we also need to engage with other Gulf countries on what is a threat to both them and us. If they want us to be able to help them when they are fighting for their survival, there are certain things that need to happen beforehand. Whether we focus on containment of Saddam as a kind of minimal objective or on democratization of Iraq as a long-term objective, we must first plan a series of bilateral moves that we are prepared to make in tandem with the Gulf states.

I would add one new element to what we have been discussing, one that Richard Perle brought up last night. It is fine and good to decide that we are going to have a policy of containment and, perhaps, democratization or regime change in Iraq. Either of these approaches is going to require sustained effort in order to be realized. Yet there is a more immediate problem that we may have to contend with: as Richard pointed out, German intelligence believes that the Iraqis will have nuclearweapon capabilities by 2003. Whatever we are doing to establish a long-term approach to Iraq, we must also develop a contingency approach now in order to deal with that threat. The idea of Saddam with nuclear weapons is not very easy to swallow.

Satloff: Senator, suppose we wake up tomorrow morning to find that Saddam has detonated a nuclear bomb in the western desert of Iraq. What do we do?

Brownback: We would be praying that morning, for certain. That is the nightmare scenario for all of us, and it is why I continue to push policies that some may deem inappropriate. As a policymaker, I see Saddam as somebody who is clearly opposed to the United States, is clearly an irritant and a difficulty for us in the region, has some of the more rudimentary weapons of mass destruction (WMD), has shown a willingness to use them, and clearly desires more of them. This is an intolerable situation for us in a key region of the world, and we have to confront it aggressively. If he detonates a nuclear weapon, we would have to make a very strong and clear response -- quick, aggressive, and assertive action.

Satloff: General, how would you suggest that we deal with this nightmare scenario?

Scowcroft: That is of course one of the worst possible outcomes, and one which our policy has tried to deter. Actually, though, it would not revolutionize our approach. Saddam had chemical weapons during the Gulf War, and we would not be deterred from future action if he had nuclear weapons; in fact, that would perhaps allow us to respond militarily in a way that we cannot at the moment.

Jim put his finger on something, though: we need to keep our eyes on the longterm future for the region. Saddam is a problem; he is frustrating, and everybody hates him. Yet so far, our policy has worked; we are keeping him contained. He is a nuisance, and we have more forces deployed there than we would like, but right now he is not a threat to the region. Although the prospect of nuclear weapons does change things, we should not be mesmerized by Saddam. We ought to put him in perspective. In terms of the long-term future of the region, Iraq -- aside from its current leader -- is a key state. Our policy has been based on a balance of power, if you will, between Iraq and Iran as the two superpowers in the region.

Suppose, then, that a liberated Iraq breaks into its constituent parts. Would this be a problem? It would of course change the balance of power in the region. More important, though, it would liberate the Kurds in Iraq. Given that Kurds also populate parts of Iran, Syria, and Turkey, this would be a potentially major problem in the region, one that we would have a terrible time untangling. So we have to keep our eye on the ball. As obnoxious as Saddam is, and as much as we would all like to get rid of him, we must remember Korea. We started our involvement in Korea in 1950, but we still have two divisions of troops there, and the North Korean regime is still as obnoxious as it ever was. We probably cannot solve the Iraq problem completely, and we ought to keep that in mind.

Satloff: Jim, you talk about the long-term future. If indeed the prediction of Saddam obtaining the bomb by 2003 is correct, that is a lot sooner than later. What do we do in the meantime?

Hoagland: It would speed up things quite a bit. He explodes a test weapon in the western desert?

Satloff: Just to show us that he has one.

Hoagland: I would write a very angry column. (Laughter.) I say that just to underline something which is obvious to you all -- I am not a policymaker.

I would like to come back to the idea that maybe somebody will take care of Saddam for us. This has been the basis of something between wishful thinking and policy for a long time now -- that some anonymous Iraqi colonel is going to put a bullet through Saddam's brain. This is much less likely to happen if we are not actively pursuing a policy of highlighting Saddam's weaknesses and the unique evil of his regime. This has to be our premise, or we are missing the point. It is unthinkable that we would tolerate the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Saddam, because he has used weapons of mass destruction against his neighbors and even against his own citizens -- against the Kurds. I would put a slightly different emphasis on the Kurds as well. They are too often seen as a source of instability and great problems. Yet they are, essentially, victims. They have been for a long time and will continue to be, in part because of their own weaknesses and the nature of their society. Yet, it is important that we see this regime as inherently evil, and one that we really cannot allow to possess nuclear weapons -- Saddam would use such weapons.

