
Three Crises in Search of a Policy

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Dear President George W. Bush:

*Congratulations on your election as the leader of the world's only
superpower. Can we talk?*

*All the best,
Yasir or Ehud or Saddam
or Mohamed*

The above imaginary note could have been sent by Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, Iraqi "President" Saddam Husayn, or Iranian President Mohamed Khatami. Each will be waiting for signs of the new U.S. administration's intentions and policies. These leaders may wonder, "Will the new president be friendly or hostile, forgiving or vindictive, interested in containment or engagement?" They may ask, "Will he judge me fairly or will he be a captive of U.S. interest and political action groups?"

The new administration is not likely to have much of a grace period from international crises. If recent history is any guide, Palestinians and Israelis will make demands and require presidential handholding, Saddam Husayn will challenge him to a new and potentially risky confrontation, and Iranians in general will examine every statement for signals of the next move toward or away from dialogue. And, as Bill Clinton discovered, these issues cannot always be set aside while the new team "gets smart on" or focuses on other issues it prefers or promised to address first.

ARAFAT ON LINE 1, BARAK ON LINE 2

By the time of the inauguration the more violent aspects of the confrontation between Palestinians and Israelis may have subsided. The daily attacks by

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stone-throwing Palestinians and Israel's settlers and military could be over. The damage to the personal lives, property, and self-esteem of both sides, however, is significant, and the impact will be long lasting. The nature of this confrontation—including teenagers deliberately sent forward to throw stones at the Israeli Defense Force and Israeli settlers on the West Bank rampaging through Arab villages—is the most serious since the 1948 war. The media images of slain children and murdered soldiers will linger in the minds of all who viewed them. For the first time the confrontations were broadcast in real time and in graphic detail throughout the Arab and Muslim world as well as in Israel and the West. It will take a major effort by Israeli and Palestinian leaders as well as erstwhile American negotiators to bring the peace process back to life.

Both sides and the U.S. have much at stake in trying to resolve the conflict and restart the negotiation process. The Israelis have been confronted, once again, with a denial of their right to a homeland and state, which many believe to be based on history, ideology, and religious belief, and a denial of the Holocaust itself—the event that has and will continue to shape the psyche of Jews in Israel and the United States for generations. For Palestinians—both Muslim and Christian—the violence has reminded them of their powerlessness and of Israel's ability to thwart their most basic ambitions to return home, to declare a state, and to have control over their national and religious institutions. For both it is a matter of self-view and pride.

The risk is particularly high for Israeli Prime Minister Barak. He resigned in mid-December and called for a new election for prime minister within 60 days both to avoid a later campaign against rival Benjamin Netanyahu and to place the peace process on the electors' agenda sooner rather than later. He needs a vote of confidence that his strategy of compromise with the Palestinians—including the return of West Bank land and resolution of the refugee and settlement issues as promised at Oslo and Wye Plantation—can still bring peace. He must show Israelis that Israel has a Palestinian partner it can live with—a difficult mission given the increased polarization among Israel's diverse political groups and worried population. Alternatively, he must convince Israelis he is ready to be tougher than he has appeared to be in dealing with the Palestinians, Arafat, and the U.S. If re-elected, he (or his successor) will look to Washington to put a new team in place quickly to deal with these issues. Whoever wins the Israeli election will anticipate that the new U.S. administration will accord Israel's security as high a priority as previous administrations. He will not have the flexibility of changing his strategies or tactics in dealing with Palestinian violence that the U.S. may seek from him. Israel may hope to benefit from the political disorder in Washington caused by the close election to obtain new promises and evidence of "on the ground" support.

The stakes are high, too, for the United States. Although Washington is accused of applying a double standard to Israel and Arabs and of not being an

honest broker, both Israelis and Arabs demand that the U.S. force them to the peace table. Israelis mistrust the Europeans, who are eager to play a role in the peace process, because they are staunch advocates of Palestinian causes. The Palestinians opt for U.S. mediation because they believe that only Washington can exert influence over Israel. Failure to resolve the complicated issues of Palestinian refugees, Jewish settlements, and Jerusalem is disappointing. But the risk of a blow back, of spillover violence, and terrorism against U.S. interests because it has or has not succeeded in resolving the peace process is high. While it is highly likely that the attack in Yemen on the USS Cole was planned long in advance of the Palestinian-Israeli riots of October and November, the incident serves as an example of the unpredictable nature of the terrorist threat.

Equally disturbing have been the unprecedented and public pro-Palestinian, anti-U.S., and anti-Israel demonstrations on Arab streets in Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, and Bahrain. They also reflected support for Iraqis suffering under sanctions, a suffering that many Arabs blame on the United States and not Saddam. More serious, however, the demonstrations contain an implicit risk to the regimes in Riyadh, Muscat, Doha, and Manama, respectively. The rulers joined in condemning Israel at the Arab summit in Cairo in October 2000, but they did not declare *jihad* (holy war) despite calls to do so by the popular protests in the Arab street and Muslim clerics in Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Rulers want to avoid war, but also avoid angering their populations. Rather than risk a total break with domestic critics, Arab rulers will distance themselves from Washington. Those that had begun the process of normalizing relations with Israel—Jordan, Oman, Qatar, Morocco, and Mauritania, for example—will keep their mutual offices and consulates closed.

