



Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

Why U.S. National Security Requires Mideast Peace

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Two myths have important, distorting effects on the Bush administration's policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.¹ First is the optimistic belief that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is only a minor obstacle to American foreign policy—a modest hindrance that will not prevent the United States from achieving its main foreign policy goals. Second is the pessimistic belief that a final settlement between Israel and the Palestinians is infeasible, so a forceful U.S. push for peace will only waste effort on a fool's errand. These two assumptions have led the administration to adopt a passive policy toward the conflict, declining to offer firm U.S. leadership toward peace.

In fact, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict now poses a major threat to U.S. national security. It does this by easing al-Qaeda's recruiting efforts, helping al-Qaeda terrorists to find friendly haven in Arab and Islamic societies, and making Arabs and non-Arab Muslims less willing to cooperate with U.S. efforts to destroy al-Qaeda networks. Accordingly, the U.S. should treat the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a serious menace to America's safety and move forcefully to end it.

Moreover, a strong U.S. push for peace could well succeed, as many pieces needed for a settlement are now in place. The conflict poses an unprecedented threat but is also ripe for solution.

The Al-Qaeda Threat and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Whatever helps al-Qaeda endangers the U.S. because al-Qaeda itself still poses a grave danger. We should not be lulled by the quiet since 9/11/01. Al-Qaeda has ambitions to wreak mass havoc and may also have the power. Its gruesome goals are expressed in Osama Bin Laden's declaration that "to kill Americans ... civilian and military—is an

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individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible.”² Al-Qaeda’s press spokesman, Suleiman Abu Ghaith, has claimed a right for al-Qaeda to kill four million Americans, including two million children.³

The U.S. destroyed al-Qaeda’s sanctuary in Afghanistan in 2001 and its remaining leadership is now in hiding. This forced it to morph into a more decentralized organization, but it remains dangerous. Today its leaders plot new mayhem from sanctuaries in Pakistan’s north-west frontier region and elsewhere. They seek to acquire weapons of mass destruction and may also have the opportunity: enough nuclear materials remain poorly secured in Russia to make tens of thousands of Hiroshima-sized atomic bombs. Many Soviet nuclear and biological-weapons scientists also remain underpaid or unemployed, ripe for hiring by terrorists.

Why does al-Qaeda endure against U.S. efforts to destroy it? Why does it still find recruits and support? An important reason lies in the poison spread through the Mideast region by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Opinion polls show that the conflict is highly salient in the Arab and Islamic world. Surveys also show that U.S. policy toward Israel/Palestine is deeply unpopular among Arabs and Muslims and that the U.S. itself is also deeply unpopular in these quarters. Further, polls show that the first and second phenomena cause the third—that Arabs and Muslims resent the U.S. largely because they care about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and disapprove of U.S. policies toward that conflict.

A March 2001 poll commissioned by the University of Maryland asked respondents in five Arab states—Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Lebanon—to identify the “single most important issue” for themselves, to include local domestic political issues. In Egypt a whopping 79 percent named the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; 60 percent did so in Jordan, Kuwait, the UAE and Lebanon. An additional 20 percent in these last four countries identified the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as among their top three issues.⁴ Similarly, a spring 2002 Zogby International survey of five Arab states—Egypt, the UAE, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia—found that about two-thirds of respondents viewed the Palestinian issue as “very important” or “the most important” issue facing the Arab world today.⁵

These poll numbers may be somewhat inflated as some respondents may have feared declaring a prime concern about local governance. (Taking issue with the government can be unsafe in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world.) Thus some whose main concern is local malgovernance perhaps stifled that thought and spoke of Israel/Palestine instead. But even discounting heavily for this possibility, these polls indicate broad and intense public concern over the Israel/Palestine question.

The reasons are three: the intifada that flared in the Palestinian territories after September 28, 2000; the new Arab satellite TV, including Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya and other channels; and the strength of supranational Arab and Muslim identities in the region. The intifada gives the conflict a dramatic and cruel face, ripe for inflaming television coverage. Satellite TV, which appeared only in the 1990s, provides a new medium for piping this cruel face into the homes of Arabs and Muslims far from Israel/Palestine. Their Arab/Muslim identities are aroused by these images, stirring anger even among non-Palestinians.

