

The Bush Visit and Tensions in the U.S.-Israel Relationship

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- The December "surprise" resulting from the publication of the U.S. National Intelligence Estimate disrupted fifteen years of Israeli policy based on working with the international coalition to pressure Iran to drop its nuclear weapons program through sanctions and the threat of military action, and has reminded Israelis of the limits of American security guarantees and strategic cooperation.
- Within two weeks following publication of the NIE report, China signed a major contract on energy development and supply with Iran, and Russia quickly dispatched two shipments of nuclear fuel for the Bushehr nuclear reactor. Egypt moved to improve relations with Iran, and Saudi Arabia welcomed Iranian President Ahmadinejad to Mecca for the Haj.
- Prime Minister Olmert had explained the logic of the "Annapolis process" in terms of the coalition to stop Iran, but two weeks after Annapolis, with the release of the NIE report, this rationale has lost much of its relevance.
- Another source of stress comes from differences over renewed U.S. efforts to forge a quick agreement with the Palestinian Authority at a time of continued terrorism, the violent conflict between Fatah and Hamas, the failure to develop functioning Palestinian institutions, and the PA's ongoing incitement and rejection of the legitimacy of a Jewish state.
- In addition, the overall decline of U.S. influence, as reflected in Iraq, the return of Russia as a world power, the chaos in Pakistan, and other developments, has highlighted the limits of Israeli reliance on American assistance, and the need for Israel to maintain an independent capability to act when necessary.

President Bush's first visit to Israel since taking office in 2001 comes at a time of strain in the usually cooperative relationship between Jerusalem and Washington. In particular, the December "surprise," resulting from the publication of the U.S. National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) summary report on Iran's nuclear weapons program,¹ reminded Israelis of the limits of American security guarantees and strategic cooperation. Other sources of stress come from

differences over renewed efforts to forge a quick agreement with the Palestinian Authority headed by Mahmoud Abbas and Salam Fayad, in parallel to escalating attacks from the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip. In addition, the overall decline of U.S. influence, as reflected in Iraq, the return of Russia as a world power, the chaos in Pakistan, and other developments has highlighted the limits of Israeli reliance on American assistance, and the need for Israel to maintain an independent capability to act when necessary.

The Impact of the NIE Report on Israeli Security

For Israel, the Iranian nuclear weapons program is the most acute strategic threat, and December 2007 NIE report (of which only a short summary was declassified) was a major shock. The summary, and the subsequent headlines in the major media outlets, declared: "We judge with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program."² While a footnote and subsequent paragraphs explained that this assessment was limited to only one aspect of the Iranian program ("weaponization") and that the other more basic and important aspects, including uranium enrichment, were continuing, the headline took the urgency and the justification out of the U.S.-led international coalition on Iran.

These developments disrupted fifteen years of Israeli policy based on working with the international coalition to pressure Iran to drop its nuclear weapons program through sanctions and the threat of military action, if necessary. Within two weeks following publication of the NIE report, the momentum of the sanctions regime to contain Iran, built up slowly over the past three years, was suddenly reversed. In short order, China and Malaysia signed major contracts on energy development and supply with Iran, and Russia, which had withheld the fuel rods for the large Bushehr nuclear reactor for at least one year, quickly dispatched two shipments. In parallel, the leaders of the Sunni Arab component of the coalition to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear weapons state also concluded that the U.S. had changed course. Unsure of the future course of U.S. policy on Iran, Sunni Arab states that attended Annapolis, including Egypt, have been scrambling to broaden their contacts with Iran, and Saudi Arabia welcomed Iranian President Ahmadinejad to Mecca for the Haj pilgrimage.

The headline of the NIE report asserting that Iran had "halted its nuclear weapons program" appeared to signal that a U.S.-led military attack on Iran's nuclear installations was extremely unlikely. This was perhaps the main objective of the officials who wrote the published summary - to make it all but impossible for President Bush to order an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities in the last year of his administration.

Despite the central importance of these issues, the years of strategic coordination meetings, and repeated American assurances, Israeli policy-makers were apparently not consulted on the decision to release the NIE report, its timing, or its very contentious wording. Israel could do nothing as the U.S. crippled the primary source of pressure which had contributed to the Iranian decision to close (or hide) the blatant aspects of its nuclear weapons development in 2003.

As a result, in his visit to the region - including Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states - President Bush will be pressed to find ways to reverse the damage from the NIE report. Beyond statements of continued concern about the dangers that will be created if the radical Iranian regime acquires nuclear weapons, the U.S. administration will be asked to consider measures that will revive the stalled sanctions regime, and to consider the possibility of military action, if all other means have been exhausted.

Differences Over the "Annapolis Peace Process" and Security Measures

While Israel is focusing primarily on Iran, President Bush, Secretary of State Rice, and others are emphasizing Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts and the declared goal of negotiating the terms of a peace agreement based on a Palestinian state by the end of 2008. The two issues are closely connected, however, and on his way to Annapolis at the end of November, Prime Minister Olmert explained the logic of the "Annapolis process" in terms of the coalition to stop Iran, and the need to involve the Saudis and other Arab states by demonstrating movement and hope on the Palestinian track. But two weeks after Annapolis, with the release of the NIE report, this rationale has lost much of its relevance, as has the case for Israeli security risks related to negotiations with the Palestinians. The murder of two Israelis on December 28 by Fatah gunmen - connected with the same security forces that are armed and trained as part of the Annapolis framework promoting Palestinian statehood - is a stark reminder of these risks.

