



**U.S. POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST:
ON THE BRINK**

by Harvey Sicherman

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Speaking in Canada on December 1, 2004, President Bush detailed his foreign policy objectives for his next term. First, he would build and rebuild international coalitions; second, he would pursue vigorously the war on terrorism; third, he would enhance "our own security by promoting freedom and hope and democracy in the broader Middle East." This, Bush argued, was the only alternative to dictators and mullahs armed with weapons of mass destruction. Acknowledging the critics, the President insisted nonetheless that progress was being made, including "movement toward elections." Interestingly enough, three elections—the parliamentary reconstruction of the Israeli government; the Palestinian vote on January 9, 2005, to replace Yasser Arafat; and the Iraqi vote scheduled for January 30, 2005—offer acid tests of the U.S. approach. Success will confirm partners for the American enterprise of transforming the region; failure will greatly encourage American adversaries.

(1) ISRAEL: THE "BULLDOZER" AT WORK

Israel's parliamentary democracy has always elected fractious coalitions whose sometimes dizzying mix of parties and personalities often befuddled observers and participants alike. Ariel Sharon's government has been no exception. He began in 2001 with a broad national unity coalition and then, after Labour left, used his landslide victory early in 2002 to create a Likud-centered patchwork. He represented an Israeli consensus (shared by President Bush) that little could be done while Yasser Arafat continued to lead the Palestinians.

The American-led demand for "reform" leadership, however, was skillfully defeated by Arafat and, following the failed Abu Mazen government (September 2003), both the United States and Israel reviewed their strategies. Both chose "disengagement." Bush would keep his distance from the diplomacy. Sharon would begin a revolution.

On December 18, 2003, the Israeli leader announced that Israel would withdraw its troops and settlers from Gaza (plus four others in the northern West Bank). This would be complemented by the completion of a barrier to combat Palestinian infiltration and a continuation of selected military strikes. "Disengagement" reflected a broad Israeli view that a "two-state" solution to the conflict meant separation from the Palestinians, not integration.

Sharon, patron of the Israeli settlers and opponent of Oslo, had often spoken of "painful sacrifices" that Israel would make for peace but never specified them. Disengagement detached him instantly from most of the settlers and, in its resemblance to ideas advanced by the opposition Labour Party, outraged much of his coalition government, including parts of his own Likud Party. In May, Sharon attempted to outflank them by calling a non-binding party referendum only to be rebuffed despite a letter from President Bush assuring that Israel would not be asked to return to the pre-1967 War borders or admit millions of Palestinian refugees. In August, the Likud Central Committee boxed him further by forbidding a negotiation with Labour for a new unity government. Already down to 56 seats out of the Knesset's 120 because of resignations over disengagement, Sharon's government depended upon Labour to survive.

Ordinarily, a leader who takes the opposition's ideas and fractures his own party cannot qualify for political life insurance. But Sharon, architect of the modern Likud and a highly inventive former general, rose to the challenge. Buoyed by public opinion polls showing 70-80 per cent of Israelis in favor of disengagement, he would remake both the party and the government.

After a summer of unsuccessful negotiation within the coalition, Sharon risked a dramatic Knesset vote (October 26, 2004) on the withdrawal plan; it passed on the support of the Labour-led opposition. Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and several other critical Likud leaders approved the measure only on condition that within two weeks Sharon agree to a national referendum, delaying the withdrawal from Gaza by at least a year. (Sharon had announced May 2005 as the beginning of the process.) The Prime Minister did not recoil from this ultimatum, perhaps hoping that a deck clearing of his rivals would open posts to lure Labour into a negotiation.

Then, on November 11, 2004, Arafat died. Netanyahu, to the derision of supporters and opponents alike, decided not to leave the Cabinet on the grounds that a new situation had developed. His bluff had been called.

