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*“No matter who rules in Baghdad, George Bush will have to decide between the role of statesman and politician in Arab–Israeli peacemaking.”*

## America in the Middle East: Statemanship versus Politics

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A stream of post–September 11 commentary has blamed Islam, the Muslim world’s plague of authoritarianism, dysfunctional economies, and decrepit educational systems for spawning the anger that has infected Muslims with hatred for America. Norman Podhoretz, the former editor of *Commentary*, contentiously argued in that magazine last February that “Islam has become an especially fertile breeding-ground of terrorism in our time. This can only mean that there is something in the religion itself that legitimizes the likes of Osama bin Laden, and indeed there is: the obligation imposed in the Koran to wage holy war. . . .”

In turn, a host of suggestions, some dreadfully naïve and others constructive, have been proffered to cure the Muslim world’s ills. Muslims undoubtedly would benefit from more freedom and prosperity and better education, just as America’s relations with the Muslim world would be enhanced by fewer suggestions from leading Christian ministers that Islam is “evil” or that the Prophet Muhammad was a “terrorist” (ideas suggested respectively by the Reverend Franklin Graham and the Reverend Jerry Falwell). There are 1.2 billion Muslims in the world, and 300 million in the Middle East alone. For the sake of argument, even if extraordinary campaigns of social, political, economic, and religious reform were feasible, and voices inside and close to the Bush administration promoted such campaigns, they would take years, if not decades, to implement. Yet the American Enterprise Institute’s Michael Ledeen espouses a revolutionary mission that “will successfully transform the lives of hundreds of millions of people throughout the Middle East.” Ledeen argues that the key is subverting and toppling regimes that sponsor terrorists. His list includes Iraq, Iran, Syria,

and Saudi Arabia. Other lists contain five, six, or seven countries and include the Palestinian Authority of Yasir Arafat. To many ears, not least many Muslims, ideas such as these have the ring of a twenty-first-century crusade, quite literally a clash of civilizations.

### NOT HEARD ON THE STREET

The conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is the litmus test for United States–Muslim relations, and it has increasingly become a source of great hostility toward America. Addressing Israeli television viewers about the situation in the West Bank and Gaza, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak remarked: “If this is to continue for 10 or 15 years, there would be a time when you face 400 million people harboring grudges against you. What you would do then, could you stand facing 400 million?”

When Mubarak’s predecessor, Anwar Sadat, signed the Camp David agreement with Israel in 1979, many Egyptians had little patience for the Palestinian cause. They felt they had paid enough blood and treasure in the conflict. They were ready for peace and spent little energy worrying about the fate of other Arabs. The temper of 2003 is different in Egypt and the wider region. Because of improved media access, there are tens of millions of vicarious participants in the conflict daily.

At the same time, animosity toward the United States is on the rise in the Arab world. Is this simply a matter of Arabs holding America responsible for their corrupt governments, as talk-show denizens and print journalists frequently claim? Are governments intentionally prompting anti-American and anti-Israeli sentiments to divert attention from problems closer to home?

Public opinion in the region is hidden from Western view not just by barriers of language and geographical distance but also by the words that Westerners use. An example is the use of “the street” to refer to opinion in Muslim countries, especially in Arab countries. The term originates in the region, where it is used by Arab

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elites, often in a deprecating sense that corresponds with the Lebanese proverb *ra'i al-baqir ahsan min siyasa al-bashar*—"the thinking of a cow is better than the politics of the masses." Certainly in Western use the term implies a formless mass of people swayed by the sentiments of the moment and manipulated by autocrats, a modern parallel to "the mob" in revolutionary France 200 years ago. "The street" implies few nuances of opinion, no need to stratify point of view to discern class, gender, age, regional, or occupational distinctions. "The street thinks . . ." intone sage-sounding media performers, as though talking about tidal movements. A rough equivalent for the United States would be "the mall thinks . . .," yet closer to home it is understood that there are various points of view, different countries to hear from, and that no single group speaks authentically for America.

