

MAINTAINING A BALANCED U.S. POLICY ON MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Every Arab-Israeli agreement since the founding of Israel in 1948 has been at least in part a product of United States pressure. But for U.S. pressure to produce a lasting peace agreement, it must be applied evenhandedly to both Arabs and Israelis. If the U.S. applies its diplomatic leverage disproportionately against Israel, as the Bush Administration has begun to do, the peace talks will collapse. Such a tilt against Israel undermines America as an honest broker and erodes Israeli confidence in America, which is an indispensable requirement for Israeli flexibility in the negotiations. Unbalanced U.S. pressure against Israel inflates Arab expectations and encourages the Arabs to escalate their demands and rule out concessions. It rewards Arab hardliners at the expense of Arab moderates. And it discourages Arab negotiators from negotiating directly with Israel, instead leading them to negotiate with Washington in the hope that America will "deliver" Israel. This inevitably will paralyze the negotiations, since a lasting peace can not be imposed by America, but can be attained only through direct negotiations between the warring parties.

The Bush Administration should understand these dangers. Yet it repeatedly has gone out of its way to side with the Arabs on contentious issues in the course of the negotiations. Secretary of State James Baker, for example, unilaterally decided to hold the second round of talks on December 4 in Washington, as the Arabs wanted to maximize U.S. involvement, rather than in the Middle East, as Israel wanted in order to signal Arab acceptance of the Jewish state. To demonstrate that he would not be railroaded by the U.S., Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir delayed sending Israel's delegation to Washington for five days.

U.S. Contradiction. The State Department also sided with the Arabs by granting visas to Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) officials who acted as unofficial advisers to the joint Palestinian-Jordanian delegation in Washington. This required the Bush Administration to grant waivers to the PLO officials, who otherwise would have been banned from entering America under a 1986 law that prohibits the entry of members of terrorist groups. This concession contradicted U.S. assurances that Israel would not have to negotiate, even indirectly, with the PLO, which Israeli rejects due to the PLO's continuing terrorist activities. Allowing PLO officials to come to Washington also undermined U.S. attempts to build up Palestinian moderates and permitted the PLO to increase its control over the negotiations. By meeting Arab demands to allow PLO officials to come to Washington, Baker's State Department might have removed a short-term obstacle to Arab participation in the negotiations, but damaged the long-term prospects for a negotiated settlement.

The most recent U.S. tilt against Israel came when the U.S. joined the 14 other members of the United Nations Security Council in backing a January 6 resolution that "strongly condemns" Israel's January 2 decision to deport from the Israeli-occupied Gaza Strip and West Bank 12 Palestinians accused of inciting terrorism against Israelis. This was the first time that the U.S. supported a U.N. Security Council resolution that "strongly condemned" Israel for any action. This resolution, in fact, was tougher in its language than U.N. Security Council Resolution 660 of August 2, 1990, which merely "condemned" Iraq for invad-

ing Kuwait. On the five previous occasions that the Security Council criticized Israeli deportation of Palestinians, the resolutions at most "deplored" the deportations.

Why is the Bush Administration escalating U.S. criticism of Israel? The longstanding U.S. policy of opposing deportations of Palestinians from the occupied territories had not changed. What had changed was that these deportations came in the midst of Arab-Israeli peace talks. U.S. officials acknowledged that Washington had acceded to the harsher language criticizing Israel because the U.S. hoped to lure the Arabs back to the bilateral talks with Israel that were scheduled to resume in Washington on January 7. The three Arab delegations had threatened to boycott the Washington talks in protest of the Israeli action.

It is as unwise as it is unseemly for the Administration to support a one-sided resolution criticizing a longtime ally in an unprecedented manner as a price for securing Arab participation in the peace process. It is particularly distasteful that Washington signed on to a resolution that was drafted by the PLO, given the fact that it was a Palestinian terrorist attack that killed an Israeli on January 1 that provoked Israel to consider the deportations in the first place. Four Israeli settlers have been killed by terrorists since the peace talks began in Madrid on October 30. Although the U.S. issued *pro forma* denunciations of these terrorist acts, there was no effort by the Administration to craft U.N. Security Council resolutions to "strongly condemn" these obstacles to the peace talks. Nor did Israel refuse to attend the peace talks due to the terrorism. That would have rewarded the terrorists by derailing the negotiations that they oppose.

Dangerous Double Standard. What has developed at the White House and State Department is a dangerous double standard concerning the responsibilities of participants involved in the peace negotiations. Israel is expected to accept passively Palestinian terrorist attacks against Israelis to avoid jeopardizing the "peace process." America is expected to bow to Arabs when they threaten to boycott the peace negotiations and is expected reward the Arabs by criticizing Israel. Yet the Arabs feel free to threaten to abandon the peace negotiations and expect U.S. concessions in exchange for returning to the negotiating table.

What is happening is that Israel and the U.S. increasingly are being held hostage to the "peace process." Despite the fact that the negotiations are moving at a glacial pace, if at all, Israel and America have been expected to alter their policies to avoid harming this fragile "peace process." Israel has been urged to tone down its campaign against terrorism by ceasing deportations of Palestinians linked to terrorist groups. The Bush Administration in September postponed for 120 days consideration of \$10 billion in loan guarantees to Israel, citing concerns about upsetting the "peace process."

While the Bush Administration wants Israel and America to subordinate their own security and foreign policy interests to keep the peace process limping along, it has put the Arabs under no such constraints. Although the murder of four Israelis by Palestinian terrorists is a much larger threat to the ultimate success of the peace talks than the deportation of 12 Palestinians, the Arab nations at the negotiating table have not cracked down effectively on terrorists, or even adequately denounced the continuing terrorist attacks on Israelis.

If Israeli policies are held hostage to the peace negotiations, then the policies of the Arab participants in the negotiations too should be held hostage. The Bush Administration should end its double standard in its policy toward Arab-Israeli peace talks. It should do this by:

- ◆◆ **Insisting** that Arab delegations at the peace talks take concerted action to end all terrorist attacks on Israelis. Even if such attacks do not derail negotiations, they will make a genuine peace impossible.
- ◆◆ **Sponsoring** a U.N. Security Council Resolution that "strongly condemns" Palestinian terrorism against Israeli civilians and calls for a halt to terrorism during the peace negotiations.
- ◆◆ **Acting** as the honest broker at the peace talks by encouraging the two sides to work out their differences without U.S. intervention, wherever possible. By overplaying its role as a catalyst, particularly in the early phases of the negotiation, the Bush Administration encourages the Arabs to negotiate with Washington rather than Jerusalem. This undermines Israeli confidence in America at the very moment when such confidence will be a crucial determinant of Israeli flexibility in negotiating with the Arabs.

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