Public opinion polls show that while most Israelis support peace negotiations based on a "two-state solution," they are also realistic about the obstacles and failures of the Palestinian leadership to work towards this objective. Continued terrorism, the violent conflict between the Fatah and Hamas factions, the failure to develop functioning institutions, and the ongoing incitement and rejection of the legitimacy of a Jewish state reinforce these concerns. Palestinian negotiators have already rejected the Israeli requirement that any future Palestinian state be demilitarized. Furthermore, there is no indication of Palestinian readiness to revise what they refer to as "the right of return" for refugees, which is a euphemism for the destruction of Israel through entry of millions of Arabs.

Similarly, the failure of even moderate Palestinian and Arab leaders to accept Jewish rights in Jerusalem is a deal breaker. Over half of the Knesset's members, including more than a dozen members of Olmert's Kadima Party, signed a petition last year requiring a special majority of the Knesset to alter Jerusalem's municipal borders. There is also strong opposition to re-dividing Jerusalem in Olmert's own cabinet. Thus, serious negotiations on these "permanent status" issues have not started, and when they do begin, progress will be slow and difficult. And until the Palestinian Authority proves that it can deliver on pledges to advance political and security reform, the Bush Administration's determination to proceed increases the likelihood that the result will be the creation of a failed Palestinian state.

In addition, in Israel, President Bush will face widespread public protests over pressures for a unilateral halt to construction in communities built beyond the pre-1967 "green line" (the 1949 armistice line). This position is seen as incompatible with the April 14, 2004, letter from President Bush to then Prime Minister Sharon,³ and the repeated American pledges endorsing Israel's right to "secure and recognized borders." These pressures, and the resulting friction with Israel, also reflect the American determination to proceed quickly with the "momentum established at Annapolis," thereby ignoring the obstacles created by Palestinian failures.

In anticipation of pressure on Israel to ease movement for Palestinians as part of the massive economic development plan, and Secretary of State Rice's statements that echo traditional Arab and European emphasis on Palestinian victimization, Defense Minister Barak declared that Israel cannot and will not remove checkpoints that are vital to preventing ongoing terror. Israeli officials have emphasized that in negotiations during the peace process, freedom of military action in the West Bank must be maintained. They have also made the case for continued Israeli military presence in the Jordan Valley. While President Bush and other U.S. officials have backed Israel on these issues in the past, the American desire to obtain a quick agreement may lead to changes in these policies and more tension.

A U.S.-Israel Defense Treaty Will Not Resolve These Issues

America remains the only global superpower and Israel's main ally, as seen both in the extent of military cooperation and in the political dimension. However, in addition to the sources of friction over Iran and negotiations with the Palestinians, the relationship between the U.S. and Israel is also affected by the decline in U.S. influence, particularly in the Middle East. The ongoing conflict in Iraq, the return of Russia as a world power, the chaos in Pakistan, and other developments highlight the need for Israel to limit the degree of its dependence on Washington for insuring its vital security requirements.

For these reasons, any discussion of yet another effort to conclude a U.S.-Israel defense treaty is unrealistic, and further tensions may develop if Israel decides on the need for unilateral military action to disrupt Iran's nuclear weapons development efforts. While the military assistance provided by the U.S. since the 1973 Yom Kippur War may be unprecedented, it cannot substitute for an independent Israeli military capability when vital interests are at stake. The political maneuvering in Washington that apparently led to the wording of the NIE summary report on Iran, and the differences emerging over demands to relax Israeli security measures in the hope of achieving a breakthrough in negotiations with the Palestinians, are pointed reminders of the limits of even the closest of alliances between sovereign nations.

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Notes

1. Gerald M. Steinberg, "Decoding the U.S. National Intelligence Estimate on Iran's Nuclear Weapons Program," *Jerusalem Issue Brief*, Vol. 7, No. 24, 5 December 2007.

2. "Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities," National Intelligence Estimate, National Intelligence Council, November 2007,
http://www.odni.gov/press_releases/20071203_release.pdf

3. The April 2004 letter from President Bush to then Prime Minister Sharon: "The United States reiterates its steadfast commitment to Israel's security, including secure, defensible borders, and to preserve and strengthen Israel's capability to deter and defend itself, by itself, against any threat or possible combination of threats....As part of a final peace settlement, Israel must have secure and recognized borders, which should emerge from negotiations between the parties in accordance with UNSC Resolutions 242 and 338. In light of new realities on the ground, including already existing major Israel i populations centers, it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949, and all previous efforts to negotiate a two-state solution have reached the same conclusion. It is realistic to expect that any final status agreement will only be achieved on the basis of mutually agreed changes that reflect these realities."

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