Scowcroft: One way to demonstrate our feelings on this issue in a fairly cost-free manner is to bomb the dikes in southern Iraq and reflood the marshes in order to give some respite to the Shiites there who are being persecuted very badly. We thought about doing that at the end of the first Bush administration; why we did not, I can't imagine, because Saddam purposefully dried out those marshes. Even the environmentalists ought to be in favor of such a move. (Laughter.) That would be a good demonstration, especially if he tested a nuclear weapon; it would let him know that we are still willing to take action.

Ross: We should not put too much emphasis on how we would respond if Saddam detonated a bomb. He is much more likely to keep any nuclear capability under wraps until he decides on an appropriate moment to let the world know about it. Instead, we should focus on the potentially accelerating process through which he might acquire that capability. That is, you can have a policy toward Iraq that is built around containment as the minimal objective. At the same time, you can continue to support changing the realities within Iraq as a larger objective, including regime change. These are not necessarily competing objectives, especially at a time when the administration is trying to approach the use of sanctions in a way that is more sustainable.

Although we should avoid building Saddam up into something more than he is, the image of Saddam with a nuclear bomb is different than that of Saddam with chemical weapons. If he had possessed nuclear weapons back in 1990, we might well have considered further options at that time. When we met in Geneva with Iraqi deputy prime minister Tariq Aziz, former Secretary of State Jim Baker basically let him know what we would do if they used chemical weapons against our forces. That was all fine and good in a bilateral context where it was us nose-to-nose with the Iraqis. But the fact is that Saddam is not trying to acquire nuclear weapons because he is thinking about using them against us. He has a very different regional agenda in mind. Therefore, we have to develop a practical, contingency approach to what we might do from a military standpoint. We are not likely to be presented with a single target that makes it easy for us to take out this threat; rather, we will probably have to deal with a much more complicated set of targets.

Given all of this, we also have to initiate some public conditioning regarding what would be required in these scenarios and what an appropriate response would be. During last night's discussion, Larry Eagleburger argued that we would have to respond very aggressively to such scenarios, but he also felt that there would not be public support for these measures in the United States. We cannot wait until the last minute and suddenly decide that a threat exists; we cannot assume that the average citizen is going to understand the nature of this threat and that we will be free to carry out whatever plan we have in mind. Contingency planning has to take on not only a military character, but also a political character. These scenarios have domestic ramifications as well as international and regional ones.

Satloff: Senator, you have been very forthright on Capitol Hill in trying to explain the WMD threats emerging from Saddam. What response to these threats do you think the American people would accept, and what do you think is necessary to educate them about these threats?

Brownback: Dennis made a good point about the image of Saddam with nuclear weapons. You can put an image like that on a bumper sticker and it will change public opinion in the United States. Right now, I would have to say that the containment- to-democratization mode is sustainable with the U.S. public. Could we suddenly say, "Okay, we're sending in the troops and they're headed to Baghdad"? No -- I don't think the public would support that. If Saddam moves against us, though -- knocks down a plane, for instance -- public opinion in favor of a response could ratchet up rapidly. For example, with something like the "let the marshes become marshes again" idea, it would probably take only minimal types of provocation from Saddam for the public to approve of moving forward on that. Actually, I think that the Bush administration has just such a mindset; that is, if Saddam gives us a reason to take action, we should have a predetermined response in mind.

For now, then, we stabilize the sanctions regime, we work with the Arabs broadly in order to build consensus against Saddam, and we work toward democratization, which is a much better term than "regime change" because it describes what we are actually after. We do not want some Sunni colonel who is as bad as Saddam assuming power. That would just mean trading the devil we know for the one we do not. So we do need a much more sustainable long-term U.S. policy; we should probably respond to the WMD threat, and a sustainable policy gives us a chance to do so.

Scowcroft: We should not be mesmerized by the bomb problem. If Saddam developed and in fact used a nuclear weapon -- in Kuwait, Iran, or somewhere else -- I think it would certainly galvanize the United States and probably the whole region. After all, that would involve an Arab using a nuclear weapon against his fellow Arabs; in such a scenario, regime change would work. I really think that he would refrain from using a nuclear weapon, though. He might try to blackmail with it, but using it would be extremely counterproductive for him.

Hoagland: A comment and a question. My sense is that the Bush administration does see a kind of continuum: containment moving toward a possible choice of regime change. I think there are dangers in this approach, which is the main one being promoted -- it is a very subtle, difficult message to get across in the Middle East. People in the region will look at the containment efforts and assume a weak policy, even though we are still considering the option of regime change. That is a dangerous way to approach the problem.

My question springboards off of what Dennis said, and I would put it to Brent. Is it your view that if Saddam had nuclear weapons in 1990, that would have changed the way we looked at Desert Storm?

Scowcroft: No -- as Dennis said, it might have changed our tactics, perhaps dramatically, but we would not have been deterred from what we did.

Satloff: Would we have gone to Baghdad?