Arabs widely disapprove of the expansionist policies pursued by Ariel Sharon’s Israeli government and fault the U.S. for giving him almost unconditional support. The spring 2002 Zogby survey found minuscule support in five Arab states for U.S. policy toward the Palestinians: only 2 to 6 percent of respondents in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Lebanon voiced approval, and only 10 percent in the UAE. By contrast, 89 to 94 percent of respondents in

Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Lebanon and 83 percent in the UAE voiced disapproval of U.S. policy toward the Palestinians. In the world of opinion surveys such huge majorities are equivalent to unanimity. A similar picture emerged in the three non-Arab Muslim states that Zogby surveyed. Approval of U.S. policy stood at 10 percent in Pakistan, 5 percent in Indonesia, and 3 percent in Iran; disapproval registered at 79 percent, 75 percent, and 95 percent respectively.⁶ This highlights that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not merely an Arab concern but also animates the wider Islamic world.

Arab/Islamic hostility toward American policy translates into enmity for the U.S. as a whole. A March 2004 Pew Research Center poll of four Muslim countries found unfavorable views of the U.S. outnumbering favorable views by 61 to 21 percent in Pakistan, 63 percent to 30 percent in Turkey, 68 to 27 percent in Morocco, and a remarkable 93 percent to 5 percent in Jordan.⁷ A Zogby International study taken three months later found even deeper hostility toward the United States in six Arab states: those with unfavorable views of the U.S. outnumbered those with favorable views by 69 percent to 20 percent in Lebanon, 73 percent to 14 percent in the UAE, 88 percent to 11 percent in Morocco, 78 percent to 15 percent in Jordan, 94 percent to 4 percent in Saudi Arabia, and 98 percent to 2 percent in Egypt.⁸ The hostility these polls reveal is especially ominous as it extends even to traditional U.S. allies like Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan.

Finally, Arabs and Muslims explain their enmity toward the United States as stemming largely from U.S. policies toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Pace President Bush, they do not hate us for our freedoms. They hate our policies. Zogby again, May 2004: 76 percent in Jordan, 78 percent in the UAE, 79 percent in Lebanon, 81 percent in Saudi Arabia, 84 percent in Morocco, and 95 percent in Egypt declared that American policy toward the Arab-Israeli dispute was “quite important” or “extremely important” in shaping their attitude toward the U.S.⁹ Similar majorities indicated that their views of the U.S. are shaped more by American policy than American values, by majorities ranging from 76:16 in Jordan up to 90:1 in Egypt.¹⁰

Anti-Americanism in the Arab/Islamic world matters because it fosters a friendly environment where al-Qaeda can flourish, raising new recruits and money while evading the American dragnet. An Arab/Muslim public friendly to the U.S. would act as its eyes and ears, helping it glean the intelligence that is vital to successful counter-terror. But publics hostile to the U.S. sit on their hands, letting the terrorists hide in their midst while the U.S. searches

blindly. Osama Bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri and other al-Qaeda leaders run free in northwest Pakistan today because the people of that region are militantly anti-America and pro-al-Qaeda. These dangerous fish could swim no more in Mao’s metaphorical sea if the public willed otherwise—as it would if it viewed the U.S. with more approval.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not the sole cause of Arab/Muslim popular hostility toward the U.S. The war in Iraq and the impact of virulent anti-American propaganda from al-Qaeda and other Islamist movements also stoke the fire. Winding down the Iraqi occupation would help, as might stronger public diplomacy to counter al-Qaeda’s propaganda. But U.S.-Mideast relations will not heal fully while irritation from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict persists. In the meantime Al-Qaeda will benefit accordingly.

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Al-Qaeda’s leaders will not be weaned from their campaign of terror by an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement. Terror is their way of life, their reason for being. They cannot be conciliated; they must be destroyed. To achieve this their support base must be stripped away, and that can only come by engineering a large improvement in Arab/Muslim public attitudes toward the U.S. This will leave the extremists friendless and exposed, soon to face capture or death. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict should be ended not to appease their anger but to bring their demise.

The conflict fuels friction between the U.S. and other governments as well as publics. Often the U.S. needs these governments’ help against al-Qaeda and other foes, and U.S. national security suffers accordingly. America’s NATO allies are essential to defeating al-Qaeda, but disputes over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have frayed U.S. relations with these allies. Disagreements stemming from Arab-Israeli strife have also disrupted important U.S.-Syrian cooperation against al-Qaeda. For a time after the 9/11/01 attacks Syria gave the U.S. valuable assistance against al-Qaeda, including intelligence information that helped thwart an al-Qaeda attack on the U.S. Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain and an attack on an American target in Ottawa. Many American lives were perhaps saved. By 2002 Syria was an important source of intelligence on al-Qaeda and an important ally against it.¹¹ (Syria’s secular regime has long been targeted by Islamist radicals, including al-Qaeda, so the regime has worked to develop intelligence against these movements, often surpassing U.S. intelligence. It has hundreds of files on al-Qaeda and has penetrated al-Qaeda cells throughout the Middle East and Europe.)¹² But Syrian cooperation later ended, foundering on frictions with the U.S. that stem largely from Syria’s conflict with Israel, which is aggravated in turn by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict is Ripe For Solution

So the bad news is that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is damaging U.S. national security. The good news is that many pieces are now in place for a peace settlement. Seven in particular bear mention:

1. Years of negotiation have made clear to both sides the peace terms that each can and cannot accept. If they want peace they know what its outlines must be. Long months of fumbling in the dark for a mutually acceptable formula will not be necessary. That formula is well known.

