

Presidential Study Group Trip Report: Camp David through Middle Eastern Eyes

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

With a couple of minor exceptions, there was scant criticism of U.S. policy by Arab leaders. Contrary to expectation, officials from Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Palestinian Authority volunteered very few complaints. Israel's discontent with the relationship, on the other hand, was manifest and unmistakable. Israeli representatives from both ends of the political spectrum expressed clear and unambiguous feelings of frustration with U.S. policy. Their disappointment was not simply a matter of bruised feelings over the Phalcon affair or an inevitable corollary to a relationship of dependency. Their attitudes are partly reinforced by the uncertainties surrounding both the peace process and Israel's new role as a global rather than regional power --particularly in the arms industry. However, Israel did voice well-founded concerns about Washington's wishy-washy policies, highlighting failures on behalf of the U.S. to take vital Israeli interests into account; namely the North Korean missile program, the Iranian nuclear program, and the level of U.S. military assistance to Egypt.

In light of Israel's emerging role, Phalcon may be a harbinger of things to come. Specifically, the principle of having to take American interests and concerns into account is becoming a practical rather than a theoretical matter and proving to complicate an already complicated relationship. These nascent constraints are both real and unfamiliar in terms of the freedom of action Israel is accustomed to, and related tensions will not ease overnight.

Robert Satloff Some Israelis expressed interest in a much deeper, more inclusive, relationship with the United States, perhaps even up to the level of a treaty. Others suggested that Israel must trim its aid package down to the bone in order to enjoy greater independence from the United States and put an end to a controlling embrace.

VIEWS ON IRAQ

Arnold Kanter We raised the issue-local leaders did not. No one in either Saudi Arabia or Jordan seems to think that the United States' current policy of containment will either be effective or sustainable over the long run. When it came to alternatives, the consensus broke down. In Jordan, where sanctions continue to crush an economy already inundated with problems, officials believe that sanctions should be eased if not lifted. They advance the theory that in doing so, it would open up Iraq and put additional pressure on the regime to the breaking point. The Saudi view of containment seemed to be more ambiguous. Despite their recognition of its ineffectiveness in the long run, they

evinced no particular dissatisfaction with the current policy. On the topic of the Iraqi opposition movement, they were dismissive and contemptuous. Regarding the use of force, one Saudi royal hinted that while hesitant to endorse this option any time in the near future, they might be willing to do so under two conditions: that the US was utterly determined to oust Saddam and second, that a truly viable method was presented.

SENTIMENTS ABOUT BASHAR AL-ASAD

Arnold Kanter There was a striking consensus that Bashar is an "untested unknown." Saudis expressed this view in a generous and optimistic way, one royal saying that, "He is a fine young man." A Palestinian that was less optimistic said, "Bashar is a joke." No one has a great deal of confidence about what Bashar will attempt to do or how successful he will be in doing it.

Wat Cluverius The Saudis were firm that the Syrian leader would be tending to his domestic garden for at least the rest of this year and possibly the next, precluding any advances in the peace process. However, one Israeli commented that in terms of final outstanding issues between themselves and the Syrians, the gaps are very narrow. "Not much work is left to do. There is a mountain and a lake-he gets the mountain, we keep the lake."

OPINIONS OF CAMP DAVID

Arnold Kanter The Saudis were utterly reserved about Camp David. They were concerned about Arafat's political safety under US and Israeli pressure, but confident that Arafat would not give away the store-after all, he could not give away that which was not his to give. The same confidence was not to be found in Jordan, where developments on the Israeli-Palestinian track could easily erupt into street violence throughout Amman, all while the Kingdom stands by not idly, but somewhat helpless. One surprising discovery was that for the Palestinians, as a matter of principle, Jerusalem seemed less important than the right of return.

Wat Cluverius Psychologically, Israelis were perhaps less prepared to accept major concessions on Jerusalem, at least in the sense that most Arabs no longer expect to get very much. The terms of an agreement being discussed today were not part of the national conversation even ten or fifteen years ago and are therefore still contentious. While Jerusalem continues to be the mother of all mantras, the right of return is an even redder line. To accept the right of return is to confess that the state was born in sin and a wrong was done. This issue will sooner prove a deal-breaker than a dealmaker.