How then to make room for Labour? An utterly calm Sharon swiftly reduced his coalition still further when he negotiated with United Torah Judaism, a small ultra-Orthodox party whose financial demands were anathema to his sixteen-seat, anti-religious Shinui Party partner. On December 1, Shinui joined to defeat the budget by a large margin. Sharon promptly fired them. His government was down to forty.

These reverses were only a backing up in order to plunge forward. Now the way was open to bring in Labour and at least one religious party. Sharon needed Shimon Peres to remain as Labour's leader and the Likud Central Committee to reverse its decision. On December 2, the day after the budget defeat, Shimon Peres arranged for Labour to postpone its vote on primaries for new leadership. The 81-year-old veteran sat impassively as the party plenum did his will amid vaudevillian scenes when former Prime Minister Ehud Barak, announcing his return to politics, tried to seize the microphone and reverse the verdict.

This in hand, Sharon pressed a simple argument on his party: take a Likud-Labour-Religious Coalition or risk new elections. On December 9, two-thirds of the Central Committee chose the coalition route. One January 10, 2005 (a day after the Palestinian election to replace Arafat), Sharon presented the Knesset with his new government. It passed 58-56, a Likud rebellion insuring that the Prime Minister would still depend on opposition abstention.

Still, the former general, nicknamed the "bulldozer" for his smash-and-grab tactics, had lived up to his reputation. In sixty days, he demolished then reconstructed the Israeli government to reflect public opinion highly favorable to disengagement. Sharon still faced hard tests: a narrow position in the Knesset; settler resistance that, if mishandled, could lead to civil strife. But, the Bush Administration now had an Israeli partner, at least for the Gaza withdrawal.

(2) PALESTINE: UNDOING ARAFAT'S LEGACY

While the Israelis were transfixed by Sharon's audacity, the Palestinians faced a reconstruction of their own. Yasser Arafat left a losing war, a corrupt and chaotic government, and burnt bridges with Washington. Added to this legacy was a stricken economy subsisting on international aid.

The Palestinian Authority was no democracy, but in the absence of another charismatic figure, the Palestinians observed both Fatah Party and Oslo rules. The candidate for new Chairman would be Arafat's long-time confidante and first Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas, known as Abu Mazen, this to be affirmed in an election scheduled for January 9, 2005. Significantly, Abu Mazen had broken with Arafat's violent strategy in the Rais' lifetime. "We support the intifada," he often said, "but we are against the use of arms in the intifada," reminding listeners of the 1987-93 Palestinian rebellion that ended with Oslo. As the putative new leader, his election therefore would suggest a real change of direction.

Abu Mazen faced multiple challenges. First, he had to surmount the fractured political system to achieve a preponderance of influence and power; second, he needed to regain international confidence in the Palestinian leadership; third, most difficult of all, he had to achieve decisive control over the violence.

Abu Mazen acted energetically on two of the three. A senior figure among the so-called Outsiders (the exiles) of the Palestinian leadership, he suffered from Fatah's reputation for corruption, his popularity with the Americans and Israelis, and his colorless political persona. Initially, he was opposed by the highly popular Marwan Barghouti, an Insider (resident of the West Bank) entrusted by Arafat to form the last (and least disciplined) of his front groups, the al-Aksa Martyr's Brigade—competitive to Hamas in suicide attacks. But Barghouti was in an Israeli jail (multiple life sentences for terrorism) and wholly identified with Arafat's strategy. His campaign ended when the Fatah establishment and some of the prominent al-Aksa Martyr chiefs rallied to Abu Mazen.

Coincident with imposing some order on Palestinian politics, Abu Mazen offered the international donors a new sense of "transparency" (honesty) on finances. The donors reacted promptly by offering the prospect of additional sums. (The Palestinians were already the highest per-capita recipients of international assistance.) Washington gave its own emergency grant to help the Palestinian Authority, unable to pay overdue utility bills and wages.