Scowcroft: If we knew he had nuclear weapons, we would have made sure that we eliminated both the weapons and his capability to build them. Yet, we would not have been going to Baghdad for the reasons that people say we should have gone.

Satloff: Let's move from the Gulf to the Arab-Israeli arena. Dennis, what is achievable today?

Ross: Well, what is achievable today is not what we were working on for the last year. (Laughter.) We have to be honest with ourselves and look at what is possible. I have often said that the art of diplomacy is to focus on the attainable, not the impossible. We learned something at the end of last year. President Clinton put on the table a set of ideas that were the culmination of arduous effort. These ideas did not just appear out of the ether; they emerged from what I would describe as at least thousands of miles covered, both figuratively and literally -- certainly thousands of hours of discussion, argument, examination, and dissection, with both the Israelis and the Palestinians. We had a genuine belief that these ideas were the best possible way of responding to the essence of what each side needed -- not what they wanted, but what each side needed.

According to these ideas, the Israelis would have been able to place 80 percent of their settlers into settlement blocks within borders that would have been redrawn to accommodate that. They would have had a set of security arrangements designed to ensure their long-term early-warning needs in the West Bank; they themselves would have controlled these measures, with access to certain key locations in clearly defined emergency situations. They would have had a presence in the Jordan Valley for a period longer than the time of withdrawal, but it would have been a finite period. They would have had the largest Jewish Jerusalem -- east and west -- ever because all of the Jewish neighborhoods of east Jerusalem would have become part of Israel.

There would have been a right of return for refugees to the new state of Palestine, but there would not have been a right of return to Israel, although Israel could have determined which Palestinians could have come back under

family-reunification or humanitarian considerations. The Palestinians would have gotten an independent state in all of Gaza, which would have been slightly enlarged. They would have gotten almost all of the West Bank. They would have had a capital in Arab east Jerusalem. They would have had security arrangements built around at least one core element of an international presence, which was critical from their standpoint, and, as I said, they would have had unlimited right of return for refugees to their own state. The essence of each side's needs, based on everything we knew from them, was met by these ideas.

Now, former Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak was prepared to sign off on this agreement, and it was pretty clear that there would be a different Israeli government if there was no agreement. The agreement did not guarantee that Barak would have survived, but it made his political survival at least possible. Without an agreement, there was no possibility. So not only was it the end for Clinton, it was the end for Barak. There would be an alternative in Israel that would basically make all of the proposed concessions, from an Israeli standpoint, unthinkable. In addition, I told the Palestinians very explicitly that a new American administration would come in, look at what President Clinton had done, and say that he had expended the prestige and resources of the United States and the office of the presidency. He had put unprecedented ideas on the table. We had never done anything like that at any point in the peace process. Yet, the Palestinian response to this was "no." Anybody who claims that they did not say no, I was there -- they said no. When you say that you accept certain ideas with reservations, and then each of your reservations undercuts the ideas, you have said no.

Any new U.S. administration was not going to expend its resources and political capital on this kind of process. So the Palestinians, and specifically Chairman Yasir Arafat, knew that this was the end of the line -- the wall -- that they could not do better, and that the alternative was very stark. We had come to five partial agreements with Chairman Arafat in the past, and each one came only after a wrenching experience where it was clear that he hit the wall, could not do better, and could see the consequences. This time around, he hit the wall, he could see the alternative, yet the strategic reality was that he could not make a permanent-status deal on these kinds of terms. He could do it only on terms that basically met all of his needs but not the Israelis' needs. So he could not make a feasible deal.

Today, we have an Israeli government that is similarly incapable of making a permanent-status deal. If you listen to Ariel Sharon, he says that he needs a longterm, interim agreement. So Chairman Arafat demonstrated that he could not make a permanent deal, we now have an Israeli government that cannot make a permanent deal, and the reality on the ground is nothing short of horrific, with real people paying the price on a daily basis. This is not an abstraction, this is not theoretical; real people are suffering. The challenge right now is to change the reality on the ground and to create a political process, because there has to be some sort of direction. You will not change the environment on the ground without some direction, some possibility of hope. No political process, even in parallel with a genuine change in the environment, is going to be able to resolve issues such as Jerusalem, refugees, or borders right now. So the political process has to focus on what it can handle. Statehood can be handled. Security arrangements -- partial, not complete, because we cannot solve the border question -- can be handled. Disengagement of the two peoples will also have to be handled. This approach is necessary in order to confront the environment on the ground on a day-to-day basis, because we have seen a colossal loss of faith and confidence on the part of both publics.

