

Avoiding the Mideast:

Never a Real Option

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Articles & Testimony

There is a growing belief in some foreign policy circles that four months of violence and Ariel Sharon's landslide victory in Israel last week are further proof that former president Bill Clinton's proposals for a Middle East peace failed miserably, and that the Bush administration should absolve itself of the whole mess by sitting on the sidelines. This "all or nothing" approach is a false choice.

Even with Bush's announcement Friday that he would send Secretary of State Colin Powell to the region, the conventional wisdom sees the Bush team as backing away from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. After all, it would be hard to equal the extraordinary involvement of Clinton. He tried and failed to orchestrate a grand peace deal at Camp David last summer and again during his waning hours in office, only to see a Palestinian intifada, or uprising, overtake diplomacy, leading to Sharon's devastating defeat of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak.

Who could blame the Bush White House for a wish to let the Israelis and Palestinians stare into the abyss and decide themselves whether to restart the diplomacy machine?

There were preliminary signs during the presidential campaign and in the days following Bush's inauguration that the administration was tempted to wash its hands of intensive involvement in the region.

One of Powell's first decisions as secretary of state was not to send an envoy to the last-ditch Israeli-Palestinian peace talks at Taba, Egypt — a clear break from the Clinton strategy. Powell has also decided, at least for now, not to name a new Middle East peace envoy to replace the retired Dennis Ross. Together, these decisions signaled that, unlike Clinton, Bush did not want to focus like a laser beam on Mideast peace, a notion reinforced by Powell during his confirmation hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He said, "the parties themselves must make the peace. . . . We also pledge to focus our own efforts on the region as a whole and not just on the peace process standing alone."

Upon Sharon's victory, however, Powell wisely called key Arab leaders, urging them to give Sharon a chance to form a government and formulate policies. Publicly, Powell called for calm in the region. The United States, he said, would not be "standoffish."

Indeed, the United States cannot be indifferent to what happens in the Middle East, and not only because of its historic bonds to Israel. On average, about 20 percent of U.S. petroleum imports come from the Middle East. And the United States has a keen interest in winning Arab support to contain Iraq. The fate of the Mideast is tied to U.S. national security, and therefore this administration, like its predecessors, can't afford to stay on the sidelines.

It is not inconceivable that Israeli-Palestinian hostilities could spin out of control and deteriorate into regional war. Indeed, the Middle East may now be at its most perilous point since the last comprehensive Arab-Israeli war in 1973. Repeated attacks across Israel's northern border, the growing acceptance of Iraqi entreaties by Israel's neighbors Jordan and Syria, the concern that the hawkish Sharon will react as harshly to provocations as he has in the past — all suggest that there is reason to believe an Israeli-Palestinian entanglement could lead to broader conflicts. So, while Clinton was attracted to the region by a rising opportunity for peace-making in the wake of the Cold War and Gulf War, Bush will inevitably be dragged into the Middle East on account of mounting threats.

The prospect of war interests no Israeli or Arab leader (except, perhaps, the perennially truculent Saddam Hussein). But there is no doubt that Arab radicals are going to try to provoke Sharon, seeking to puncture his assertion that he will keep Israel secure. These groups are counting on him to overreact, and thus galvanize the Arab world and the international community in a broader struggle against Israel. "We and our people are not afraid of Sharon; just the opposite, he gives us a motivation to pursue the resistance," Hamas spokesman Ismail Abu Shanab said after Sharon's election.

To some Mideast observers, the danger is palpable. Senior U.S. intelligence officials have called the Shebaa Farms, located along the Israel-Lebanon-Syria border, the most dangerous place on Earth, posing a greater risk to regional and international security than either the DMZ between North and South Korea or the Taiwan Strait. Israeli military chief of staff Lt. Gen. Shaul Mofaz told reporters last May that Israel, feeling its deterrent had been undermined by Arab perception of Israeli weakness following its unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon, was on a hair-trigger alert in case of Hezbollah attack. This sense of the Israeli deterrent having been weakened is not idle speculation. I have been struck by the number of Lebanese Hezbollah flags fluttering in the Palestinian territories since the current intifada began last fall. These flags are shorthand for the sentiment that you don't negotiate with Israel, you attack it.

