



BUSH, THE NUDGE-IN-CHIEF

by Harvey Sicherman

President Bush's long-awaited and much-demanded personal engagement in the Israeli-Palestinian tangle has finally begun. Visiting Jerusalem and Ramallah in early January 2008, he announced his role: Nudge-in-Chief. Then, refreshed by visits to the wellsprings of Christianity, the President reiterated his (faith-based) conclusion that a treaty enshrining the two-state solution could be reached by the end of his tenure. But this was not the main purpose of his regional visit.

The November 2007 *National Intelligence Estimate* (NIE) on Iran's nuclear weapons program had angered and confused U.S. allies in the Gulf. And simultaneously the evident success of General Petraeus' surge in Iraq was in danger of being wasted by the paralysis of the Maliki government. Here, too, the President exercised the nudge, trying to keep in play his main policies, including the by now heavily discounted "freedom agenda."

RENEWING THE FAITH

Bush's visit to the Middle East came six weeks after the relaunch of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process at Annapolis. Each of the players had then returned to old bad habits, as if to reassure their audiences that no new acts were in store. The Israeli bureaucracy announced new apartment construction for areas of greater Jerusalem, angering the Americans and Palestinians while taking no action on old promises to dismantle illegal outposts. Rocket firings from Gaza and the killing of two Israelis on the West Bank by security men employed by the Palestinian Authority reminded the world of the unfulfilled Palestinian pledges to suppress violence. Meanwhile, no final status talks commenced. And those supposed supporters of the Annapolis process, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, facilitated the movement of Gaza pilgrims to Mecca through Egyptian rather than Israeli or Palestinian Authority checkpoints, thereby harming both Abbas' plans to gain some credit and Israel's desire to keep money from reaching Hamas-controlled areas. The hope of Annapolis was fading fast.

Bush began the revival in Israel, one of those few countries where the President remains popular. He was received with the goodwill and enthusiasm that befitted a friend. Neither a beneficiary of the U.S.-Jewish vote nor known as a supporter of Israel before becoming President, Bush had taken Israel's side in the second intifada, on the Iranian threat, and during the second Lebanon War. His 2005 letter to then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon endorsed retention of some of the 1967 territories and negated the return of large numbers of Palestinian refugees to Israel. Bush also supported Israel's "disengagement" from Gaza.

Still, the United States and Israel disagreed on important matters. Most of Israel's leaders had never been enthusiastic about the Iraq War (Iran was the real threat) and regarded U.S. promotion of Arab democracy as naive, even dangerous. Prime Minister Olmert's proclamation notwithstanding, neither Israel's security establishment nor popular opinion saw in Abbas' Palestinian Authority a partner capable of delivering peace. And on Syria, the Israelis appeared ready to deal with Damascus even at Lebanon's expense, possibly because, unlike Bush or the French, they put little stock in the lasting power of Beirut's tenuous democracy.

The Americans had their own differences with the Israelis. A negotiated rather than unilateral withdrawal from Gaza was preferred by the State Department. For its part, the White House was deeply disappointed by Israel's mishandling of the 2006 Lebanon War, fumbling an opportunity to deal a heavy strategic blow to Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria. Both countries had been at odds over Israeli arms exports to China. And there were doubts in Washington over the Olmert government's staying power and capacity to deliver on its promises.

George W. Bush swept much of this aside in his by now characteristic mix of direct talk and brimming confidence. On the evening of January 9, 2008, after meeting with Olmert, Bush described a three-track process (“the vision track,” the “Roadmap issues,” and “help the Palestinians” prepare for statehood. Later he would add a fourth, “support from other Arab states”). He would not “butt in and actually dictate the end result of the agreement.” Instead he would be “nudging them forward....” The next day, after nudging both sides, Bush read a written statement that summarized the U.S. outline of a final agreement. The two-state solution meant a “homeland for the Palestinian people, just as Israel is a homeland for the Jewish people.” Israel should have “secure, recognized, and defensible borders”; the Palestinian state should be “viable, contiguous, and sovereign and independent.”

Bush added a “painful political concessions” category to this familiar theology that included “mutually agreed adjustments to the armistice lines of 1949 to reflect current realities and to ensure that the Palestinian state is viable and contiguous.” Translation: no Israeli return to the 1967 lines and territorial swaps to compensate the Palestinians for the largest Israeli settlement blocs. Bush also wanted “new international mechanisms, including compensation, to resolve the refugee issue.” Translation: as implied by the earlier reference to Israel as a Jewish State, no wholesale return of Palestinian refugees to Israel. Finally after repeating Israeli and Palestinian obligations to the Roadmap, Bush took a pass on Jerusalem, thereby returning the contested city to its traditional position in the order of issues to be negotiated--last. This certainly eased Olmert’s coalition situation.