The anger level, the mistrust, the suspicion, is mutual. The self-absorption in grievances is very high. We have to change the realities, and the way to do that is to build an approach to the conflict that is premised on Israel getting security and the Palestinians getting a process that leads to the end of Israeli control over their lives. With that as our premise, we establish a code of conduct about what each side will do to avoid behaviors that are impossible or difficult for the other, and then we will have a political process focused on those issues that we can realistically address. If we pursue this approach, we will eventually recreate the circumstances wherein a solution becomes

possible. Although such a solution is unrealizable today, we cannot throw our hands up and say, "It's impossible, we can't do anything." We have an obligation to do something. We have not lost our interest in finding a solution; what we have to do is create a set of circumstances that eventually makes a solution possible again. Satloff: Senator, what lessons should we be learning from the recent past, and especially from our relationship with Chairman Arafat?

Brownback: I watched Dennis's actions in the peace process -- I think all of us did -- with great interest near the end of the Clinton administration. In some cases, I was almost shocked at what was put on the table: items that had been sacrosanct for years. I just said to myself, "No, you don't put those pieces on the table." Yet what was more shocking to me was when the Palestinians simply walked away from the offer. This was a pretty good deal -- as good as it was going to get -- so I was really stunned at their move. Then we devolved into where we are today, which looks like the worst situation that we have seen there in two to three decades. Lots of people are being killed, and most people live in some sort of horror at the current situation. The U.S. government is doing the right thing in backing up right now, cooling our involvement a little bit and reappraising what is realistic. We are going to have to lower our expectations for the region in the short term. As for how far we lower the bar and whether Dennis's prescription is best, I would defer to others and need to give it more thought myself. Yet those are two minimal steps. We also need to extend ourselves and try to negotiate and build relationships with the other countries in the region based on something in addition to the peace process. This will be tough, since these countries will link everything to the peace process, but we still need to be aggressive in this fashion. We should look for bilateral measures that we can use to build some trust and confidence that the United States is a good partner in the region.

Satloff: General, given the last six months, is Chairman Arafat part of the problem or part of the solution?

Scowcroft: He is both. Dennis outlined a perfect process, logical in every respect. Yet Arafat and the Palestinians are not operating on this logical ground. For them, this is not a negotiation, where each side must give up something. Arafat did not want to come to Camp David; he said he was not ready to do so. This unreadiness is based on the deep sense of injustice that invests the Palestinian extremists. They think that all of the territory belongs to them; getting 90 percent of it back is not a great deal for them because it is all theirs psychologically. The real killer of the proposal, though, was its permanence. If we had said, "This is a step," then it might have gone differently. Instead, Arafat was in the position of having to go back to his people and say, "This is it -- it's never going to change." He might have gone along with measures that were expedient but that left the grand end open, perhaps never to be closed. We have to grapple with this sort of mindset when we are dealing with Arafat. Whether he can ever make an agreement, though, is another question. The problem is that there is nobody around right now who is better.

We must also remember that Arafat has only one lever to use -- putting people in the streets. The Israelis can use all kinds of levers -- economic levers, personal-freedom levers, and so forth. They can adjust their pressures. Arafat has no levers other than putting people in the streets, and these people are probably prepared to stay in the streets longer than the Israelis are prepared to continue the kinds of things that are going on now.

Satloff: To be fair, General, Arafat does have other levers -- letting the terrorists in and out of jail is a pretty significant lever. Witness the bus bombings in recent months.

Scowcroft: That is all part of the same strategy, though -- turning up the violence.

Hoagland: That lever is a club he drops on his own foot -- it is totally counter-productive. I also think that it is impossible to improve on Dennis's description of what happened and what ought to be done now -- both components are exactly right. Brent offers a very interesting idea about the permanency of last year's proposal, but of course it was the permanency that was driving Barak's offer -- his sense of history, his sense of being able to tell the Israelis that he had finished the conflict, had drawn the borders. That is what enabled him, in his own mind, to go through with the process. Earlier, I said that I keep the Middle East in my life to make me humble, and this is a good example.

I went to Israel and to the West Bank and Gaza last June, and for the first time in thirty years of watching the Middle East, I became convinced that there not only could be, but probably would be, a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian issue, pretty much on the terms that Barak was beginning to -- and, amazingly, did -- put forward at Camp David. The question now is not whether Arafat can accept a deal. It is whether Arafat, or those who follow him, can accept anything less than what Barak offered. The answer is probably "no," and that condemns us to a very long period of unrest.

I also want to touch on one factor that I still have not thought out clearly for myself, but which I think is important. I am not quite sure how to look at the role of those Arab governments that we in the media call "moderate" or "pro-American conservative." I have a sense of a declining vitality in these governments, to put it politely, in their effectiveness during times when it looks like there might be a peace agreement; in their effectiveness with the Palestinians; in their effectiveness when pursuing objectives that should be in their own interest; and in their effectiveness during this kind of insurgency/civil-war period. What should American policy be toward these governments? Until now, we have assumed that they will be helpful to American interests, to peace. Yet this assumption is wearing pretty thin. The moderate Arab governments are in deep trouble, and any policy that assigns them a large role -- whether it be on Iraq or on Israel and the Palestinians -- is in trouble.