Finally, various governments offered political support for a fresh start under Abu Mazen. Egypt's President Mubarak advised that Sharon was the Palestinian's best negotiating partner and offered additional help in assuring a turnover of Gaza to the Palestinian Authority rather than Hamas. Abu Mazen himself toured Syria and Kuwait, restoring relations long sundered because of Arafat, while he assessed the relative influence of Damascus (and Tehran) on various Palestinian factions. British Prime Minister Blair, anxious to still the clamor in his own party for an initiative on the Palestinian issue, offered a conference in London to restart the political process. His enthusiasm was soon qualified by both Bush and Sharon to focus on Palestinian reform and Gaza rather than the endgame of a final agreement.

All of this set the stage for two rounds of Palestinian ballots, part of a long-delayed electoral cycle. On December 24, a limited, competitive municipal poll (previously approved by Arafat) drew a huge turnout that confirmed Fatah's supremacy but also shook the party by awarding Hamas a good showing. Then came the crucial vote on January 9, when over 60 per cent of a respectable turnout, refuting Hamas' call for a boycott, gave Abu Mazen his mandate for change.

Thus, the elements of a revived Israeli-Palestinian negotiation, assisted by the United States and others, are falling into place. Sharon's plan for Gaza—unilateral in theory but multilateral in practice—might now serve to renew relations with a reformed Palestinian Authority. At best, this would revive the Road Map leading toward Bush's "two-state" vision.

Very large hurdles, however, remain to be surmounted. The vote notwithstanding, Abu Mazen is not master of the Palestinian house. His most daunting difficulty will be to dismantle the dangerous combination of warlords, corruption, and "the chaos of guns" that are incompatible with the building of a state.

Much of this violent activity is justified by its practitioners as part of the war against Israel. Abu Mazen has argued for several years that such terrorist tactics are not effective. Nonetheless, just like Arafat, he opposes a "civil war" among the Palestinian factions. His preferred method is a hudna or truce that can be renewed. As the election approached, Abu Mazen extolled martyrdom in the company of gun-firing "soldiers of the resistance;" he described Israel on one occasion as "the Zionist enemy," provoking Israeli and American criticism. While even Sharon admitted the new Rais could not immediately

control Hamas (or even al-Aksa), such forbearance will not last in the absence of a strenuous effort by the Palestinians to suppress terrorism, especially when the Israelis leave Gaza.

The passage to final-status talks with the Israelis may compound Abu Mazen's troubles. U.N. and European diplomats argue for a rapid resumption of final-status talks under the Road Map schema, which will require difficult reciprocal steps by the Palestinians (suppression of violence) and the Israelis (settlement freeze). Moreover, each side's negotiating positions do not admit much optimism that agreement can be reached on such issues as Jerusalem or refugees or settlements. After four years of warfare, the Israelis are not ready to repeat concessions based on trust. To the contrary: separation, not collaboration, is the dominant political impulse.

These complications mean that President Bush will have to strike the right balance of encouragement and expectation from Abu Mazen. Bush—and Sharon—must "empower" the new leader but not make the mistake, made so often with Arafat, of not holding him accountable for his obligations. Arafat's death, Sharon's reconstruction, and Abu Mazen's ascension have allowed the parties to re-imagine the road toward the two-state solution. But this second chance, so rare in so intractable a conflict, can be seized only if a rapid improvement in Palestinian conditions accompanies a wind-down of the terror campaign as the Israelis leave Gaza.

(3)IRAQ: ROLLING THE DICE

An Israeli National Unity government and a new Palestinian partner offer a fresh horizon for achievement. The Iraqi election, scheduled for January 30, 2005, however, is the most crucial for the United States. It comes in the context of deepening trouble for Washington and its local friends.

By September 2003, it was already clear that the first U.S. plan for Iraq—a surgical strike against Saddam and his henchmen, to be replaced by a group of imported Iraqi leaders—would not work. Few of the imports commanded much of a following. Worse, Saddam's government, true to its Stalinist-like design, collapsed when the real sinews of the regime, the Baathist Party leaders and their henchmen, went underground. And the regular Iraqi Army, which, under professional military leadership, was expected to assist a small U.S. force in controlling the country, proved a chimera. Most of its units had already disbanded while awaiting events, and the Coalition Provisional Authority, rather than attempt its revival, had abruptly dissolved the Army in May.