The urgency with which the United States is likely to become involved is underscored when one adds Syria to the mix. Syria is a key player in containing or unleashing Hezbollah when it suits its purposes. One Western diplomat who has met with Bashar Assad, the new and inexperienced leader of Syria, described him as one who "spouts Hezbollah slogans," and is engaged in setting up an oil pipeline with Syria's traditional foe, Saddam Hussein. Without much fanfare, Iraq has moved three divisions to and from the Syrian border, and another toward Jordan, as a muscle-flexing exercise to restore Saddam Hussein in the Arab world, by demonstrating his solidarity with Arab opponents of the peace process across the region. (In order to ingratiate himself with the Palestinians, Hussein has been sending emissaries to the West Bank to deliver cash to families of those killed or wounded by Israel.)

The spread of Arab satellite television is inflaming and galvanizing Arab public opinion against Israel. When a 12-year-old Palestinian boy was killed tragically by crossfire in a Gaza gun battle between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian Authority security services, the image was replayed endlessly throughout the Arab world. In response, an estimated half-million people joined an anti-Israel march in Morocco. Anti-Israeli protests were even seen in the sleepy sheikhdom of Oman. A chain reaction of anger is easy to imagine.

U.S. involvement in the region is also somewhat complicated by Middle East misperceptions about Bush, which the president would be wise to dispel. In the salons of the Arab world, there are whispered assumptions that the Bush administration will be tougher on Israel because of the friction that existed a decade ago between the elder President Bush and the government of then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir; because of the new president's oil background; and because American Jews traditionally support Democrats on the national level. This has led some Arabs to

mistakenly believe that Bush, unlike Clinton, will not be moved to action by violence.

Arabs aren't the only ones with misconceptions. One notion widely — and wrongly — believed by Palestinians and other Arabs, but also by Americans and Europeans, is that the nationalist Likud Party of Sharon is averse to American intervention. While Likud's rhetoric may suggest this, it simply hasn't been so. U.S. officials have long harbored reservations about right-wing Likud governments, believing them more prone to miscalculate Arab intentions and therefore to a greater chance for crises.

Over the years, I have heard American officials say repeatedly that the peace process was self-sustaining when the Labor Party of Ehud Barak, Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin was in charge; it was no coincidence that the Oslo agreement of 1993 occurred without U.S. involvement. Conversely, U.S.-Likud relations have demonstrated that each has reasons to work with the other. Likud has accepted, sometimes grudgingly, American involvement over the years because of its regional isolation; the United States has interceded because of its fears of Arab-Likud miscalculation. It should come as no surprise, then, that some of the most intensive periods of American involvement occurred with the Likud in power: The U.S.-brokered efforts to bring Israelis and Arabs together in Madrid in 1991 and for the Wye River memorandum reached in 1998, not to mention the U.S. involvement in the landmark Camp David summit of the late 1970s and subsequent Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty.

While U.S.-Likud diplomacy can be prickly, a Sharon government is likely not only to be more dependent on the United States than would its Labor counterparts, but more dependent on the Americans in general, given the recent deterioration of Israel's relationships with its Arab neighbors.

The challenge facing the United States will be to remain engaged while devising an approach that's less ambitious and more incremental than the Clinton administration's. This will not be easy. After the violence is quelled, the United States must find a diplomatic middle ground between the unattainable — the grand Israeli-Palestinian deal envisioned last year at Camp David — and the unthinkable — a slide down to a kind of Kosovo on the Jordan. The most likely alternative is a return to an incrementalist approach, a move that would be made easier if Sharon is able to assemble a broad coalition.

In a poll of Americans last month, 80 percent of those surveyed agreed with the statement, "Under the incoming Bush administration, the U.S. should continue to make Middle East peace and stability a high priority." This, of course, does not mean that President Bush should become a Middle East desk officer. Middle Easterners should be weaned from the assumption that they can have the attention of the American president whenever they want it. Rather, Bush should save such involvement, as White House spokesman Ari Fleischer put it, for "when it makes a difference," leaving Powell as the point man. But as for staying on the sidelines, there's far too much at stake for that.

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