Ross: I agree with that, Jim, and there are a lot of lessons that I am in the process of learning as I reflect on this issue. One lesson is that we need to be more realistic about what our Arab friends can and cannot do. It is an illusion for us to think that they can deliver the Palestinians. They cannot. As I mentioned earlier, the end of the Clinton administration provided a very revealing picture. On the day that the president presented his ideas to the Israelis and Palestinians, he also talked to five Arab leaders, and every single one of them supported what he had laid out, saying in effect that it was revolutionary and that they would do what they could to encourage Chairman Arafat to accept it.

Yet, when Arafat raised questions -- knowing that we were past the point of being able to negotiate, since this was the culmination of the negotiating process -- every single one of these leaders came back and said, "Well, he has questions." These leaders can support a decision that the Palestinians make -- that they can do. If Chairman Arafat had felt that he could agree to Clinton's proposal and had needed the Arab leaders to create a climate of support, they would have been able to do so. Yet, they were not going to put themselves in a position in which it looked like they were trying to force Arafat to accept an agreement or a concession on Palestinian rights. That has to be a Palestinian decision; it cannot be their decision. So we have to start with the premise that these leaders can be helpful only to a point; if we build our policy around the expectation that they will deliver something, it will be wrongheaded.

This fact relates to Iraq as well. These leaders are acutely aware of the psychology at the street level now. Earlier, I mentioned the impact of satellite television; it does create a much greater awareness, but it can also create a kind of anger. In addition, there are other angers throughout the Arab world that are implicitly directed against these moderate Arab regimes. The legitimate outlet through which these angers are allowed to emerge is anger at Israel or anger at the United States, not anger at fellow Arab countries. Yet once a kind of spontaneity emerges in the region, you never know where this anger is going to go. Our Arab friends will focus on their needs in a crunch, but we should not assume that they will support our efforts in a particularly visible way if they feel that their own publics will not support them.

I would also like to comment on something that Brent said: there is a sense of entitlement on the part of the Palestinians. Thus, there has always been an asymmetry in this peace process. The Israelis approach the process from the standpoint that it is a negotiation. The Palestinians tend to approach it from the standpoint that when they accepted a two-state solution, they made their basic concession and, as a result, are entitled to everything else. So anything further that we ask them to give up is something to which they feel they are entitled.

Now, having said that, we went through a very intense negotiating process which revealed that in fact they knew they had to make some concessions. Arafat has not walked away from the concept of peace with Israel; he still stands by a two-state solution. What he never did, however, is prepare his own public for the fact that the concessions which were being talked about in private were going to have to be addressed in public as well. Part of this failure was that he did not prepare himself. He launched a process with an ideal in mind. He focused on what he was going to get, but he never focused on what he was going to have to give up. When push came to shove and he had to confront that fact, it was too hard to redefine himself. The people around him intuitively understood that concessions would be required because they were immersed in the details of the discussions. Arafat was not. Oftentimes, I thought he stayed aloof because it was an effective tactic -- which, by the way, it was. Yet it was also a means of not having to confront what it is he would have to decide.

Arafat had said that he needed more time to prepare for Camp David. At that time, though, his negotiators had hit a wall themselves; they were no longer negotiating. The preparation that was needed was for him. I recommended going to Camp David as planned, though, because I was afraid of an explosion. We had seen eight days of violence in May 2000 involving, for the first time, shooting between the Palestinian security forces and the Israel Defense Forces. September 13 was looming, and I felt that if we did not meet well before then, we were going to see an explosion without ever having known whether our ideas could produce an agreement. We knew that Barak was prepared to contemplate these ideas, and we did not want to foreclose that possibility without having tested it. Yet I also knew Arafat well enough to realize something: he never makes a decision one minute before he has to, and for him, September 13 was, I believe, a decision point -- maybe not the final decision point, but a decision point. July 11, when we went to Camp David, was not. The Clinton White House was often accused of basing its decisions on political considerations. Yet here is a case where we did not want to be too political. We feared that if we went to a summit around the September date, it would look like we were sucking the air out of the political campaign in an attempt to draw attention to our administration. Ironically, then, by a kind of reverse political psychology, we did not go at a time that might have made more sense.

Satloff: Senator, we have had a fairly disquieting conversation so far. Not much is achievable in the Arab-Israeli arena right now. As for Saddam, even in the best of scenarios, it seems that we are going to live with this fear of him for the immediate future. Are there any opportunities for progress on these or other issues in the Middle East? If you had a chance to speak with the president about this region, is there any one initiative that you would suggest he undertake?