Thus, four crucial months were lost allowing Saddam and his men to survive the shock of defeat, reorganize, and develop a strategy. Beginning with their part in the massive looting and destruction of the infrastructure while U.S. forces stood by, the insurgents had simple objectives: make the country ungovernable through violence; throw the full weight of occupation on the foreign soldiers; prevent economic recovery. There might be enough coalition troops to hunt the resistance but not enough to hunt, guard critical facilities, and rebuild Iraq's worn out infrastructure. Hence, much of the early attacks concentrated on driving out the U.N., NGOs, and private contractors, making life miserable and insecure for the average Iraqi.

Once aware of these tactics, the Bush Administration reacted on multiple fronts. Militarily, the U.S. Command sought to train new Iraqi security forces in quick time to supplement coalition troops. Politically, Washington sought international approval for a swift turnover of formal authority to Iraqis. An Iraqi interim government would replace the Occupation Authority by June 30, 2004, and then, six months later, the people would elect a new Constitutional Assembly.

In Spring-Summer 2004, this strategy yielded international success and local failure. Even as the United States secured a supportive U.N. resolution, patched up quarrels with allies and arranged for the cancellation of much Iraqi debt, the situation on the ground deteriorated drastically. A rising Sunni-based insurgency was symbolized by the town of Fallujah, a veritable safe haven for the terrorists, and scene of a gruesome lynching of four U.S. contractors in March 2004. Simultaneously, the main U.S. opponent among the Shiites, the Iranian-supported cleric al Sadr, seized control of several important Iraqi towns including the Holy City of Najaf after the United States began to curtail his activities. American reactions through Spring were hampered by lack of armor and the political preparations for a handover, mediated by the U.N. envoy Brahimi, to an Iraqi interim administration. Meanwhile, the hastily trained Iraqi forces panicked, proving mostly useless or dangerous.

As a result, when Ayad Allawi took over as interim Prime Minister in a sudden and heavily guarded ceremony on June 28, 2004 he faced burgeoning terror attacks, insurgent safe zones spreading from Fallujah all along the crucial western road leading to Jordan and wholly inadequate Iraqi security forces. Allawi, himself a former Baathist and leader of a party full of officials who had broken with Saddam, attempted cooption, corruption, and coercion to bring the insurgents to heel. Not surprisingly, the lack of effective coercion soon crippled the other tactics as well.

The United States and its local allies continued to lose ground through the run-up to the American election campaign while promising to dislodge the insurgents in time for the Iraqi poll in early 2005. By mid-November, the Pentagon announced a reinforcement of 14,000 troops and the extension of tours so that 150,000 ground forces would be available to secure conditions for the election. Then in a destructive 10-day campaign, Fallujah itself was captured, yielding a treasure trove of information about the insurgents, including their connections to former Baathists operating out of Syria. But too many had escaped in the slow run-up to the attack, as Allawi was drawn into a futile negotiation to surrender the city. Then, even as the Marines subdued Fallujah, the northern city of Mosul promptly erupted as the city's police force fled before brazen attacks on their stations. The local U.S. force, reduced to one brigade in the belief that the city was safe, could not secure the situation.

The United States did not have enough forces to beat the insurgency anytime soon and, although a few Iraqi units fought well, it was clear that the second round of Iraqi trainees were not yet much better than the first. They and government officials were special targets. In the week preceding January 4, 2005, for example, over seventy were killed including the Governor of Baghdad. Meanwhile, the critical oil industry and the reconstruction effort could not progress further in the face of the violence. Half the Iraqi population lives in the four of eighteen provinces most affected by the violence. The fact that most of the south and Kurdistan were largely free of trouble thus counted for less than Washington's inability to defeat the opposition or make a political deal with Sunni leaders to isolate it.

