

Stephen Van Evera / Professor of political science at MIT and a member of the MIT Security Studies Program / February 5, 2005.

A shorter version without footnotes appeared in The American Conservative, March 14, 2005, pp. 7-10.

WHY U.S. NATIONAL SECURITY REQUIRES MIDEAST PEACE

I. INTRODUCTION

The Bush administration has lately taken first steps to dampen the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but should now take far stronger measures to bring peace. This conflict now threatens the safety of all Americans--by aiding 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 U.S. national security and move forcefully to end it.

A tentative U.S. push for peace will likely fail but a strong push 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.

II. THE AL-QAEDA THREAT

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 the 9/11/01 al-Qaeda attack. Al-Qaeda has vast 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 individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible."¹ Al-Qaeda's press spokesman, Suleiman Abu Ghaith, has claimed a right for al-Qaeda to kill four million Americans, including two million children.²

¹ 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.

² 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

Al-Qaeda's power lies in its surviving organization. The United States 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. Al-Qaeda still has sanctuaries in Pakistan's northwest frontier region, in eastern Afghanistan, and elsewhere, where its leadership plots new mayhem with impunity. U.S. intelligence warns that al-Qaeda remains potent.

Al-Qaeda wants to acquire weapons of mass destruction and may also have the opportunity. Vast nuclear and biological weapons materials remain poorly secured in the former Soviet Union. 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. The administrations of George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush have all done too little to lock down these materials and scientists, leaving al-Qaeda with a frightening opportunity.

III. HOW THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT HELPS AL-QAEDA

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 Israeli-Palestinian conflict is highly salient in the Arab and Islamic world. They 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. Finally, they offer strong evidence that the first and second phenomena cause the third: Arabs and Muslims resent the United States in large part because they care about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and disapprove of U.S. policies toward that conflict.

Two polls taken in the Mideast since 2000 confirm that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is highly salient with Arab and Muslim publics.

- A March 2001 poll commissioned by the University of Maryland's Sadat Chair 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.³

- A spring 2002 Zogby International survey of five Arab states--Egypt, the UAE, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia--likewise found about two-thirds of respondents saying they viewed the Palestinian issue as "very important" or "the most important" issue facing the Arab world today.⁴

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

Why is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict so salient to distant Arabs and non-Arab Muslims? The answer lies in three factors: 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 broad Arab and Muslim identities in the region. The intifada gives the conflict a dramatic and cruel face, ripe for inflaming coverage by the new TV. 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 activated by these images, stirring anger even among non-Palestinians.

Second, polling data reveal that 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 for U.S. policy toward the Palestinians in five Arab states: only two to six percent of respondents in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Lebanon voiced approval, and only ten percent in the UAE. In 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 these are enormous majorities, equivalent to unanimity. A similar picture emerged in the three non-

³ Shibley Talhami, The Stakes: America and the Middle East (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2002): 98.

⁴ 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

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 stood at 79 percent, 75 percent, and 95 percent in these three countries, respectively.⁵ This highlights that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not merely an Arab concern, but also animates the wider Islamic world.

Third, many polls taken since 2000 show broad public hostility toward the United States in the Arab/Islamic worlds, including two major polls taken in 2004.

- A March 2004 Pew Research Center poll of four Muslim countries found very negative views toward the U.S. Specifically, it found respondents holding unfavorable views of the United States outnumbering those with 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.⁶

- A June 2004 Zogby International poll found even deeper hostility toward the U.S. in the six Arab states surveyed. Specifically, Zogby reported that respondents holding unfavorable views of the United States 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.⁷

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.

- Vast majorities in a May 2004 Zogby International/Sadat Chair poll--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.⁸ Similar

Kuwait, 78 percent in Lebanon, and 64 percent in the UAE. Ibid.

⁵ Zogby, "Why Do They Hate Us?": 8.

⁶ 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).

⁷ 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.

⁸ Arab Attitudes Towards Political and Social Issues, Foreign Policy and the Media (Anwar

majorities also indicated that American policy is more important than American values in shaping their views of the United States, by percentage ratios ranging from 76:16 in Jordan up to 90:<1 in Egypt.⁹ It's less "who we are" than "what we do" that explains Arab enmity toward the U.S.