Brownback: I have made suggestions to him about getting away from the drift policy in Iraq, and that is one recommendation that I would push to him now as well. Whatever we choose to call them, we need to stick to the ultimate goals that I discussed earlier, goals which I believe to be achievable. This process may take some time, but we should not move off of it; we will send the wrong signal if we do. We should also look at what sort of bilateral measures we could engage in throughout the region. For instance, the prime minister of Lebanon recently visited the United States seeking international financial aid. This is a chance for us to talk to Lebanon about regional issues. We would have to press them to make certain concessions before we would proffer financial support, but it is nevertheless a chance to engage Lebanon on important matters. We just lifted the travel ban there about three years ago; that is another opportunity to establish a dialogue. We should start looking for more of these little opportunities. The rest of this panel is far more knowledgeable than I on the specifics of such items. As a policymaker, I tend to try to gather information in order to see what is politically feasible, but I think that these are opportunities the president should pursue.

Satloff: Brent, you have dealt very closely with two past U.S. presidents. Can you see President Bush getting the Middle East "bug," as other presidents have tended to do before they left office?

Scowcroft: Possibly -- I think he is aware of the dangers and does not want to catch that bug, and that this was one of the factors that resulted in his backing away from intense involvement. He does not want to get trapped in it. As Dennis said at the outset, though, we do not have a choice here. The reality is that we are going to be dragged into any problems; it is a critical area of the world for us, and we cannot turn our back on it. One of the places that we ought to focus on again is Iran. President Muhammad Khatami is in serious trouble now, debating whether to run again and so forth. What we have going for us in Iran are the Iranian people themselves, who have voted decisively three separate times now in favor of liberalization. Whether Khatami is fatigued, discouraged, or simply does not believe in what he has been telling us, it seems to me that we should take advantage of the impending review of the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA). A unilateral gesture now -- either to relieve some of the sanctions imposed by executive order or to say that we will not seek to renew ILSA -- could rejuvenate Khatami and quietly let him know that we are behind him, which might put some life back into the area. The longterm evolution of Iran toward liberalization is very much in our best interests, and I think it is conceivable. There may be potential in Syria as well, though I do not know much about that country.

Satloff: Last night, we had quite an exchange between Larry Eagleburger and Richard Perle regarding ILSA. Reluctantly or not, both of them concluded that any change in ILSA would be a mistake because it would send precisely the wrong message at a time when the Iranians have done nothing to merit a change in American policy.

Brownback: I would have to respectfully disagree with what the general was saying. He was correct in his assessment of the elections and of Khatami, but the clerics and others who are actually running the country are continuing to use very destabilizing tactics, even stepping up such activity in some of the areas throughout the Middle East. We cannot back away from ILSA at a time when they are increasing their support for terrorist groups and activities. I understand the purpose that Brent described, but canceling ILSA would send other signals that are inappropriate given what the Iranians -- the officialdom of Iran -- are doing right now.

Scowcroft: We have to pay something to get something, though. We are stalemated now, going nowhere. The sanctions do nothing to facilitate reform in the targeted countries, and they hurt the United States economically. We are not enforcing them on the Europeans now, and if we do so we will find ourselves in a big battle. The sanctions are pretty much worthless in terms of influencing the Iranian regime, so why not a gesture that the Iranian people could see as evidence of our goodwill?

Satloff: During the last two years of the Clinton administration, several gestures were made -- a speech by former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, the change on some import duties.

Scowcroft: Not to disparage these efforts, but the change on imports involved only three items -- rugs, caviar, and pistachio nuts. Pistachio nuts already had a 300-percent duty on them, so the change did not matter. We should do something that actually gets their attention, and not grudgingly. We get so little out of the sanctions other than punishing American businesses.

Hoagland: This is a difficult issue -- I suppose that maintaining ILSA is probably better than sending the wrong signal. One problem with doing away with ILSA is that the Iranians have made it clear that this gesture will not change their attitudes or policies on most of the issues that are important to the United States. They will continue to do what they are doing, and Khatami supports that stance fully, as far as I can tell. The one piece of their policy and outlook that fits with ours concerns Iraq. In order to achieve change in Iraq, then, we are going to have to work with the Iranians somehow, tacitly, quietly. This would be the first area of change in Iranian- American relations, and it is a very valuable step to take.

Brownback: Over the next twenty years, we will have far greater problems making progress with Iran than with probably any other regime in the region. Consider the activity that they have been willing to sponsor, what they have

been willing to do themselves, how they have been willing to do it, and the dedication to these activities exhibited by a large body of the Iranian people. The problem with Iraq is Saddam. Some say that he will be replaced by a leader who presents the same problems, but I think that once we get past Saddam, we will be able to engage Iraq. In Iran, though, there is far more depth to these problems -- within their system, their mentality, their sense of who they are as a people, and their willingness to operate against the United States. We confront them in Central Asia, in Lebanon, and in a number of other areas throughout the region. In the long run, then, Iran is by far our most difficult problem in this region.