The January 30 elections were designed to bring Iraq's communities together through nation-wide parties for the purpose of creating a new constitution. Having overthrown a Sunni-based dictatorship espousing a pan-Arab (Baathist) ideology, the

United States had to avoid the alternatives of a Shiite dictatorship advocating a pan-Muslim ideology or a breakup that in Kurdistan might lead to Syrian, Turkish, and Iranian intervention. The only way out of this tangle was a constitution that reflected the "three negatives": (1) no Sunni dictatorship, intolerable to Shiites and Kurds; (2) no independent Kurdistan, intolerable to Shiites and Sunnis; and (3) no Shiite Islamic state, intolerable to Kurds and Sunnis.

A month before the election, the United States found itself in the bizarre position of battling a Sunni insurgency while taking up the Sunni case for political inclusion with the Shiites and Kurds. Postponing the date, prescribed by the U.N. resolution that recognized the Iraqi Interim Government, would present international complications; worse, it would look like a concession to violence; and, worse yet, a betrayal of supreme Shiite Ayatollah Sistani, hitherto opposed to violence against the Americans.

Thus, the January 30 election for a constitutional assembly and local administration would be only as significant as the turnout, and the turnout only as significant as the Kurdish and Sunni participation. It was unlikely to reduce the violence or strengthen Iraqi loyalties to a political system still taking shape. Nonetheless, a large number of voters casting ballots despite violent intimidation would confer some legitimacy on the results. If combined with an aggressive and successful U.S. military campaign, it might persuade the Sunnis (and others) that slowly but surely the wheel was turning in favor of the Americans and a new regime. Under these circumstances a way could be found for the Sunnis to have their say on the constitution. These were surely huge "ifs," growing bigger as the date approached. Yet, it was clearly an election that would make a difference, in itself, something new for Iraq and the region.

(4)U.S. POLICY ON THE BRINK

As President Bush begins his second term, his policy to transform the Greater Middle East faces crucial milestones. America is committed to nurturing new democracies in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine, an astonishing about-face since 9/11 for an Administration originally hostile to nation-building altogether. Thus, it may be said that whatever the prospects in the Middle East, U.S. foreign policy itself has surely been transformed.

Will it work? A thousand obstacles obstruct the way, yet some things have begun to move. Insofar as elections signal a potentially democratic direction, 2005 begins with important auguries for the development of local partners capable of working with the United States. Sharon's new government gives proof of his readiness to withdraw from Gaza. The vote for Abu Mazen ratified a potential Palestinian partner for peace. Renewed Israeli-Palestinian cooperation, taken in tandem with local legislative and party elections scheduled for late this year, could give a big boost to a nascent Palestinian democracy.

In the Iraqi election, even a modest Sunni turnout against the odds will be an important signal although the poll itself appears more an act of keeping faith with the Shiite majority. Both the Kurds and Sunnis, however, must rely on Washington to make clear that the alternative to Saddam's dictatorship is not a Shiite theocracy. January 30 begins the hard struggle for a constitution that respects the minimum: no Sunni domination; no Shiite Islamic republic; no independent Kurdistan.

For the advocates of democracy in the Middle East, the Palestinian and Iraqi elections focus on a quintessential virtue: citizen choice. Yet this beginning, potentially the birth throes of popular government, should also remind us of the distance yet to go. These polls will matter little if in the end those who oppose democracy can abort the results through violence. U.S. policy will still be poised on the brink of failure so long as that battle remains in doubt.

To view a videofile of Dr. Sicherman's October 19 lecture on "The Democratic Prospects in the Middle East":
<http://www.fpri.org/multimedia/20041019.sicherman.democraticmiddleeast.html>

To view a videofile of his October 17 lecture on "U.S. Policy Toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict":
<http://www.fpri.org/multimedia/20041017.sicherman.usarabisraeli.html>

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