- Respondents to the June 2004 Zogby poll likewise said that U.S. policy was important in shaping their attitude toward the United States, by overwhelming 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.¹⁰

Anti-Americanism in the Arab/Islamic world matters because it fosters a friendly environment where al-Qaeda can flourish. This friendly environment eases al-Qaeda efforts to raise new recruits and money. It also impedes efforts by the U.S. and its allies to gather the intelligence they need to roll up the al-Qaeda organization. A public friendly to the U.S. would act as its eyes and ears, helping it glean the intelligence that is the key to successful counter-terror. A public hostile to the U.S. sits on its hands, letting the terrorists hide in its midst while the U.S. searches blindly for them. 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. This public forms a friendly sea for al-Qaeda fish to swim in. These dangerous fish could swim no more 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. Other causes include the U.S. war in Iraq, and the impact of virulent anti-American propaganda from al-Qaeda and other Islamist movements. To heal U.S.-Arab relations the U.S. must wind down its war in Iraq, and it must apply far stronger public diplomacy to counter al-Qaeda's false propaganda. But the Israeli-Palestinian conflict also remains a major irritant, and U.S.-Arab and U.S.-Muslim relations will not heal fully while it persists. Al-Qaeda will benefit accordingly in the meantime.

Bin Laden, al-Zawahiri, and al-Qaeda's other 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. If they lose one excuse for murder they will find another. Accordingly, they cannot be conciliated and must be destroyed. To achieve this their support base must be stripped away, by engineering large improvement in Arab/Muslim public attitudes toward the U.S. This will leave

Sadat Chair for Peace and Development and Zogby International, May 2004, downloaded from www.bsos.umd.edu/SADAT/, 1/19/05): 8-9.

⁹ Arab Attitudes Towards Political and Social Issues: 8.

¹⁰ Zogby International, Impressions of America 2004: 4, table 2b.

these leaders friendless and exposed, swimming in an unfriendly sea, soon to face capture or death. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict should be ended not to appease their anger but to lay the basis for their demise.

The Israeli-Palestinian 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 American 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. Disputes rooted in the Arab-Israeli conflict 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. This assistance included intelligence information that helped thwart an al-Qaeda attack on the U.S. Navy 5th 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.

IV. 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 ending the conflict. Six in particular bear mention.

- 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.

- 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

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."

2000.¹³ If the public can agree on terms there is little reason their leaders cannot do likewise.

- 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.

- 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, which envisioned a settlement that involved 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. If the Palestinians and Israelis want to make peace they will now find many other Arabs willing to help it happen.

- 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 nevertheless require Israeli withdrawal.

- 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 buffer room to defeat a 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.

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

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.

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 plans envision Israel's withdrawal 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. Control of the city of Jerusalem would be shared along ethnic lines. Control of its holy places, including the Temple Mount area, would also be shared. 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. The Palestinians would not insist on a large return of Palestinian refugees to Israel, instead seeing their right of return recognized mainly by generous compensation to the refugees.

Neither side will accept terms outside these parameters. For example, Israel will never accept a large return of refugees to Israel, and Palestinian insistence on a large return will 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. 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.¹⁴

What U.S. action does peace require? The two sides cannot make peace on their own; the U.S. must lead them to peace. Specifically, the U.S. must frame its own final status peace plan and use carrots and sticks to persuade both sides to accept it. 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 also necessary. If either side needs incentives to move it forward those incentives--both positive and negative--should be framed and firmly applied.

¹⁴ Moreover, even if Israel somehow gained such terms its victory would be Pyrrhic as such a settlement would contain the seeds of its own demise. Palestinian leaders who made such a deal would be weakened against their own radicals. These radicals would be in a stronger position to disrupt the peace by committing terrorist violence against Israelis or even against the Palestinian leadership. Even if peace were made outside the Clinton/Abdullah/Geneva/People's Voice parameters it therefore would well not endure.

The U.S. final status plan should involve a full Israeli withdrawal in exchange for full and final peace, in line with the four peace plans discussed above. 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 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 timeline.

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 the U.S. 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.¹⁵ No Palestinian leader would ever accept any such terms, so Sharon aims to impose these terms unilaterally.

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 religious motives are probably not at work. Rather, he is by reputation essentially a national security hawk. If so, the collapse of the eastern invasion threat over the past two decades should have made Sharon more willing to trade land for peace. But it hasn't. 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.

¹⁵ 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

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. government 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 terms 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 the 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. American 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.