In spring 2002, Zogby International polled 10 countries, 8 of which were Muslim, and found remarkably varied opinions. While many expressed admiration for American institutions and culture, United States policy in the Middle East fared poorly, with approval ratings well below 10 percent. In the region, America's Middle East policy is seen as skewed to the gross disadvantage of the Palestinians. In contrast, Hollywood films and American higher education and science earn very favorable responses. The respondents did not seem to hate American values or freedom at all. In fact, the poll indicates considerable but by no means unanimous admiration for America and its political system. What the respondents do not like is America's policies, and negative views of United States policy tend to color general attitudes about America.

Even in Morocco, distant from the Arab-Israeli conflict, only 38 percent of the sample views the United States favorably. In Egypt the results are bracing—only 15 percent of the public holds a positive view. In a massive December 2000 global poll that included the Middle East, Pew Foundation researchers described Arab opinion toward the United States as "overwhelmingly negative." Although the evidence of deep disaffection for the United States is powerful, ideologically driven attempts to deny the data persist, often coupled with the claim that anti-Americanism is manufactured by failing regimes and that any attempt by the United States to adjust its policy will be seen as a boon to extremism.

President George W. Bush deserves considerable credit for loudly expressing his respect for Islam and for condemning hate crimes against Muslims in America. Nonetheless, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that movement toward a fair solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict is an unavoidable priority for the United States precisely because Muslims' disaffection for America stems largely from the conflict.

Only a decade ago considerable optimism was afoot in the Middle East. Arabs and Israelis were thinking about a postconflict Middle East. The first Bush administration established an architecture for peace that included wide-ranging talks bringing together Israelis and Arabs from across the region. The Oslo agreement, originating in 1993, inspired remarkable hope and good feeling. Anti-Americanism simply did not exist to the extent that it does today. That the process failed is tragic, and the requiem for that failure implicates all parties, including the United States, but the need to find a solution remains.

## MUGGED BY REALITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

President George W. Bush came into office wary of the Middle East crucible. As he moved into the White House in January 2001, the second Palestinian uprising or intifadah was already in its fourth month (the first intifadah started in 1987 and ended only with signing of the Oslo accords in 1993). Palestinians and Israelis were dying almost daily.

In September 2001 Israeli General Ariel Sharon, then an opposition politician, paid a provocative visit to the Temple Mount, which is also the site of the Dome of the Rock mosque, one of the most revered sites in Islam. The area was electric with tension due to the broad despair about the deteriorating conditions in the West Bank and Gaza. Rioting broke out, and continued. Prime Minister Ehud Barak calculated that he would crush the uprising in its bud. Even peaceful and lawful demonstrations by Arab citizens in Nazareth were met with lethal gunfire by Israeli forces in the early weeks of the intifadah. In the end, Barak's failure left Israelis feeling less secure, not more, as the Palestinians reciprocated violence with violence.

Within weeks of Bush's inauguration, Sharon was swept into the prime ministership. Sharon's crushing electoral defeat of Ehud Barak reflected Barak's success in alienating not just right-wing voters but even his constituency in the Labor Party. Sharon promised security to Israelis. Although he has failed to deliver on this promise, he proved a more astute politician than Barak. Rather than repelling political allies, he attracted them, not least the opposition Labor Party, which joined Sharon to form a coalition government that survived until November 2002.

Well into summer 2001 Bush was content to delegate the diplomatic heavy lifting in the region to his subordinates, especially Secretary of State Colin Powell. This is not surprising. Bush's predecessor, Bill Clinton, was thwarted in his well-intended efforts to bridge Palestinian and Israeli differences at Camp David the previous summer. Bush and his advisers bluntly indicated their intention to steer clear of Arab-Israeli pitfalls. But if Middle East peacemaking was an aversion for the Bush team, Iraq was an obses-

sion. Yet the idea that the Arab–Israeli conflict could be put aside so the United States could deal with Afghanistan or Iraq “reflects either appalling arrogance or ignorance,” as Geoffrey Kemp, a former National Security Council staffer, has observed.

Moreover, Bush surrounded himself with neoconservatives. Despite notable exceptions, not least Colin Powell and his deputy, Richard Armitage, neoconservatives define the ideological core of the Bush administration. Whereas realists, such as Powell, argue that American interests are best served by acting in concert with allies and that military power should be deployed only when vital United States interests are at stake, neoconservatives expound a broader expenditure of power to preserve and expand American interests. America’s destiny is to lead the world, they argue, and George Bush often seems to be swayed by their worldview. These are men and women with a mission.

Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, for example, argues that there must be a broader war beyond the war against terrorism. “That larger war we face,” Wolfowitz has argued, “is a war of ideas, a struggle over modernity and secularism, pluralism and democracy and real economic development.” The Pentagon enjoys unique weight in foreign policy decision-making in the Bush administration. Rather than simply playing the traditional advisory role, the Pentagon is a full player at the foreign policy table. This is a Bush innovation. While significant differences of view exist within the Bush administration, the Defense Department particularly is top-heavy with neoconservatives, including out-of-the-limelight Douglas Feith, the undersecretary of defense for policy. As early as the mid-1990s, when the United States government was attempting to shepherd the implementation of the Oslo accords, Feith, a former Reagan administration official, stridently opposed Oslo. Indeed, in 1996 Richard Pearle, now head of the Defense Advisory Panel, and Feith wrote an advisory paper addressed to then Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, urging him to abandon Oslo.

In December George W. Bush added another neoconservative voice to the administration with the appointment of Elliot Abrams as his top Middle East assistant on the National Security Council. Abrams was convicted of perjury in the Iran-contra affair in the 1980s during the Reagan administration, but Bush’s father pardoned him. Like most of the other senior officials now dealing with the Middle East, Abrams has little experience in the region, but is an ardent supporter of Israel.

The neoconservatives have argued that the Palestinians would prove more malleable to a solution after Iraq’s Saddam Hussein is toppled from power. Therefore, there was no need to tackle that conflict before invading Iraq. In the words of Robert Kagan, one of

the men who has helped shape the administration’s geopolitical paradigm, Iraq is a “historical pivot. Whether a post-Hussein Iraq succeeds or fails will shape the course of Middle East politics, both now and for the remainder of this century.”

The White House—in a “Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!” spirit—began in summer 2002 to build its case for a war to topple Saddam. The president’s advisers were convinced that the United States could proceed unilaterally without congressional or United Nations approval. Addressing the Corps of Cadets at West Point on June 1, Bush argued for a preemptive strategy rather than one of deterrence. “We cannot defend America and our friends by hoping for the best. We cannot put our faith in the word of tyrants, who solemnly sign nonproliferation treaties, and then systemically break them. If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long.” The ideas expressed at West Point have been formally inscribed as the new national security policy of the United States.

In an extraordinary series of op-ed articles in summer 2002, a phalanx of respected statesmen challenged the neoconservative worldview. Brent Scowcroft, who served President George H. W. Bush as national security adviser, and other foreign policy gurus argued that the administration should keep its eye on the terrorism ball and not divert resources to invade Iraq. Former Secretary of State James Baker wrote in a *New York Times* column that Bush could not ignore the Arab–Israeli conflict. Unresolved and unaddressed, Baker pointed out, the conflict would impede the administration’s fundamental objective—getting rid of Saddam. A similar point was made by former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, who wrote in the *Washington Post* that “a U.S. assault on Iraq will be perceived in the region (and probably also in Europe) as part of an American–Israeli effort to impose a new order on the Middle East without regard for either Iraqi or Palestinian civilian casualties.”

But the Bush team has found it impossible to avoid dealing with the Arab–Israeli conflict, if only to facilitate the war against Iraq. As the comments of Scowcroft and others imply, a strong strategic rationale exists for resolving the Arab–Israeli conflict, but doing so entails nontrivial domestic political costs. More than any other foreign policy issue facing the president, the Arab–Israeli conflict exposes a clear choice for Bush. He will have to choose whether he will be President Bush the statesman or President Bush the politician. There are strong strategic arguments for choosing the first path, but strong electoral advantages in the second.

## PLAYING TO THE HOME CROWD

Palestinian terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians after September 11 delegitimized Palestinian aspirations.

And notwithstanding a number of indiscriminate Israeli attacks in civilian areas, American empathy for Israel increased in the face of what is often perceived to be a shared threat from terrorism. For his part, Sharon and his government shrewdly cast Arafat as “my bin Laden” and emphasized Israel’s partnership in suffering and action with America in the war against terrorism.