2. Most Israelis and Palestinians now agree on the same peace terms. Specifically, polls taken in December 2004 and January 2005 show that 54 percent of Palestinians and 64 percent of Israelis endorse the parameters for settlement proposed by President Bill Clinton in December 2000.¹³ If the public can agree on terms there is little reason their leaders cannot do likewise.

3. Yasser Arafat's demise has brought to power a new Palestinian leadership under Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) that opposes violence and gives all indication of seeking peace on reasonable terms. A Palestinian partner for peace seems to be in place.

4. The Palestinian intifada that began in September 2000 has made major Arab states more predisposed to foster peace. Most important, the Egyptian government now fears that passions stirred by watching the intifada are causing the Egyptian public to mobilize in ways that threaten the Mubarak regime. The fear is that crowds chanting "down with Sharon" at noon could switch to "down with Mubarak" at ten minutes past. Other Arab regimes have also come to favor an Arab-Israel settlement for similar reasons. This new mood was signalled by the Abdullah peace plan, offered by the Arab League at its March 2002 summit and re-launched at its March 2005 summit, which envisions a settlement that involves acceptance by the Arabs of Israel's 1967 borders, no demand for large return of the 1948 refugees to Israel, and full integration of Israel into the larger Arab world.¹⁴ If the Palestinians and Israelis want to make peace they will now find many other Arabs willing to help it happen.

5. Israelis are increasingly worried that Israel will lose its Jewish character unless it makes a land-for-peace trade. This worry extends to important elements in the Likud, who see the West Bank as Israeli territory but now accept that demographic realities require Israeli withdrawal.

6. Israel no longer faces a credible threat of conventional attack from its east. Israeli hard-liners have long claimed that a land-for-peace trade was unwise because Israel needed to hold the West Bank as a buffer against possible invasion from the east by Iraq and Syria. But over the past 20 years the threat of eastern invasion has largely disappeared as the economies of Syria and Iraq have stagnated, their Soviet sponsor and arms supplier has collapsed, and the United States has smashed Saddam's regime and put Iraq under occupation. The size of the eastern threat was always debatable but Saddam's demise makes clear that it exists no more, as Syria poses no serious threat by itself. Hence Israel can now be more forthcoming about trading land for peace.

7. Israel now faces a dangerous new threat from al-Qaeda that gives it more interest in reaching peace with the Palestinians.

Before 2001 al-Qaeda focused its violence on the U.S. while leaving Israel unmolested. But since 9/11/01 al-Qaeda has targeted Israel as well, as dramatized by al-Qaeda's attack on Israelis at Mombassa, Kenya, in 2002. Hence the Israeli-Palestinian conflict threatens Israeli security (along with U.S. security) by helping al-Qaeda to find recruits and sanctuary, and by hampering U.S. efforts against al-Qaeda. This gives Israel a cogent new reason to seek peace with the Palestinians.

Thus if the U.S. pushes for peace, it pushes on an open door. But peace is not possible on any terms. The range acceptable to both sides is very narrow. They are basically those of the four major peace plans that have been widely discussed in recent years: the Clinton bridging proposals of December 2000, the Abdullah Plan

of March 2002, the Geneva Accord of December 2003, and the Ayalon-Nusseibeh (or "People's Voice") initiative, also of December 2003. These proposals distill to four key elements:

1. Israel would withdraw from all the territories it occupied in the 1967 war, except for minor border adjustments involving equivalent gains and losses for both sides, in exchange for a full and final peace.
2. Control of the city of Jerusalem would be shared along ethnic lines. Control of its holy places, including the Temple Mount/Noble Sanctuary area, would also be shared.
3. The West Bank and Gaza would form a Palestinian state that accepted sharp limits on its military forces in order to ensure Israel's security.
4. The Palestinians would not insist on a large return of Palestinian refugees to Israel, instead seeing their right of return