Robert Satloff There is a certain irony in the characterizations of U.S. outreach to Egypt and Saudi Arabia regarding potential concessions by Arafat or at least his deferral of the Jerusalem issue. For decades, Arafat has labored to convince America and the world that he was the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people." However, when the issue came to a head, Arafat evidently punted, telling U.S. officials that he was not, in fact, the sole address. It is, of course, foolish to think that the other Arabs would ever counsel Arafat to accept a compromise on the Old City. That misses the whole point of the 1974 Rabat resolution - namely, what passes for moderation in the Arab world is the idea that Arafat alone should make concessions to Israel. Here, reportage on Arab views on Camp David probably misses the mark. When Arab leaders were polled on their views, it is unlikely that they told Arafat to "hang tough." It's more likely that they said "it's your neck on the line, not ours. You make the decision -- and you live (or die) with the decision." When that happened, it is clear that Arafat reverted to being the exponent of the Palestinian cause rather than the leader of the Palestinian people.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE PEACE PROCESS

Arnold Kanter The Jordanians are a bit disappointed, perhaps even a bit bitter, that the peace treaty with Israel has failed to yield economic benefits. This explains their ambivalence about the urgency of a permanent-status settlement. Jordan expects that it will be a direct recipient of substantial economic assistance commensurate with any final deal between the Israelis and Palestinians. Unfortunately, there is no assurance that any sort of "beneficial

fallout" will materialize, and Jordanian disappointment could have much broader consequences.

Robert Satloff The collapse of the summit does not signal impending doom, but it may mark the beginning of a very long interval for the type and depth of US involvement recently witnessed. As the September deadline approaches, whether it is meaningful or merely a date drawn in the sand, Yasir Arafat is faced with five alternatives:

1) Everything but Jerusalem: settling on an accord that does not include the holy city or its environs--this he ruled out at Camp David and is unlikely to accept soon.

2) Coordinated statehood: reaching an agreement with the Israelis that may not immediately resolve all permanent status issues but permits a non-confrontational declaration of independence--possible, but not probable.

3) Partially coordinated statehood: coming to an agreement on some parameters of statehood but not all, leading to a unilateral declaration of independence notwithstanding Israeli threats and international caution--messy, volatile, and likely.

4) Complete chaos: not to be ruled out.

5) A second Camp David: hard to imagine.

ASSESSMENT

Arnold Kanter The fact that the terms of the debate have radically changed, in a mostly consensual way, is encouraging. Subjects like a Palestinian state or shared control over Jerusalem have gone from being taboo subjects to shared premises, and in none of the meetings were these premises seriously challenged. Perhaps for the first time, the substance of a deal can be envisaged.

Most striking among recent developments has been the ability of symbols to obstruct pragmatic solutions. Accordingly, the hardest part of reaching an agreement will not be on the merits of the remaining issues, but finding a way of dealing with the symbols of the issues; that is, finding a mutually acceptable way of articulating some politically explosive principles such as "sovereignty" and "right of return."

Hosts in the various countries did not want Camp David to fail, but all expressed serious concerns about the concessions. Their collective uncertainty about the striking of a deal indicated that a "final deal" might not be all that final. Moreover, any deal, far from marking the dawn of a new era, could give the term "cold peace" a whole new meaning.

Robert Satloff There are refreshing signs of a new Middle East. Discussions centered on economics and development rather than politics and ideology. Talk of a just solution to the Palestinian problem has, for instance, evolved into a discussion about practical solutions instead. However, the old Middle East is still very much alive. The Lebanese border is temporarily quiet, but is only likely to remain so through the Lebanese elections in August and September. Hundreds of Iranians are still active in southern Lebanon, particularly in the Bekaa Valley, and a senior Palestinian security figure reminded us that Iran remains the principal threat to the peace process, with assets and interests throughout the West Bank and Gaza. These factors will likely re-ignite tensions.

Separately, leaders from Saudi Arabia to Israel broached (in very different ways) the issue of a nuclear Middle East, referring not to the prospect of a superpower confrontation but the very real danger presented by states within the region.

Jordanian-Palestinian relations remain raw, bruised, and festering. This leg of the Palestinian-Jordanian-Israeli triangle seems the furthest from being developed.

Of the much talked about red lines, none is redder for Israelis than the right of return. This alone among Palestinian demands could theoretically mean the end of the Jewish state, and Zionists of all stripes are opposed to it both in

principle and practice. Irrespective of Palestinian guarantees that only a small percentage of refugees would even exercise the right, Israel remains steadfastly opposed to it. Resolving this issue is likely to prove much more difficult than recent reports indicate.

This report was prepared by Michael Moskowitz.



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