Bush’s “nudge” had a preplanned effect, and largely on the Israelis. Olmert agreed to commence final status talks even though neither he nor Abbas had fulfilled, had any intention to fulfill, or could fulfill entirely the Roadmap’s strictures on settlements or violence. Some of the illegal settlements would be removed. Abbas, for his part, had been freshly strengthened by international pledges at the Paris Conference in December that exceeded \$6 billion in assistance if Palestinian reforms and changes on the ground would warrant it. Other than reaffirming support for Prime Minister Fayyad’s reform plans, Abbas had little to give and gave nothing. Bush’s appointment of Lt. Gen. William Fraser to monitor the Roadmap, and the Blair Mission to prepare the Palestinian Authority for statehood, were reminders of how much there remained to do and how little time--Bush’s time--was left to do it.

The United States, however, could not help either Olmert or Abbas with their most pressing political and military problem-- Hamas-run Gaza. There, assisted by Egypt’s reluctance to seal the border and benefiting from Hezbollah’s experience, the various gunmen and militias were rapidly becoming a more disciplined and capable force, using Palestinian civilians in Gaza as shields and Israeli civilians as targets. Their inaccurate missiles and mortars were improving in range and number. Thus, even while Bush, Olmert, and Abbas spoke of peace, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and others were fighting a war of attrition with Israel. During Bush’s eight days in the Middle East, the Palestinian side fired eighty-four rockets into Israel; the IDF, for its part, took an increasing toll of the leaders and organizers, killing thirty. Hamas sought a cease-fire to allow them to consolidate and become a redoubt like Hezbollah in southern Lebanon before the 2006 war. Israeli wanted to prevent Hamas from achieving a Hezbollah capability but without using either massive firepower or a large ground invasion. The outcome of this struggle carried significant consequences for the “two-state” solution. A Hamas victory in Gaza would make it impossible for Israel to leave the West Bank lest Hamas attempt to duplicate its success. An Israeli reoccupation of Gaza would extinguish Palestinian hope for independence anytime soon.

RESOUNDING THE ALARM

Bush’s next steps were dictated by events in Washington. On December 3, 2007, the White House had published a declassified part of the November NIE on Iran and its quest for nuclear weapons. The NIE found that Iran had stopped its known nuclear weapons program in Fall 2003; that this had come about primarily because of international pressure; but that Tehran still kept “open the option to develop nuclear weapons,” the latter judgment asserted with “moderate to high confidence.”

NIEs, composite documents reflecting some sort of consensus by sixteen intelligence agencies, have become a sore subject in Washington during the Bush Administration. An earlier one from 2002, warning of Iraq’s WMD capability, turned out to be quite erroneous. Another, from 2005, claimed Iran was in hot pursuit of nuclear weapons. The new one seemed to invalidate it. Moreover, the NIE, while concentrating on the “weapons program” relegated to a footnote the observation that the authors “did not mean Iran’s declared civil work related to uranium conversion and enrichment.”

Various analysts, the IAEA, and European officials were quick to point out that the footnote had indeed been the real focus of policy. Warheads and missiles, the other components of a nuclear weapons program, meant little if there were no enrichment. Hence, the U.N. Security Council had been sanctioning Iran because of its refusal to cease such enrichment. Was the NIE therefore implying that, the weapons program having ended, Iranian intentions were now benign?

Well, no. But the political implication was to deny the Bush Administration a reason to attack Iran’s nuclear facilities on the grounds that they were part of a military program. This was a stunning blow to the President’s own rhetoric about the Iranian danger, and the need to keep “all options” on the table. Washington was rife with rumors that the latest NIE took revenge on an Administration that, in the eyes of many intelligence analysts, had abused the product earlier. As had been the case since 2003, such open warfare diminished confidence at home and abroad in the White House and the CIA.

Bush's visit to the Arab Gulf States therefore had as its largest purpose a negation of the NIE by resounding the alarm about Iran and reassuring the loose anti-Iranian coalition that the United States would neither slacken pressure for further economic sanctions nor publicly exclude the military option.

