

The Escalating Crisis in the Middle East: Prospects and Policy (Part I)

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Brief Analysis

On October 13, 2000, Robert Satloff addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum along with David Makovsky. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks. [Read a summary \(templateC05.php?CID=1978\)](#) of Mr. Makovsky's remarks.

General Context The last two weeks have been symptomatic of the different sort of Middle East the United States will be facing in the early years of the new decade. Whereas the dominant context of the 1990s was peacemaking punctuated by intermittent bouts of violence and conflict, the new decade will be marked by violence and conflict punctuated by intermittent bouts of diplomacy.

The current situation is dangerous, on many fronts. Saddam Hussein is rattling his sabers, claiming to have a half-million new volunteers to fight Israel and sending shockwaves throughout the globe just by sending a Republican Guard division on maneuvers. The terrorist attack against the USS Cole in Aden opened a new dimension of this conflict, bringing it home directly to the United States. On Israel's northern front, the superficial calm since Israel's withdrawal in June has ended, with Hizbollah's kidnappings of three Israeli soldiers. In reaction to huge, popular rallies across the region, two Arab countries--Oman and Morocco--have lowered or suspended their commercial cum diplomatic ties with Israel. And in the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian arena, one national unity government has already been formed--the unity government between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, which seems already to be acting on the principle, enunciated by PA negotiator Nabil Shaath, of having diplomacy and violence as complementary tactics, not irreconcilable alternatives.

Potential for Getting Worse As bad as this situation is, it could get much worse. Even assuming no further worsening of Israeli-Palestinian violence, the Arab summit meeting next week could do the following: call for further suspension or even severing of existing diplomatic relations between Arabs and Israel; reinstate secondary/tertiary boycotts; sanctify a unilateral declaration of Palestinian independence; and issue a Khartoum-like declaration along the lines of "no peace without Palestinian sovereignty over Jerusalem, no peace without full Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 borders (on both the Palestinian and Syrian fronts); no normalization without full peace on all fronts." And, of course, the summit could add to the political rehabilitation of Saddam Hussein.

On the security front, the chances that Saddam will move westward are slim. But he could take advantage of the current situation (and the Turks current pique at the United States for Armenia-related reasons) to move troops northward and re-take the Kurdish autonomous zone. Alternatively, Saddam could fire an old SCUD at Israel. For him, hitting something would not be important; the mere firing would make him a hero across the region. Perhaps most acutely, Saddam could force a short-term global oil crisis by taking 500,000 to 1 million barrels of oil off the market, knowing that global excess capacity is very limited.

Other military/security dangers include the prospect for widespread, mid-1990s-style terrorism, fueled by the PA's release from jail of numerous Hamas and Islamic Jihad operatives; escalation on the Israel/Lebanon-Syria front, generated either by a reinforcement of Hizbollah via Syria, further Hizbollah action, or some Israeli retaliatory move; heightened tension with Egypt, in which the Egyptians react to Israeli strike inside Zone A by sending troops to Sinai, perhaps even to a point that would exceed Camp David limits; worsening violence inside the territories, with one likely scenario being Palestinian attacks on the sixty isolated Jewish settlements; and possibly a return to Arab-Jewish rioting inside Israel itself.

Last Chance for Diplomacy Until midweek, when Arab foreign ministers begin to meet in Cairo, diplomacy has a last chance to stem the violence and begin to put the pieces of the Israeli-Palestinian relationship back together again. Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak hinted at that several-day window when he said it would take a few days to forge a national emergency government. Sharm al-Shaykh represents that last chance. The terrible events of Thursday--with the lynching of two Israeli soldiers and Israeli's retaliatory actions against Arafat's headquarters in Ramallah--evidently scared Egypt so much that it prompted Husni Mubarak to drop his opposition to hosting a summit meeting; clearly, he sensed that Egypt had more to fear from further escalation than he had to gain from trying to ride the tiger of Arab nationalism and from venting hubris at Barak's refusal to attend the Albright-Arafat meeting last week.

U.S. Policy The Clinton Administration should tread warily into this summit. After Geneva and Camp David, this would be the third presidential summit on the Middle East this year. While no one would fault President Clinton himself for his peacemaking efforts, the U.S. role could suffer from another failed summit; the next president will surely be loath to invest personally should the President again return home empty-handed. In the context of the current crisis, one could term the United States the "dispensable nation"--Arafat snubbed his nose at numerous presidential requests to call for an end to violence and walked out on the Secretary of State, while Mubarak, recipient of billions of U.S. aid, turned down a request that the President fly to Egypt to advance the cause of peace. This is probably not a tectonic shift in the U.S. role but rather a reflection that there are moments of time when what Washington brings to this process--its alliance with Israel and its offer to the Arabs to provide a pathway to seek redress of their claims--is not highly valued by local players. In these moments, others--like the UN Secretary General--fill the void. All this suggests the U.S. should proceed with caution.

Administration officials have said they need one of two preconditions met before the President will participate: a complete end to violence or a public commitment from Arafat and Barak to end violence. The latter, of course, is more important than the former; an end to violence could be no more than a lull while a commitment can be judged over time. (It is most disheartening that analysts are still, two weeks into this crisis, asking whether Arafat could end the violence if he chose to do so. The fact that this is still a hypothetical question is itself remarkable.)

The purpose of presidential involvement would be to create enough drama to justify everyone stepping back and reassessing the idea of pursuing peace. Operationally, it would be to reach an agreement among the parties that marries their political commitment to ending violence with implementation of the agreements on security mediated by CIA Director George Tenet, which effectively amount to disengagement of forces plus the functioning of situation rooms manned by security officials of both sides to defuse problems before they become crises.

But there may even be more. Remarkably, during this bloody period, there are signs that the goal of the summit is not just to secure a total end to violence but also to get the parties to re-engage diplomatically based on the outcome of the Camp David summit and the U.S. bridging proposals crafted thereafter. Both Barak and Acting Foreign Minister Ben Ami have said or hinted as much.

There are strong reasons to be skeptical about the early re-engagement on the Camp David model. Indeed, even talking about it sounds like a flight of fantasy. Thursday--the day of horrible violence--was a good day for Arafat, who appears to have taken on a siege mentality reminiscent of the days of Black September or Beirut 1982; he had national unity at home and political gains abroad, despite the fact that Israelis died and Israel responded with U.S.-style tactics of using minimum retaliatory force for political purposes. The Arab summit this week is simply too big a prize for Arafat merely to settle for getting to the U.S. bridging proposals. After all, avoiding those proposals was the principal rationale for this crisis anyway. That is because those bridging proposals--which would have required Israel to make concessions beyond those which Barak offered at Camp David--were still not enough for Arafat, who would also have been asked to compromise on some of his core demands on Jerusalem, territory, refugees, etc. Furthermore, virtually all of the agreements or near-agreements reached at Camp David are no longer applicable in the current environment anyway. In this atmosphere, it is hard to see how to re-engage diplomacy anytime soon and hard to see how the Camp David discussions are still relevant. In fact, the chances that Arafat walks out of Sharm to a roar of popular approval are more than slim.

In his CNN interview Thursday, Barak himself hinted at an alternative: separation. Over time, this could mean some form of "unilateral withdrawal" or "strategic retreat," in which Israel takes what it wants and needs and then redeploys out of the remainder of the territories. Conceivably, this could happen in parallel with a Palestinian declaration of independence. In that context, the goal of diplomacy would be to limit the collateral damage of unilateralisms that are not coordinated. But even that approach is still very far away. The parties still must get through the next few days, when the prospect of a worsening of tensions and even a descent to further violence is very real.

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