The danger for the new administration, then, will be to try to restore the peace process and repair relations with Arab rulers and ruled. At the same time, Washington will have to walk a fine line in urging Israel to return to negotiations with the Palestinians without appearing to favor a specific candidate in the upcoming elections. At risk for the U.S. is cooperation in maintaining sanctions on Iraq and preserving the levels of force presence, deployments, prepositioned military equipment, and access to local facilities necessary if the U.S. is to continue a substantial military presence and conduct operations in the Persian Gulf. *Excuse me, Mr. President, Mr. Barak is no longer on the line.*

SADDAM CALLING

Since Operation Desert Fox in December 1998, Saddam Husayn has probed for signs of weakness in U.S. and U.N. Security Council resolve regarding his failure to comply with sanctions. Saddam effectively ended inspections of suspected weapons of mass destruction (WMD) sites and programs in November 1998. In

2000 he challenged U.S. "red lines" by having his Air Force fly into the forbidden No-Fly Zones in northern and southern Iraq and penetrate Saudi air space. Aircraft of more than a dozen countries including France, Russia, the UAE, Morocco, Egypt, Turkey, and Jordan have flown into Baghdad's reopened international airport. Iraq has also initiated flights between Baghdad/Basra and Baghdad/Mosul within Iraq. At the height of the Palestinian-Israeli confrontation in October 2000, Saddam sent several divisions to the western border and has promised to provide the Palestinians with nearly \$900 million in oil revenues. He dared the Arab governments gathered at the Cairo summit to declare *jihad* on Israel and called on the people of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait to overthrow their governments because of their failure to declare war on Israel while supporting U.S. military operations against the Iraqi people. Finally, in early July, the U.S. government announced that Iraq had test-fired a short-range, liquid-fueled ballistic missile, the *Al-Samoud* (resistance, in Arabic), which could carry conventional explosives or the chemical or biological weapons that Iraq is still suspected of hiding.² U.S. officials said the tests are evidence that Iraq is working to perfect its ballistic missile technology, which could be easily adapted to missiles with a longer range.

Except for the outbursts by Saddam and his sons against Iraq's Gulf neighbors and threats to eliminate Israel, Saddam has played a clever game. He has taken advantage of a distracted U.S. government and a divided U.N. Security Council to strengthen his hand inside Iraq and with those working to weaken if not end the sanctions regime. He held an international trade fair this fall, and visitors to Baghdad report the presence of many Russian, European, and American companies negotiating contracts for oil field development and other infrastructure projects.

What will be Saddam's quadrennial election surprise for the incoming U.S. administration? Conventional assumptions include an attack on the Kurds and/or a new move on anti-regime Shi'ah opponents in the south. The first is probably less likely, because the Kurdish leaders almost certainly keep Baghdad apprized of their moves, have not allowed an opposition presence in the north since Saddam's incursion in September 1996, and are not likely to risk their fragile gains over the last decade by unduly provoking Saddam.³ This, in effect, gives Saddam de facto control over events in the north. A move against Shi'ah dissidents in the south is much more likely, especially if further progress is made in improving relations with Iran. Iranian President Khatami met with the Iraqi representative at the Islamic summit held in Qatar in early November, and Iranian Foreign Minister Kharrazi and Iraqi Vice President Taha Yasin Ramadhan exchanged visits this fall. One of the items on their menu of issues has been an end to support for anti-regime elements—Baghdad would restrain the anti-Tehran Mujahidin-i Khalq and Tehran would curtail the activities of the anti-Baghdad Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq.

The new U.S. administration will have to enunciate a clear and coherent policy for Iraq. If campaign rhetoric becomes policy, then the new administration will probably declare that Saddam Husayn remains a threat to regional peace because he will not relinquish his WMD arsenal or live in peace with his neighbors. The United States, it will say, remains committed to containing the regime, alleviating the suffering of the people of Iraq, and supporting Iraqis who seek a new government. The risk here will involve determination to punish Baghdad if and when it crosses the so-called red lines. For the Clinton administration, crossing the red lines meant military action was authorized if Saddam deployed weapons of mass destruction, if he threatened his neighbors, and if he attacked the Kurds. The new administration will need to decide whether it will carry out its promise of confrontation and if it will take that action in consonance with other Coalition and Security Council members or go it alone. Unilateral action may be the only—and unpopular—option. European members of the old anti-Saddam coalition and Iraq's neighbors no longer support military operations against Iraq and will probably continue to ignore his violations of U.N. Security Council resolutions. To ignore Saddam is an even more dangerous decision. If his refusal to comply with U.N. resolutions on permitting weapons inspectors back into Iraq and his challenges to other restrictions involving persecution of any Iraqis or overt threats to neighbors are ignored, then he will continue to try to break sanctions and reassert his authority in the region.