Ross: Although I think that is true, Brent put his finger on something as well. We have seen elections in Iran with legitimate outcomes. These elections did not change the actual behavior of Iran toward the outside world, but they did show that the Iranian people have developed a different mindset. Khatami represents at least one segment of the leadership and the public that is looking to create a different kind of society, a civil society. We have to develop a long-term approach that takes account of the way in which the Iranian people have expressed themselves. We should in fact be concerned about a large country that is potent in terms of threats; when we see a public constituency that wants to move in a different direction, we have to think about what might be done to help them.

Experience makes me draw back a little bit from the implications of what I am saying, though. In dealing with the Soviet Union, we did not help the reformers by reducing the costs of bad behaviors. The same is true in Iran. We must show that there is a consequence for bad behaviors. We must say to the refomers, in effect, "If you want to achieve a civil society, you cannot threaten your neighbors, you cannot carry out acts of terrorism, you cannot engage in behaviors that will isolate you; you have to show an interest in reform." So we have to strike a balance in Iran, creating a sense of support for the reformers while showing that there is a very clear cost to the behaviors of people like Ali Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guard.

Scowcroft: I agree with that. As I said before, we are stalemated right now, and we do not know how to mobilize the interests of the Iranian people in a way that has an effect on the regime. We can certainly try, though, and if our efforts fail, we can easily reimpose sanctions. If this strategy does work, it can stimulate the people to give Khatami more leverage within the regime. After all, they have already demonstrated in the streets on a couple of occasions for such reasons. This strategy is worth trying because we have nothing else to do other than sit on our hands while the rest of the world disagrees with our policy and does not follow it.

Satloff: I think that we will see this difference of opinion on ILSA played out over the next several months. I would now like to open the floor to some questions from our attendees.

Merryl Tisch, The Washington Institute: So much of foreign policy, as I hear you discuss it, seems to be related to posturing and to symbols. What about Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's proposal to remove U.S. military personnel from the Multinational Force and Observers peacekeeping squad in the Sinai Peninsula? Is there any concern that this would be a destabilizing signal on a border that has been fairly secure?

Scowcroft: That is an interesting issue. The force serves no obvious purpose anymore -- it is a vestige of the past. Yet, I find it very interesting that neither Egypt nor Israel wants it removed.

Satloff: So maybe it does serve a purpose.

Scowcroft: This is where symbols and psychology come into play. Both sides take reassurance from our presence. The force is not that expensive; I think we ought to keep it there.

Ross: I agree. The United States has some 831 military personnel there, and Brent is exactly right: both sides want that force there because it provides a kind of psychological assurance. At a time when the atmosphere in the region is what it is, we should not do things that undercut that psychological assurance.

Barbi Weinberg, The Washington Institute: On the issue of Iraq's potential development of nuclear weapons by 2003, it seems to me that in order to prepare the American people for that possibility, we have to start talking about it sooner rather than later. As for where Iraq would use such weapons, my guess is that Saddam is more likely to attack Israel than any place else in the region, as an illustration of muscleflexing and, perhaps, as a challenge to the United States' ability to respond aggressively. It seems to me that we were slow to prepare our forces to go into Iraq before the Gulf War. Suppose that Saddam uses a nuclear weapon on Israel as an illustration of his capability and then threatens to use one on the Saudi oil fields if the United States does not give in to certain demands. As much as we would then want to mobilize, it might be too late.

Scowcroft: The whole purpose of our sanctions, inspections, and so on was to prevent what is now happening. Our concern about WMD in Iraq is at the core of what we have been doing there for the last decade. I don't think that we have to remind anybody about this agenda. When the Clinton administration left office, though, we did not know what was going on in Iraq in terms of WMD development, and we were no longer inspecting Iraqi facilities. So the current administration should certainly become more aware of the problem. We must also keep in mind that although Saddam has already developed the framework for a nuclear weapon, it would not be a simple thing to deliver. That is, he does not have the sort of weapon that he could screw onto the front of a Scud missile and fire. He can deliver it in many other ways, some clandestinely, but it would not be a simple thing to do.

Satloff: I think Mrs. Weinberg's point is that if you asked most Americans whether Iraq is currently being inspected by the UN to make sure it does not have any WMD capability, most people would probably say "yes"; most would not know that there haven't been inspectors there for two-and-a-half years.

