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America’s Middle East Peace Crisis

AUGUSTUS RICHARD NORTON

The Middle East has been a major diplomatic priority for every American president since Lyndon Johnson; George W. Bush undoubtedly will face his first foreign policy challenge in the region. But if Bush is to succeed where his predecessor failed, it is all the more important to examine the legacy of the Clinton administration, especially the multiple failures of 2000.

CLINTON’S QUEST FOR A LEGACY

President Bill Clinton’s last year in office began with a burst of attention to peacemaking in the Middle East. After six years of sporadic negotiations, Israel and Syria seemed, by January 2000, close to a peace agreement that would return the Golan Heights to Syria. Although Syrian President Hafez al-Assad momentarily had cold feet when an American-crafted draft peace treaty revealing important Syrian concessions was leaked in the Israeli press in late January, quiet discussions resumed within a few weeks.

Israel not only sought to make peace with Syria, but also wanted to get out of Lebanon. In 1982 Israel had invaded Lebanon with the grand ambition of defeating the Palestine Liberation Organization—which had established itself in the country after being expelled from Jordan—and installing a pliant government in Beirut, but the invasion transmogrified into a self-perpetuating occupation zone in southern Lebanon. Since the 1980s, Syria had encouraged and supported attacks on Israel’s forces

in southern Lebanon—especially by Hezbollah, the Shiite Muslim “Party of God,” which carried out most of the resistance attacks, often with deadly effectiveness. Israel’s role in southern Lebanon grew unpopular domestically as the toll in young soldiers increased. Prime Minister Ehud Barak spoke to these concerns with his 1999 campaign pledge to “bring the boys home.” Israel wanted to cut its losses and pull out, preferably in conjunction with a peace treaty between Israel and Syria. Although unilateral Israeli withdrawal without an agreement was the less desirable default option, Barak committed Israel to leaving Lebanon by July 7, 2000, with or without an agreement. If a Syrian-Israeli pact fell into place, a parallel treaty between Israel and Lebanon would follow. For the past decade, Lebanon’s foreign policy has been under Syrian sway. Without a go-ahead from Damascus, Beirut would sign nothing.

Meanwhile, Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) inched toward a “final status” agreement that was originally to have been completed by September 13, 1998 under the terms of the Oslo peace process. At a September 1999 summit meeting at Sharm al-Shaikh, PA President Yasir Arafat and Barak agreed to complete the agreement in one year. If they were to successfully tackle the toughest issues, United States mediation seemed crucial. But with his landslide election as prime minister in May 1999, Barak preferred to keep the United States in the background and capitalize on Israel’s overwhelming power over the PA and Arafat. The Palestinians understood Barak’s logic and were intent on negotiating with American help.

Thus, in early 2000 the pieces seemed in place for a stunning Middle East success for Clinton,

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potentially a legacy so impressive that the president's Oval Office peccadilloes might be overshadowed.

This success eluded Clinton's grasp, and his administration's Middle East legacy is a scuttled peace. As a new administration prepares to take office in Washington, Syria and Israel are still formally at war. Although Israel did withdraw its forces from Lebanon in May—as Barak promised—the border region remains a cockpit of tension, especially in a disputed area known as Shiba Farms in the still-occupied Golan Heights. In Israel and Palestine the Oslo process is in tatters, and nearly 300 Palestinians and more than 30 Israelis are dead, victims of the al-Aqsa intifada (uprising), the worst eruption of violence since the intifada of 1987–1993, when 1,500 died. A durable cease-fire remains out of reach.¹

Why has the early promise of the Oslo process been unfulfilled? Much of the failure rests with the shortcomings, miscalculations, and mixed agendas of Arab and Israeli key leaders, but this is a given in the Middle East. A more important explanation turns on the severe structural defects and asymmetrical benefits of the Oslo accord. The “jewel in the crown,” in the words of the sociologist Salim Tamari, was Israeli security, and this, not Palestinian rights or independence, is the central purpose of the Oslo accords as understood by Israel and the United States. Thus, in the first Clinton administration, officials such as Secretary of State Warren Christopher endorsed the view that the extent of Israeli withdrawals from occupied territory would not be the subject of negotiation, but unilateral Israeli decisions.

