

Is Washington Being Sidelined on the Middle East?

By Leon Hadar | February 20, 2007

Once upon a time, an American president would have been a leader in the effort to bring peace between Israel and its neighbors, since, after all, such reconciliation would bring stability to the Middle East and serve long-term U.S. geopolitical interests.

In that context—with the struggle over the Holy Land at the core of the Mideast conflict—finding ways to end the dispute between Israelis and Palestinians would be central. In the past, the working assumption in Washington and in Jerusalem was that as part of any Israeli-Arab process, the occupant of the White House would, at some point, have no choice in the negotiations but to exert pressure on its ally in Jerusalem to make the necessary concessions to the Arab side.

But recently the U.S. president seems to be unable or unwilling to play the role assigned to him in that old Mideast script. Take the recent diplomatic coup achieved by Saudi Arabia when it succeeded in brokering a deal between the two leading Palestinian factions, allowing Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and his Fatah party to join a government headed by the radical group Hamas.

The accord not only brings an end to the bloody fighting between Fatah and Hamas, but also creates conditions—like setting the stage for overcoming Hamas' refusal to recognize Israel—that are more conducive for restarting negotiations between Palestinian and Israeli officials. Now, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert could hold direct talks with President Abbas as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian Authority.

But while America's Arab allies, members of the European Union (EU), and Russia have welcomed the Saudi-brokered deal, Bush administration officials have expressed wariness and have given it the diplomatic cold shoulder. In fact, the lack of diplomatic progress during Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's trip to the Middle East was a direct result of Washington's refusal to back negotiations between Israel and a Palestinian government that includes Hamas.

An even more dramatic sign that Washington is refusing to play its old role has been the diplomatic pressure it has been exerting on the Israeli government to refrain from

opening a diplomatic dialogue with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus.

Indeed, according to reports in the Israeli press, Assad has sent the Israelis diplomatic messages expressing interest in negotiating a peace accord that would include recognition of and diplomatic ties with Israel in exchange for the return of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. The proposal has been taken seriously in Israel and has been debated by members of the Israeli political elite and public. But the Bush administration has argued that Israeli negotiations with Syria would reward a regime accused of cooperating with Iran to challenge U.S. interests in the Middle East. There is little doubt that the hostile U.S. response tipped the balance in Jerusalem in favor of those who oppose talks with Syria.

The current role that Washington seems to have taken on vis-à-vis the Arab-Israeli peace process, including its skeptical reactions to Saudi mediation in Palestine and to the Syrian proposal, suggests that the old script has ceased to reflect current foreign policy realism and has acquired an air of surrealism.

In a way, the change demonstrates an erosion of U.S. influence in the Middle East, which is a direct result of the implementation of the neoconservative agenda that has led to the disastrous political and military situation in Iraq. These policies have produced a series of developments that counter the neocon goal of attaining hegemony in the region, including the emergence of Iran as a regional power, the growing tensions between Sunnis and Shiites, the failure of Israel to dislodge Hezbollah from southern Lebanon, the electoral victory of Hamas, and Turkey's increasing impatience with U.S. policy.

It's not surprising that changes in the alignment of forces in the Middle East make it more difficult for the United States to use its military and diplomatic power to affect policy outcomes in the region. After all, the status and success

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of the United States as the indispensable mediator between Israelis and Arabs was tied directly to its ability and willingness to pursue that costly task during the competition with the Soviet Union (the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace accord) and after the first Gulf War (the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference, which aimed to jump start peace negotiations between Israel and its neighbors).

There is a direct correlation between the rising U.S. push for hegemony in the Middle East and mounting anti-American sentiments there—a situation that emphasizes U.S. ties with Israel. Yet these ties make it less likely that Washington would be willing to challenge Jerusalem’s policies, further eroding the U.S. position as an “honest broker” in the eyes of many Arabs.

Now that the cost of the U.S. drive for power in the region is producing countervailing pressures at home and abroad, U.S. capacity and determination to advance the Arab-Israeli peace process has been weakened and has created a diplomatic vacuum in the Middle East that is gradually being filled by regional— and outside—players. The diplomatic role that Saudi Arabia has played in mediating the intra-Palestinian conflict parallels its discussions with Iran to stabilize Lebanon, its move to co-opt Syria into the Arab-Sunni camp, and its support for the Arab-Sunnis in Iraq.

Similarly, U.S. failures in Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine have created disincentives for Washington to engage Iran and Syria, a step that it fears could be perceived as a sign of weakness. But both Syria and Israel share common interests in ending their military conflict that do not necessarily correspond to those of Washington. In fact, a deal between Damascus and Jerusalem could threaten the U.S. position by sidelining it to the diplomatic margins. That could also happen if Saudi Arabia increases its diplomatic role in the Middle East and moves in the direction of engaging Iran instead of confronting it.

From that perspective, when U.S. officials and pundits warn of the “chaos” that would follow a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, they are actually expressing their anxiety over their real nightmare scenario—a Middle East in which the United States is marginalized to a position of little power, with the other players in the region making deals with each other with little consideration of U.S. concerns. In other words, the formation of a regional security structure in the Persian Gulf that involves Saudi Arabia and Iran but not Washington, an organization that could facilitate cooperation between Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Syria to stabilize Iraq, and foster moves toward a peace agreement between Israel and Syria.

Preventing such a scenario is probably the driving force behind the idea of attacking Iran’s nuclear and military sites to help reassert the U.S. position in the Persian Gulf and other parts of the Middle East. President George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, and their neoconservative advisers are hoping that such a strike would weaken Iran’s power and lessen the “threat” that a deal between the Saudis and Tehran could pose to U.S. hegemony. Similarly, the continuing conflict between Israel and Syria helps sustain the position of Washington as a powerful outsider whose services are required by the local players. It’s the classic role of an imperial power pursuing a “divide and conquer” strategy.

At the end of the day, the only peace that the Bush administration wants to spread in the Middle East is one that preserves the U.S. dominant position, a Pax Americana. But whether Washington can continue to secure that role remains the central geopolitical question of the moment.

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