FREEDOM AS DESTINY

The Gulf States and then Saudi Arabia, where the President spent two days with King Abdallah, offered legendary hospitality made even more opulent by the recent rise of oil prices. Bush's strictures on Iran found a ready enough audience but there were doubts whether the military option, if there were one, would be exercised by the United States or Israel. Inevitably, the President's hosts had also begun hedging bets against the uncertainties of an American election year through private and public overtures to Iran, suggesting that better relations were available if Tehran were open to compromises. Bush's foreign policy had simply not been very helpful in the eyes of the various kings and princes of the Sunni Arab world who saw American blunders in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian issue redound to Shiite and Iranian advantage. Incomprehensibly, Washington was also pushing a "freedom agenda" that promised to reduce the domestic authority of the very family dynasties allied with the United States.

Bush pressed on, nonetheless. His centerpiece speech on January 13 in the shimmering ballroom of the \$3 billion Emirates Palace Hotel reprised his views of the world and the Middle East. The region was at risk because of a lack of freedom and justice. (This latter phrase was a concession to Muslim sensibilities that "freedom" properly understood meant "justice.") Everyone who believed in these principles had to oppose the fanatics and the Iranian regime: "the fight against the forces of extremism is the great ideological struggle of our time." Bush also repeated his faith that God was on the side of those who fought for freedom.

There were a few needles. Bush reminded his audience that the "talent of the people" was a greater resource than "oil in the ground." The Gulf States, however, owed their success to oil in the ground; foreign technicians to pump and sell; and "guestworkers" outnumbering their own citizens to do the rest. These royal and princely successors to fishermen, small merchants, and desert chiefs had never relied on the talent of the people, although all had pledged themselves to prepare more capable societies--especially Saudi Arabia--against the day when oil ran out or was replaced as the fuel of choice. That, however, was a distant horizon.

The President drew his favorite analogy. Just as the United States had transformed Japan after World War II into a democracy in a land where that was thought impossible, so this could be done in the Arab lands. The system might not look like the American one but it could be democratic. Bush's audience must have wondered whether this meant the United States would have troops in Iraq for the next fifty years. And they surely wished that their societies would not become democracies like the one they saw in Iraq.

NUDGE-IN-CHIEF

Bush concluded his visit with a quick trip to Egypt, where he and President Mubarak gave the usual cliches the usual recycle. The President spent but a few hours with the Egyptian leader, provoking unseemly comparisons with the two days lavished on the Saudi King. Egyptians bridle at the idea that the United States should regard Saudi Arabia as the "leader" of the Arabs, but neither Riyadh nor Cairo have distinguished themselves lately in helping American interests. The Saudi-brokered Mecca Accord between Hamas and Fatah legitimized Hamas, quite contrary to American expectations. Then Hamas violated it by seizing Gaza. For its part, Egypt has disappointed and angered both the United States and Israel through its reluctant enforcement of border control. As if to remind Washington of this reality, on January 23, Hamas broke through the Egyptian border, using recently smuggled cash to afford the besieged population a massive shopping spree, and probably also included the infiltration of new combatants and weapons. In the wake of Bush's visit, Hamas and behind it Damascus and Tehran threatened to veto not only Cairo's freedom of action on the Palestinian issue but also the Annapolis process.

The Nudge-in-Chief promised to return in the spring. But the President will have to come to grips with the inevitable decline in his leverage as his last year runs out. Bush has proposed daunting objectives: a democratic Palestine at peace with Israel; an Iran that renounces nuclear ambitions and terrorism; a pacified Iraq; a free Lebanon. To make headway on these matters, the United States must do at least the following:

- (1) Spend the next ninety days in making palpable changes for the better on "the ground" between Israel and the Palestinians, a project that must be preserved against the storms from Gaza. Otherwise the parties are unlikely to be ready for more than a "nudge" in the late summer when both of them and the United States will have to make a run for final agreement.

- (2) Go beyond the U.N. economic sanctions with European and Asian allies to hurt Iran while persuading Tehran that the U.S. military option is still available. Otherwise the anti-Iranian coalition will continue to dissipate and pressure to make deals with Iran will mount.

(3) Press the Maliki government very hard to realize the promise of the Petraeus strategy while fending off demands for premature troop reductions. If not, the benefits of the “surge” may be lost and both the Sunni and Shiite militias will resume their depredations.

By the standards of statecraft, the Bush Administration is now playing with a weak hand. In the time remaining, however, the President can leave to his successor a stronger hand than he has now. Given the stakes, both Republican and Democratic candidates should pray Bush succeeds.

[Harvey Sicherman](#), *Ph.D.*, is president of FPRI and a former aide to three U.S. secretaries of state.

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684.

For information, contact Alan Luxenberg at 215-732-3774, ext. 105 or email fpri@fpri.org or visit us at www.fpri.org.