The United States devoted extraordinary energy and resources to the peace process, but the working assumptions that guided American negotiators tarnished their credibility with the Arabs as honest brokers. The problem of United States credibility has arisen with intensity during the Clinton years

¹The al-Aqsa intifada exploded following former Israeli General Ariel Sharon's provocative September 28 visit (with a massive entourage of police) to Haram al-Sharif (“Noble Sanctuary”), the revered site of the al-Aqsa mosque, where it is believed that the prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven. This explains the importance of Jerusalem in the religious imagination of Muslims. Of course, the Old City is equally sacred to Jews, who believe that Haram al-Sharif marks the Temple Mount, where the Second or Solomon's Temple stood.

²Tony Judt, “The White House and the World,” *New York Review of Books*, December 21, 2000, p. 99.

because Bill Clinton is, in the view of many Israeli observers, the most pro-Israeli president in history. But the problem is systemic. It is indicative of the climate in Washington regarding Arab-Israeli issues that Israeli scholars frequently marvel at the contorted self-censorship that has come to characterize Washington discussions—in contrast to the lively give-and-take that marks public debate in Israel. In the recent presidential campaign, neither George W. Bush nor Al Gore devoted serious attention to foreign policy issues, but when they did touch on the Middle East, each took great care to ritually praise Israel. Neither offered a serious analysis of the conflict, and neither revealed the objectivity that is obviously a requisite for an honest broker. American policymakers enjoy emphasizing that the United States role is indispensable, which may be true, but the skewed United States approach to the Middle East has sparked an Arab search for alternative mediators. This is no small matter. One respected

European observer, reflecting on the recent campaign, writes that “electoral overbidding in support of Israel has distorted US commentary and rhetoric on the

Israeli-Palestinian struggle to the point where most European commentators (not to speak of those in the rest of the world) despair of the incoming administration's capacity to play an effective role in the region for years to come.”²

Pro-Palestinian demonstrations necessarily evoke anti-American sentiment. At the popular level, a comparable period of widespread public demonstrations in the Arab world occurred in the 1990–1991 Persian Gulf crisis and war. Even in the usually sedate Arab gulf states, anti-Israel and anti-America opinion has been mobilized, and consumer boycotts of United States companies such as McDonald's are reported. Washington policy experts are often inclined to denigrate Arab public opinion and emphasize the extent of United States influence in the region, but they underestimate the accumulating grievances of United States policy and the double standards in the region that the al-Aqsa incident only crystallized. One well-placed expert noted in a 1998 dialogue, “We don't care if they like us, as long as we have influence.” Recently, chastened by the outbursts of anti-American sentiment in October 2000, he privately observed with characteristic intellectual honesty, “I would not have thought or predicted that things could unravel so dramatically and so quickly.”

Israel has longed for acceptance in the Middle East. In 1991, following the Gulf War, an entirely new structure of relations between Israel and the Arab states emerged at the Madrid conference, where Israel and its adversaries launched a series of promising negotiations. But moves toward the normalization of diplomatic and economic ties between Israel and the Arab states of Tunisia, Oman, Morocco, and Qatar have been reversed as a result of the al-Aqsa intifada. The global Islamic Conference meeting in Qatar on November 12–14, 2000 called on Muslim states to break diplomatic ties with Israel (although outside the Middle East, none complied). Moreover, the current violence has severely strained relations between Israel and its key Arab interlocutors. Egypt's recall of its veteran ambassador from Israel in November was a serious signal of disapproval from President Hosni Mubarak. And King Abdullah of Jordan, a leading pro-Western and moderate voice, has decided not to appoint an ambassador to fill the vacant Israeli post.

"THIS IS NOT INTIFADA, THIS IS WAR"

What is wrong with the peace picture? The premise of much commentary on the peace process is that the circumstances of the Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza have been improving and that an emerging middle class is preparing to prosper from peace.³ This is a false premise. For Palestinians, economic conditions were actually better before the Oslo accords. In fact, the quality of life has declined, especially as measured by per capita annual income, which has shrunk 20 percent in the West Bank to \$1,600, and by 25 percent in Gaza, to \$1,200. The comparable figure for Israel has increased to about \$18,000, 11 to 15 times the Palestinian level. Put simply, peace did not produce an economic bonanza for the Palestinians, except for a privileged minority that has benefited from monopolies created by the PA. Internal PA documents point to immense levels of corruption, including misallocations of hundreds of millions of dollars.⁴

