

PolicyWatch #1339 : Special Forum Report

The Final Year: End-of-Term Presidents and the Middle East

Featuring Martin Indyk and Harvey Sicherman
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On February 8, 2008, Martin Indyk and Harvey Sicherman addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Mr. Indyk, former ambassador to Israel and assistant secretary of state for Near East affairs during the Clinton administration, currently directs the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. Mr. Sicherman is president and director of the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

HARVEY SICHERMAN

First-term presidents generally focus on being reelected for a second term. In contrast, second-term presidents concentrate on their legacy and ask themselves the question, "How will history judge my presidency?" This "second-term syndrome" greatly influences presidential priorities and policies. Its most problematic symptom is exaggerated and impractical rhetoric -- for example, in his second inaugural address, President Bush made a sweeping statement by pledging to end all tyranny in the world. Such rhetoric highlights a related affliction: overconfidence. This has generally led to disasters, as witnessed under Presidents Reagan, Clinton, and now Bush. Particularly in their last year in office, second-term presidents believe they can accomplish things that are, in reality, beyond their grasp.

Examining the last-minute agendas of such presidents reveals a mix between the second-term syndrome and an adaptive version of the "Jerusalem syndrome." The latter affliction (an actual psychiatric disorder characterized by obsession with the city of Jerusalem) is a metaphor of sorts for late-term presidential policymaking in the Israeli-Palestinian arena. For example, President Reagan was not fully engaged in the Arab-Israeli conflict during his second term because of the Iran-Contra affair. In the summer of 1988, however, Secretary of State George Schultz pressed for engagement on the peacemaking front. He argued that if Reagan did not act on the issue, his administration would be forever marked by the failure. In the end, Reagan's shift of focus from his presidency to his legacy compelled him to begin work on the conflict, which resulted in Washington's recognition of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) -- a historical event attributed to Schultz and Reagan.

President Bush is showing signs of the same syndrome: he visited Jerusalem last month and seems to believe that a peace treaty is achievable by the end of his term. Although praiseworthy, this goal is unrealistic given the current situation on the ground. The minimum Bush can hope for is both sides coming together to prepare a working peace process for the next administration. This would be a sizeable achievement compared to Clinton and Reagan's efforts. Of course, there are many issues that could impact progress, including the situation in Gaza, Israeli political issues, and the weakness of the current Palestinian government. If Bush achieves anything at all, it would probably happen only at the very end of his term.

Predictions about the remainder of his presidency can be made on other fronts as well. In Lebanon, the best Bush can realistically hope for is a stalemate. The triumph of the pro-Western Siniora government would be ideal, but given Syria's continued campaign of assassinations, it seems like that scenario will never come to fruition. As for Iran, enacting additional UN sanctions against Tehran is a realistic goal for the Bush

administration, but trying to end the regime's nuclear program and support for terrorism is well beyond the president's grasp. And in Iraq, Bush hopes at minimum to leave a less violent situation on the ground; ideally, he would also like to establish a functioning government.

In the end, although Bush's heart may be in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, his mind is more likely preoccupied with the Persian Gulf. After all, if he fails to achieve peace between the Israelis and Palestinians, he is no worse off than any of his predecessors. But if he leaves Iraq in shambles and Iran with a nuclear program, his legacy will be tarnished.

MARTIN INDYK

Looking at President Clinton's last year in office and the way he handled the transition to Bush provides an instructive lesson. Clinton suffered from legacy syndrome and was driven by a sense of history. Unlike Bush, Clinton was not affected by any eleventh-hour "Jerusalem syndrome" -- he was active in Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking throughout his entire presidency. But Clinton failed by handing over the peace process in flames, and by conveying a strong impression to Bush that peace efforts were futile.

Indeed, after his meeting with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in March 2001, Bush felt that conditions were not conducive for restarting the peace process. He believed that Arafat's rejection of the Clinton-Barak plan reinforced what Clinton had told him, and that there was no real way to make a true and lasting peace at that moment. It is an important lesson to learn: an outgoing president should avoid projecting his own disillusionment and thereby biasing the incoming president against the peace process. In the case of Clinton and Bush, this failure set the peace process back seven years.

Similarly, when the Clinton administration failed to achieve an Israeli-Syrian peace agreement, efforts on the Israeli-Palestinian front were affected as well. Barak's offer to Damascus set a standard -- i.e., a return to the 1967 borders -- that the Palestinians would not depart from. This, combined with the effects of the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, seemed to send the message that persistent violence toward Israel would bring about concessions, thus sparking the second intifada.

Had Clinton understood these problems at the time, he would have realized that he needed to lower his objectives. He would have been better off with something achievable -- such as an agreement confined to territorial arrangements -- instead of keeping Jerusalem as a central part of his peacemaking efforts. Then, as now, the parties are not ready to compromise on Jerusalem. Accordingly, Bush must remember to be realistic about what can be achieved, taking the situation on the ground into account. This point is even more important in the context of current Palestinian politics.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice seems to have created a viable plan for the future. Her apparent objective -- to hand off a working plan for the next administration to follow and build on -- is a realistic goal. Trying to achieve a peace agreement this year is not a recipe for success, however, and given that another failed attempt would further empower Hamas, it is much better to focus on what is actually possible. In addition, Washington should solidify efforts to rebuild Palestinian infrastructure in the West Bank in order to create the security that would enable a future Israeli withdrawal. Plans should also be put forth to jumpstart the West Bank economy because doing so might prove to the Palestinians that both President Mahmoud Abbas and peace efforts are worth supporting. Finally, Washington needs to foster engagement with Arab states. Israeli-Syrian negotiations should be a step in this process, not the focus. All of these initiatives are achievable, and the administration would be wise to work on them during its final year.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Gerri Pozez.

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