Still, the 2002 Chicago Council on Foreign Relations annual poll of American attitudes on international issues continues to show that the general public overwhelmingly favors a neutral diplomatic stance by the United States. While 25 percent of the respondents believe that the United States should take Israel’s side and only 1 percent say it should favor the Palestinians, 71 percent assert that the United States should favor neither side. This result reflects the sensible view that America should not let its sympathies get in the way of its interests. Similar results appear in other leading polls and are corroborated by this writer’s impressions from recent speaking tours in five states.

This does not mean that nearly three-quarters of all voters will vote for President Bush in 2004 if he adopts a balanced perspective on the Arab–Israeli conflict. After all, voters have many criteria for allocating their votes. Though there may be a silent majority in favor of a balanced United States approach to the Middle East, the more salient voices in Washington tend to reflect an overt bias toward Israel. This is especially reflected in Congress, where the “wrong” vote threatens to provoke a “take no prisoners” riposte from the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the powerful Washington lobby organization.<sup>1</sup>

Another reason a balanced approach is unlikely has obvious political roots. American Jews number slightly more than 5 million. Moreover, Jewish voters traditionally tend to favor Democratic candidates and in 2000 they cast their votes en masse for Al Gore. But in tight races, as in Florida two years ago, a relatively modest shift in Jewish voting in key states could make all the difference; Bush’s strong support for Israel may well gain him the ballots of many Jewish voters that he did not win in 2000.

Bush’s political base in the Christian right has been formidable, and the Christian right evinces uncritical support for Israel. In contrast, American Jews tend to split roughly on Labor (left-center) versus Likud (right-center) lines; indeed, some of the harshest critics of Likud Prime Minister Sharon are American Jews who see his policies as leading nowhere but to more violence. Bush’s resident political engineer and strategist, Karl Rove, spends much of his effort sustaining the firm support of the Christian-right base. “Cultivating the Christian right, which now forms the base

of the Republican Party, has been Rove’s major preoccupation,” longtime political journalist Elizabeth Drew noted in the December 5, 2002 *New York Review of Books*. Rove’s interjections into White House foreign policy discussions emphasize that applying diplomatic pressure on Israel implies potentially heavy political costs domestically. If United States policy in the Arab–Israeli conflict turns on winning Florida in the 2004 presidential election, it will be difficult to construct a foreign policy that realistically addresses both Israeli and Palestinian concerns.

## IN THE SHADOW OF WAR

Despite the reinstatement of United Nations weapons inspectors in Iraq in November, barring extraordinary developments—total cooperation from Saddam, a coup in Baghdad, or Saddam’s sudden demise—the United States will invade Iraq. Massive resources are now assembled in the Persian Gulf, and for the United States to step off the path to war could be construed as a stunning political defeat for George Bush.

As the war clouds gathered in the gulf, the Bush administration cooperated with the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations to establish a “road map” to a two-state solution that would see Israelis and Palestinians living side-by-side in peace. The road map specifies a process of political reform for the Palestinians that is understood to entail nudging or pushing Arafat aside in favor of new leadership. In practice, this proposal foresees an end to the conflict on the basis of Israeli withdrawal from most of the territory that it has occupied since 1967. For the Palestinians, the road map leads to a state in three years.

The plan presumes an early end to the violence that has claimed 2,400 lives on both sides, but it is doubtful that the Israelis or the Palestinians are capable of stopping the killing on their own. To demand an end to violence as a precondition for diplomatic progress puts extremists in the driver’s seat. Unless the United States is prepared to adopt a much more determined diplomatic stance, the road map remains a doubtful guide to ending the conflict. Anti-American sentiments already have been unleashed, and the conflict fomented hostility that plays into the hands of America’s enemies.

Of course, the neoconservatives assert that the United States will find the Middle East considerably more pliant following a military triumph in Iraq. If war does come, much turns on the duration of the fighting and the cost in American and Iraqi lives and treasure. It would certainly be ill advised to presume that American efforts to placate Muslim public opinion with slogans in lieu of serious movement on the region’s signal conflict will fool any more people in 2003 than in 2002. No matter who rules in Baghdad, George Bush will have to decide between the role of statesman and politician in Arab–Israeli peacemaking. ■

<sup>1</sup>See the essay by Michael Lind, “The Israel Lobby,” *Prospect*, April 2002.