

PolicyWatch #1373

Bush's Last Middle East Trip Could Be More Than Just Farewells

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May 13, 2008

President Bush returns to the Middle East this week for the second time in 2008. Initially planned to mark Israel's sixtieth anniversary, his itinerary has expanded to include meetings with top officials from Afghanistan, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, and Saudi Arabia. Except for a trip to Riyadh, these meetings will be held at a World Economic Forum conference in Sharm al-Sheikh, Egypt. This lineup prompted National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley to say the trip has "both symbolism and substance" and, considering the urgency of the issues, something of substance may actually emerge.

Israel and the Palestinians

On May 14 and 15, the president will address the Israeli Knesset, and is scheduled to meet with country's president and prime minister, Shimon Peres and Ehud Olmert. This part of the trip is largely symbolic and will focus on the continuing U.S. commitment to Israel's security. Underlying this commitment is a newly announced package of advanced arms sales, including long-range combat aircraft and anti-missile radars, largely paid for by a ten-year program of U.S. military aid worth \$3 billion annually.

Also symbolic, however, is the absence of a trilateral U.S.-Israeli-Palestinian meeting, indicating the lack of progress in the peace talks. The president's meeting with the Quartet's economic envoy Tony Blair signals a low-key encouragement for the peacemaking effort. Behind the scenes, there are contradictory reports about movement on some of the core issues, such as provisional borders for a Palestinian state, but they are offset by the continued impasse on Jerusalem and refugees. The inability of the parties to produce a joint document or even a public statement so far suggests that serious obstacles remain.

Two other clouds looming over the president's visit have been temporarily pushed aside. First, Olmert is holding at bay his latest legal troubles regarding alleged irregular campaign contributions by promising to resign if he is formally indicted. Second, the prospect of large-scale violence with Hamas seems reduced -- if only for a moment -- by a renewed high-level push for a tacit cease-fire with Israel, spearheaded by Egypt's intelligence chief General Omar Suleiman. However, these short-term fixes hold little hope of actually advancing an Israeli-Palestinian agreement by the time Bush leaves office next January.

Lebanon's Latest Crisis

Overshadowing the lull in Israeli-Palestinian violence is the latest round of fighting in Lebanon, triggered last week by Hizballah's refusal to bow to the Lebanese government's authority on airport and telecommunications security. President Bush is scheduled to meet Lebanese prime minister Fouad Siniora in Egypt on May 18 in a show of support, but such demonstrations (and the deployment of the USS Cole destroyer on Lebanon's coast) are symbolic and have little substance. Indeed, the timing of Hizballah's severe reaction to the government's moves may reflect a deliberate effort to embarrass the U.S. president. The Lebanese army shows little appetite for confronting Hizballah, and as Bush told reporters yesterday, it is hard to "help people have courage."

U.S. spokesmen have been more explicit than usual in blaming Syria and Iran for this latest threat to

Lebanon's relatively moderate government. As a result, a failure to respond effectively -- for example, with greater support for the Lebanese government and for UNIFIL, or putting more pressure on Hizballah's patrons in Damascus and Tehran -- will be widely seen as a sign of failure not only for the president's trip, but also for U.S. democracy promotion and other regional policies.

Iraq and Afghanistan

Also in Egypt, Bush is scheduled to meet with President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan and Iraqi vice president Adel Abdul Mahdi and deputy prime minister Barham Saleh. The news from Iraq is comparatively favorable with progress on ceasefires and overall security in both Basra and Baghdad, and some signs of political movement on the oil law and the reinstatement of dissident factions in the governing coalition. No major initiatives for either of these countries are expected beyond the usual reaffirmation of U.S. support, and the president is likely to reiterate his policy that any changes in troop deployments will be guided by the assessments of military commanders on the ground.

Egypt, Jordan, and Other Players

In another sign of business as usual, the president is scheduled to meet with Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak and Jordan's King Abdullah II. Considering the profile of this conclave, the focus will probably be on economic issues such as the soaring global food prices. In this context, the United States would do well to defy low expectations by announcing new assistance programs for Iraqi refugees in Jordan and modern education and vocational training for Egyptians.

Egypt's recent domestic political troubles will almost certainly get little public notice, although in private, Bush may congratulate his Egyptian counterpart on his recent eightieth birthday and gently inquire about his future plans. If Bush cares to cite a success story for Arab democracy, he might point to Kuwait, which will hold an admirably free and peaceful (and probably also inconclusive) parliamentary election on May 17.

Saudi Arabia and Oil Prices

As a result of Egypt's perceived inertia and surging oil revenues, Riyadh has new diplomatic power in the region, and is active on a range of issues including Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, and particularly Iran. President Bush needs to channel Saudi efforts and soothe Riyadh's sense of frustration that Iran's ambitions are not being blunted.

Contrary to its public stance, Riyadh has been reportedly encouraging the United States to strike terrorist training bases in Iran from Iraqi soil. By Saudi logic, this would help force progress on Iran's meddling in Iraq and the ongoing nuclear issue. The expected cautious Bush response might need to be refined in view of Hizballah's activities in Beirut, loudly denounced this week by the Saudi foreign minister. The president will also want to judge whether the absence of eighty-four-year-old defense minister Crown Prince Sultan, who is confined to a Geneva clinic, means any change in Saudi analysis of regional dynamics.

The perennial question of Saudi oil policy has become particularly topical recently because of the rising domestic U.S. debate over soaring oil prices. Last week, a White House spokesman said the president would make his concerns about the impact of high oil prices on the U.S. and world economies very clear to the Saudis. Given all the other problems besetting U.S. policy, any hint of Saudi flexibility on this issue would be taken as a matter of real substance. But so far, Riyadh is stressing economic rather than political inputs on oil policy.

Policy Implications

For this trip to prove a success (even symbolically), it will be essential that the president make concrete exchanges with the U.S. allies facing challenges from common regional foes. This could take the form of

additional U.S. economic or security support in return for commitments to help with the threats from soaring oil prices and Iran and its proxies. Given the risks of pro-American positions by U.S. regional allies, President Bush should strive to make this trip more substantive than symbolic, as the eight eventful years of his administration draw to a close.

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