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recognized mainly by generous compensation to the refugees. Neither side will accept terms outside these parameters. Israel will never agree to a large return of refugees to Israel; Palestinian insistence on a large return would torpedo peace. And the Palestinians will accept no deal that they cannot credibly claim involves full Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories. Egypt's Anwar Sadat and Jordan's King Hussein both got full Israeli withdrawal from Egyptian and Jordanian territory in exchange for full peace in their earlier peace deals with Israel, and today's Palestinian leaders need to claim that they won the same terms to quiet their own radicals, who will otherwise accuse them of surrendering the national cause by accepting second-best treatment—"Not even what Sadat got! Not even what Hussein got!" Accordingly, Israel will torpedo peace if it offers less than full withdrawal—as it did at the failed talks at Camp David II in the summer of 2000, where it unwisely insisted on retaining eight percent of the West Bank and parts of Palestinian East Jerusalem.¹⁵

The American Role

What U.S. action does peace require? The two sides cannot make peace on their own; the U.S. must lead them to it. Specifically, Washington must frame its own final-status peace plan and use carrots and sticks to persuade both sides to agree. Enough with Oslo-style, open-ended peace plans: the two sides will move forward more willingly if they know their destination. And enough with passive mediation: strong U.S. persuasion is necessary. If either side needs incentives to move it forward, inducements—both positive and negative—should be starkly framed and firmly applied.

The U.S. final-status plan should involve a full Israeli withdrawal in exchange for full and final peace, in line with the four previous peace plans. The U.S. should use the first phase of the 2003 Quartet roadmap as its work plan to start the parties toward its final-status agreement; then it should omit the roadmap's phase two (which would create a Palestinian state with provisional borders) and move directly to the roadmap's third phase—final-status negotiations. It should closely oversee forward progress on the roadmap, framing a schedule for the fulfillment of both sides' roadmap obligations and enforcing compliance with that time line.

The new Palestinian leadership may need U.S. persuasion on two issues: right of return and end of violence. Some Palestinians choke on the notion that Palestinians who were driven from Israel in 1948 cannot return there. But the necessities of peacemaking require that the Palestinians accept this. The Palestinian leadership also must eventually disarm the various terrorist groups that

operate in the Palestinian territories and establish firm central control of all instruments of force. Abu Mazen may adopt these policies without pressure, but if not Washington should apply whatever weight is required.

Israel's government more clearly needs strong American persuasion. Prime Minister Sharon will not freely offer anything close to full withdrawal from the West Bank to gain peace. Instead he aims to create a Palestinian mini-state on perhaps half of the West Bank, with no presence in Jerusalem and no control of its airspace; and to annex to Israel the other half of the West Bank and all of Palestinian East Jerusalem including the Muslim holy places.¹⁶ No Palestinian leader would ever accept such terms, so Sharon aims to impose these terms unilaterally, without negotiation.

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Sharon's reasons for insisting on retaining large chunks of the West Bank are hard to fathom. He is not known for deep religious concerns so these are probably not at work. Rather, he is by reputation a national security hawk. If so, the collapse of the eastern invasion threat over the past two decades, plus Israel's new interest in helping the U.S. defeat al-Qaeda, should have made Sharon more willing to trade land for peace. But they haven't. Thus Sharon's motives are a puzzle. But for whatever reason, Sharon is now pursuing goals that preclude a peace settlement.

Accordingly, the U.S. must persuade Sharon to drop his pursuit of Israeli expansion. Carrots should include the prospect of large economic aid to cover the cost of adjusting Israeli defenses to

new borders and the prospect of a full formal alliance with the United States, to even include NATO membership, if Arab-Israeli peace is achieved. As a stick the U.S. should explain that no U.S. government can remain allied to another government that pursues policies that injure U.S. national security. The U.S. should elaborate that Sharon's policy of retaining large chunks of the West Bank precludes an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement; that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict injures U.S. national security; that Sharon's policy of expansion therefore injures U.S. national security; and that the U.S. therefore insists, as an absolute condition of continuing the U.S.-Israel strategic relationship, that Sharon's policy of expansion be discarded. Instead Sharon must agree to make peace within the terms of the four peace plans mentioned above.

Such a policy, pursued with energy, will likely bring the Palestinians and Israelis to a settlement. The publics on both sides already favor moderate policies that align with peace, and they

will not support leaders whose policies threaten rupture with the United States. Hence leaders on both sides will find themselves impelled toward peace if the U.S. forcefully applies its carrots and sticks to get them there.

