

PolicyWatch #1325 : Special Forum Report

## Bush to the Middle East: Previewing a Presidential Visit

Featuring [Patrick Clawson](#) and [Robert Satloff](#)

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*On Monday, January 7, Patrick Clawson and Robert Satloff addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute and discussed the upcoming visit of President Bush to the Middle East. Dr. Clawson is deputy director of research at The Washington Institute and author, most recently, of [Deterring the Ayatollahs: Complications in Applying Cold War Strategy to Iran](#) (with Michael Eisenstadt). Dr. Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute and host of Dakhil Washington, a weekly public affairs broadcast on al-Hurra satellite television. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks. Ambassador Robert Blackwill, president of Barbour Griffith & Rogers International, also made some off-the-record remarks at the event.*

### ROBERT SATLOFF

Although the recent White House press release states "President Bush to Travel to Middle East to follow up on Progress Made at Annapolis," his trip centers on the Persian Gulf and is a continuation of Vice President Cheney's trip to Saudi Arabia last year. The tour also has greater impetus because of the reverberations from the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) about Iran's nuclear program -- namely, the fear that the United States is slackening in its resolve to confront the rising threat from Iran.

The Arab-Israeli portion of the trip will be brief and will involve few emotive images, few historic moments, and no major push towards a peace breakthrough. There will only be bilateral meetings and no trilateral discussions between the Americans, Israelis, and Palestinians. In Israel, other than the visit to Yad Vashem, Bush will have private meetings and meals with President Shimon Peres and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert with no other major symbolic events planned. In contrast, there is a good chance Bush will return to Israel in May for Israel's sixtieth anniversary -- an event full of symbolism and activities.

The NIE report forms a backdrop to the visit to Israel. No matter how the analysis of the NIE is parsed -- whether the limited explanation the NIE gives to the phrase "nuclear weapons program" or its emphasis on how Iran's continuing enrichment is the most essential element for making nuclear weapons -- there is no escaping the enormous political impact of the U.S. intelligence community's collective judgment that Iran no longer has a nuclear weapons program. Among the many implications of the NIE, it also has shown that the United States and Israel are not in lock-step regarding Iran, at least on intelligence, if not operationally.

On the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Bush seems to have set a 2008 goal for reaching an agreement on a Palestinian state. It could be a "definition agreement" that defines the borders, powers, and limitations of the Palestinian State while leaving its implementation only after all the Roadmap obligations are fulfilled. In other words, this would be a "shelf agreement" that would separate reality from diplomacy and negotiations, out of the context of the situation on the street. The problem with this kind of agreement is that reality is almost certain to intrude. Negotiations are likely to be affected by how the parties implement the Roadmap's obligations. And there is little likelihood that the conditions for implementation will be met without a devotion to that end.

In addition, not enough attention has been paid to Bush's last stop in Sharm el-Sheikh to see Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. Mubarak, the leader of a country that receives more U.S. aid than any other except Israel, has not been to Washington in years. Strategically, Mubarak's regime is already in transition; in what way, however, is not clear. Tactically, Egyptian-Israeli relations, although never warm, are near their most bellicose in years. Although America needs Egypt to play a constructive role in peacemaking, in Iraq, and in the coalition against Iran, Egypt appears, at best, adrift.

## **PATRICK CLAWSON**

When Bush visits four Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries -- Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Saudi Arabia -- the two main issues on the agenda are likely to be reform and security.

Bush will presumably take a muted tone on reform. Each of these countries has made little progress worthy of praise, but there is also ample scope for him to urge further action. In Kuwait, Bush will meet with women reformers. Kuwait has extended suffrage to women, and the women's movement has gained some real visibility. But Kuwait has not been able, despite more than a decade of plans, to bring in international oil companies to accomplish the announced objectives for increasing oil production capacity -- something the world desperately needs. Bahrain is a more difficult case: human rights activists were arrested after recent demonstrations, and the once-promising political opening to the majority Shiite population seems to have ground to a halt. In the UAE, Bush will make a major address, presumably about the advantages that globalization has brought to the Middle East. Indeed, the economic openness of the UAE has strengthened the forces of social and political moderation with some success. In Saudi Arabia, the counter-radicalization program has had real successes at reintegrating violent radicals into society. However, the modest political reform of the last decade -- the establishment of the Shura Council, fixed terms for ministers, municipal elections -- seem to have stalled or been reversed.

Security is the more important part of Bush's agenda in the Gulf. In 2007, the U.S. government had an optimistic hope that there was an emerging coalition of moderates that contrasted the region's radical regimes and movements. However, the Saudis were more interested in a coalition of Sunnis, not moderates. This explains their reticence about Iraq's Shiite-dominated government and their enthusiasm for a Palestinian unity government that brought Hamas into the fold -- a plan that failed when Hamas sabotaged the Saudi-sponsored Mecca Accords. Bush could point out to the Saudis that the United States did much to address their concerns about the status of Iraqi Sunnis, providing arms and support to Sunnis ready to oppose al-Qaeda.

The main security issue is likely to be the NIE. To many in the Middle East, the estimate appears to reflect a deal between the United States and Iran, in which the United States tones down its criticisms of Iran's nuclear program while Iran reduces its support for anti-U.S. forces in Iraq. Although such conspiratorial reading is incorrect, it is accurate to say that Tehran and Washington have come to parallel conclusions: Iran knows that it cannot inflict an open defeat of the United States in Iraq, and the Bush administration realizes that it can only accomplish the limited objective of ratcheting up pressure on Iran's nuclear program in the next year. Each country may therefore be prepared to bide its time before making decisive moves.

Bush's aim is to convince the GCC states that the United States will continue to resist Iranian assertiveness. The January 9 naval incident in the Strait of Hormuz provided a useful opportunity for Bush to stress that the United States is prepared to use force when necessary to contain Iranian aggression. The GCC countries usually simultaneously seek to conciliate Iran while they privately urge the United States to take a strong stand. After all, they are weak and vulnerable and do not wish to attract Tehran's ire. But the GCC states have at times spoken out and urged Tehran to solve the nuclear problem -- for instance, the Saudi proposal that suggested Iran move its enrichment program to a neutral country.

It is worth mentioning that several GCC countries are making substantial contributions to U.S. security. In particular, for the last five years, Kuwait has been home to 80,000 U.S. troops and has supplied the land route for 90 percent of the necessary material for U.S. forces in Iraq (Turkey's vaunted role is for airborne supplies,

a small fraction of the total).

*This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Gerri Pozez.*

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