The new U.S. administration will also have to decide the extent of support it is willing to offer to the inchoate Iraqi opposition in exile and whether it will back up their embryonic efforts with U.S. military protection. Congress passed the Iraq Liberation Act in 1998 and authorized \$97 million in Pentagon aid to the Iraqi opposition, but the Clinton administration has been loath to include military assistance in the assistance offered the factions. Instead, it has concentrated its efforts on encouraging the disparate opposition factions to coalesce into one organization and advertise their plans for a post-Saddam Iraq.

Congress has tried to force the release of money and military assistance to help one anti-Saddam group, the Iraqi National Council (INC) headed by Ahmad Chalabi. Some outspoken policy advisers on the Republican side who are now militantly pro-INC opposed such aid in 1991 when they served under President George H.W. Bush. They may find themselves more cautious in committing U.S. forces and treasure to invading Iraq if they return to posts in government.

IRAN ON HOLD

Both Washington and Tehran will watch closely for signals of renewed tensions or cautious steps towards rapprochement. Each has made gestures in the past year toward the other, including Presidents Khatami and Clinton being present

during the other's speech at the U.N. in September. There has been no indication of a change in U.S. policy regarding Iran's foreswearing support for international terrorism, opposition to the Arab-Israeli peace process, and acquisition of weapons of mass destruction, and Iran continues to indicate its preconditions include resolution of all asset issues. The new U.S. administration could send several signals of friendlier intentions to Iran. It could:

- Consider ending opposition to Iranian requests for international loans. Current legislation requires the U.S. to do so.
- Oppose renewal of the Iran-Libyan Sanctions Act (known as ILSA) when it expires later this year.
- Support economic infrastructure investment projects, such as approving a pipeline carrying Central Asian oil and gas through Iran to the Gulf.

Interestingly, Iran was not mentioned during the foreign policy debates this fall, perhaps a signal in itself that a change for the better in U.S. relations with Iran is a given.

President Khatami has repeated that he is willing to debate a "dialogue of civilization," as he first mentioned in his groundbreaking interview with CNN shortly after his election in 1997. He offered an apology for the taking of U.S. diplomats as hostages in Tehran in 1979 and has managed to restore relations with Europe. He will probably have to put on hold any further gestures toward Washington and defer any friendly U.S. moves at least until the presidential elections scheduled for June 2001 are held. Khatami's conservative opponents have been able to thwart his efforts to expand freedom of the press and other liberal reforms by arresting his supporters. They believe the U.S. is determined to restore secular rule in Iran and oppose any pro-American moves. In these circumstances, there is probably little Khatami can do to further an opening to Washington without a significant gesture on the part of the U.S.

THE CRISES IN POLICYMAKING

The new U.S. administration will have to weigh policies regarding the Arab-Israeli peace process, Iraq, and Iran against concerns of domestic constituencies and Congress. Some will pressure the new administration to move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, regardless of the state of peace, while others may question what price the United States should pay for peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors. On Iraq, business and humanitarian interests will urge an end to sanctions, but human rights watchers and those long familiar with Saddam's modus operandi will know that is no solution to helping Iraqis suffering under sanctions and Saddam's repressive rule. A more vital question will be the importance of Iraq to overall U.S. foreign policy interests. Should we trade off NATO expansion for Russian support for sanctions on Iraq? Should we end

support for Taiwan to acquire promises of Chinese cooperation on Iraq and on not proliferating weapons of mass destruction? Finally, some in Congress are already urging renewed sanctions on Iran and support for the so-called National Council of the Resistance, a pseudonym for the terrorist Mujahidin-i Khalq, based in Baghdad. One thing is certain, the new administration will probably have as much difficulty as the old administration in balancing domestic demands with national interest. ■

NOTES

¹ Arab journalists in Egypt and Syria, for example, have in recent months denied the Holocaust happened, while most Palestinians say they do not understand why they should be punished for what was essentially a European "problem."

² The range of the missile was less than 150 kilometers (95 miles) and not in violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions that ban missiles with a range greater than 150 kilometers. Steven Lee Meyers, "Flight Tests Show Iraq has Resumed a Missile Program," *The New York Times*, July 1, 2000, A1.

³ In September 1996 Iraqi Kurdish Democratic Party leader Mas'ud Barzani invited Saddam into Irbil to help weaken his Kurdish rival Jalal Talabani, head of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. The Iraqis used the opportunity to arrest and eliminate opposition elements in the area, while others who had been cooperating with the U.S. and exile anti-Baghdad factions fled abroad.