Of course, the current climate in Washington precludes a policy of active U.S. pressure. Instead the Bush team now plans only some rather passive mediation unlinked to a strong U.S. policy. This will not be nearly enough to bring peace. Even the current ceasefire will likely break down unless it is reinforced by strong U.S. pressure for peace. The present Mideast calm is refreshing but without a far more forceful U.S. policy it is only the calm before another storm.

Americans who care about U.S. national security should therefore work to change the Washington climate. Our security requires al-Qaeda's defeat, and that demands a Palestinian-Israeli peace. Our government is derelict if it does not pursue such a settlement—soon and with full force.

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article footnotes

- ¹ A shorter version appeared as "Vital Interest: Winning the War on Terror Requires a Mideast Peace Settlement," *The American Conservative*, Vol. 4, No. 5 (March 14, 2005): 7-10.
- ² In 1998, quoted in Anonymous, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes: Osama bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the Future of America* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2002): 59.
- ³ In 2002 Abu Ghaith announced on an al-Qaeda-affiliated web site, www.alneda.com: "We have a right to kill 4 million Americans—2 million of them children—and to ... wound and cripple hundreds of thousands." Quoted in Graham Allison, *Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe* (New York: Times Books, 2004): 12.
- ⁴ Shibley Telhami, *The Stakes: America and the Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2002): 98.
- ⁵ John Zogby, "Why Do They Hate Us?" *The Link*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (October-November 2003): 3-13 at 8, downloaded from www.ameu.org/uploads/vol36_issue4_2003.pdf on 1/19/05. Specifically, respondents holding the Palestinian issue "the most" or "a very important" issue facing the Arab world were 80 percent in Egypt, 64 percent in Saudi Arabia, 76 percent in Kuwait, 78 percent in Lebanon, and 64 percent in the UAE. *Ibid.*
- ⁶ Zogby, "Why Do They Hate Us?": 8.
- ⁷ *A Year After Iraq War: Mistrust of America in Europe Ever Higher, Muslim Anger Persists* (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, March 16, 2004, downloaded from www.people-press.org/reports, 1/19/05).
- ⁸ Zogby International, *Impressions of America 2004: How Arabs View America: How Arabs Learn About America* (Zogby International: downloaded from www.aaiusa.org/pdf/Impressions_of_America04.pdf, 1/19/05): 3, table 1.
- ⁹ *Arab Attitudes Towards Political and Social Issues, Foreign Policy and the Media* (Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development and Zogby International, May 2004, downloaded from www.bsos.umd.edu/SADAT/, 1/19/05): 8-9.
- ¹⁰ *Arab Attitudes Towards Political and Social Issues*: 8. Respondents to the June 2004 Zogby poll likewise said that U.S. policy was important in shaping their attitude toward the United States, by important/unimportant percentage ratios of 89:7 in Morocco, 81:3 in Saudi Arabia, 71:20 in Jordan, 89:5 in Lebanon, and 72:16 in the UAE. Zogby International, *Impressions of America 2004*: 4, table 2b.
- ¹¹ Seymour Hersh, "The Syrian Bet," *The New Yorker*, July 28, 2003; and William James Martin, "Clean Break with the Road Map," *Counterpunch*, February 14/15, 2004: 12-14.
- ¹² Hersh, "Syrian Bet."
- ¹³ *In the Post Arafat Era, Palestinians and Israelis Are More Willing to Compromise: For the First Time Majority Support for Clinton's Permanent Status Settlement Package* (Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, downloaded from www.pcpsr.org/welcome.html on 1/19/05); and reported in Akiva Eldar, "Poll: Majority of Palestinians Now Support Two-State Solution," *Haaretz*, January 18, 2005.
- ¹⁴ Suleiman al-Khalidi, "Arab Leaders Relaunch Peace Offer," Washingtonpost.com, March 23, 2005.
- ¹⁵ Jeremy Pressman, "Visions in Collision: What Happened at Camp David and Taba?" *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Fall 2003): 5-43 at 16, 18. This eight percent figure uses Israel's method for measuring the West Bank. The Palestinian method for measuring indicates that Israel insisted on retaining thirteen percent of the West Bank. *Ibid.*, 17. Israel also proposed to delay the transfer of another ten percent of the West Bank for 6-21 years, so by Palestinian accounting the Palestinian state offered at Camp David II would have initially comprised only 77 percent of the West Bank. *Ibid.*, 17-18.
- ¹⁶ James Bennet, "Mideast Next for Bush: After Iraq, a Strong Hand," *New York Times*, April 25, 2003; and Akiva Eldar, "People and Politics: Extracting a Price is an Idea that Won't Go Away," *Haaretz*, November 25, 2003.

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April 2005

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PSB 04-12-0697



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