Hoagland: Perhaps. This is a real problem that we saw played out in the space of a couple of days, when former Secretary of Defense William Cohen went on television with a five-pound bag of faux anthrax in order to make Americans more aware of the danger. Once the Clinton administration realized that they were drawing attention to a problem for which they had no answer, they very quickly decided not to put five-pound bags of anthrax on television anymore. (Laughter.) That was their answer to the problem.

Weinberg: I did not make my point effectively. My question really concerns our military readiness, not the awareness of the general public. If the Iraqis obtained a nuclear weapon, we would have to take action very quickly. Yet, we are not in a position to mobilize our military in such a manner. How do the panelists see us preparing ourselves militarily and publicly, given that this is a potential scenario in 2003? We have been saying for ten years that the Iraqis may have nuclear capability in the future, but all of a sudden the possibility looms much closer on the horizon.

Brownback: I think we are fairly well prepared militarily, in the sense that we have troops and planes in position there. As you know, we are engaged in daily flights over Iraq. So now, perhaps, we should be beefing up those forces somewhat; I would leave that to the military planners. As for preparing the American public: we politicians have to deal with the public constantly, and as wonderful as that is, experience has taught me that it sometimes takes a six-foot-high prairie fire to get their attention -- a real and present danger. If you tell them that Saddam could have nuclear weapons in 2003, I think a fair number of people would say, "Well, it's 2001, I've got a while." Instead, they are thinking about their children's education and Social Security and the economy; that is just the nature of most Americans.

Participant: I have heard Richard Perle talk about the possibility of nuclear weapons in Iraq, as well as in North Korea and elsewhere, but usually in the context of the domestic debate on the missile defense system. This 2003 date, though, represents a very alarming timeframe. As was pointed out earlier, Mr. Perle cited German intelligence as the source for that date during last night's discussion. Does the U.S. government have confirmation of this date?

Scowcroft: One of the indications that we have from the time when we were inspecting is that the Iraqis had

constructed a device but that they did not have the fissile material to load it. I do not know whether that is actually true or not.

Roger Hertog, The Washington Institute: We do not seem to give enough consideration to the supply side of nuclear devices and materials, which in most cases appears to be Russia. What should we do about Russia, which seems to be the supplier to both Iraq and Iran? They have a very serious capability in this area.

Brownback: Yes, they do -- that is an excellent point. We have been buying nuclear material from Russia. The Nunn-Lugar proposal that passed in Congress and received funding has been pretty successful in getting a lot of this material out of the area. We are not getting all of it, though; the basic materials to build weapons are still flowing out of Russia, particularly to Iran. This issue was addressed briefly in the last presidential campaign, when we conceded that it was fine for the Russians to ship certain kinds of weaponry to Iran even though such shipments were against our laws. We did not waive the sanctions provisions under the laws, but there had been a side agreement that we would let a certain level of weaponry go. We continue to use surveillance to try and stop this from taking place. Now the Russians are saying that they are going to transfer openly, at least with Iran. Probably not with other countries at the moment, but there is such a softness in Russia on this matter that we may see more such transfers to other countries throughout that region.

Satloff: Will stopping the flow of weapons technology to Iran ever be our numberone priority with the Russians? Or will we continue to accept a certain seepage from Russia?

Scowcroft: Seepage would be difficult to stop even if we had a Russian government that believed exactly as we do about this issue. Russia is not a tightly governed nation right now, to put it mildly, and there are questionable things going on in the corporate structure of Russia even though it is owned by the government. There are freebooters out there running their own show, and many of them pay absolutely no attention to what is going on in Moscow. So seepage of the kind that the senator is talking about -- little bits of scientific information, nuclear materials, and so forth -- is going to be very hard to stop.

Ross: You have to divide this issue into two parts. One part is this seepage, which as Brent says is going to be very difficult to stop because the kind of control that once existed in what was the Soviet Union no longer exists today. Ironically, a certain laissez-faire attitude is part of this problem. Russia no longer has a "military-industrial complex," so everybody who was a part of that complex has been given a kind of carte blanche to make weapons deals. We have to curb that sort of behavior to some extent by creating incentives for the Russian government to do what they can to control it.

This problem raises a second, larger question: what are American-Russian relations going to be like in an era that will not be characterized by a cold war? We cannot go back to our old relationship because the landscape is so completely different now. Yet, Russia is going to be much more competitive than it used to be, given President Vladimir Putin's view of reestablishing Russian credibility and stature on a global basis. We will not be able to dictate policy to the Russians. The more we try to impose our views, the more they will resist. So we will have to create a multifaceted relationship with them. We will have to focus on those things that are most important to us -- like this weapons-transfer issue -- while recognizing that we are not going to succeed every time and that there will be tradeoffs on some critical issues.

Nabil Fahmy, Egyptian ambassador to the United States: Jim Hoagland was asking the floor to respond to the role of the moderate states or the friends of the United States in the Middle East. I r ❖

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