The Oslo structure is heavily skewed to security. Half the 120,000 PA public-sector employees work in one of the nine police and paramilitary forces that Arafat has created. With 1 police officer for every 45 people, these forces far exceed the levels agreed to by Israel in the accords. (Until the recent

upsurge in violence, Israel had been willing to look the other way because it is the beneficiary of Arafat's security state.) If the levels of economic and cultural collaboration between Israelis and Palestinians have lagged, security cooperation has not—at least until the al-Aqsa intifada. Under the chairmanship of Central Intelligence Agency director George Tenet, Israeli and Palestinian security officials have closely collaborated. Senior American officials, up to and including President Clinton, had urged the PA to throw dissidents in jail without regard for due process or basic rights, thereby signaling that American rhetoric about democracy and human rights does not apply to Palestinians. Vice President Al Gore spoke similarly in 1995 when he told Arafat to take "tougher measures against the enemies of peace." Distinctions between peaceful versus violent opposition tend to get lost in injunctions such as Gore's.

The al-Aqsa intifada is not simply a popular rejection of Israeli occupation but of the entire structure of the Oslo process, including the oppressive rule of the PA. This is one reason it is difficult for Arafat to quell the violence. He and his political apparatus are disdained by many Palestinians. According to Harvard University political economist Sara Roy, in the first days of the violence in late September, attacks in Gaza were directed at the clubs and hangouts favored by Arafat cronies, venting deep-seated resentment at the PA. The great irony is that Arafat is trying to ride the tide of Palestinian opposition, which is in significant measure not merely rejecting Oslo but the PA as well. Marwan Barghouti, the leader of the Tanzim, a leading force in the intifada, spoke for many demonstrators, "Let those who will negotiate do so, but the Palestinian people will continue their struggle." Or as an unidentified Palestinian declared, "This is not intifada, this is war."

As the Palestinians approached a final agreement with Israel under Oslo, they realized that peace would look eerily like the miserable status quo. With over 200,000 Jewish settlers now embedded in the West Bank, a network of security zones, and 250 miles of reserved bypass roads that are off-limits to Palestinians, the Palestinian state would have had the appearance of a bizarre political quilt, not a contiguous state. The purpose of the settlements as envisaged by General Sharon and other opponents of Palestinian statehood was precisely to make a viable Palestinian state unthinkable. In significant measure, the plan has worked, which is why knowledgeable observers frequently note the parallel

³ See, for example, Thomas L. Friedman, "Diplomacy by Other Means," *The New York Times*, November 3, 2000.

⁴ See Sara Roy, "The Crisis Within: The Struggle for Palestinian Society," *Critique*, no. 17 (Fall 2000).

between apartheid-era Bantustans in South Africa and the dispersal of the Palestinians into a handful of enclaves with no secure land links and dubious economic viability.

Over the past two decades, the United States position on the settlements, as well as on the hot-button issue of Jerusalem, has changed dramatically. President Jimmy Carter referred to the settlements as “illegal”; Ronald Reagan said they were “unnecessarily provocative”; George Bush opposed them and famously withheld United States funding to prevent settlement construction. In Bill Clinton’s lexicon, however, the settlements represent only “disputed territory.” Suggestions that the settlements sit on occupied territory were rejected by the Clinton administration. Moreover, the administration accepted the notion of “natural growth,” namely the continuing expansion of existing settlements and the building of new adjunct settlements to accommodate the growing settler population.

This was an important shift, undermining the original goals of United Nations Security Council resolution 242, the

1967 document stating the principles for achieving Middle East peace: the acknowledgment

of the right of all states to a secure and recognized existence, and the exchange of occupied territory for peace. The resolution clearly presumed minor territorial adjustments rather than the wholesale incorporation of occupied territory into Israel (United States Secretary of State Madeleine Albright had intimated that the Oslo accords supersede 242, but few diplomats share that position).

In 1967 Israel conquered East Jerusalem, including the Old City, which was then held by Jordan. Israel declared the city to be the eternal and unified capital of Israel and has consistently refused to discuss relinquishing its sovereign control of it. Simultaneously, the Palestinians claim East Jerusalem as their capital. Under international law, East Jerusalem is and remains occupied territory according to the terms of resolution 242, which is precisely why all major governments maintain their embassies in Tel Aviv and not in Jerusalem. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Dome of the Rock mosque, and the Wailing Wall—places central to Christians, Muslims, and Jews—are all part of the Old City, but Jerusalem is now a massive municipality. The symbol-rich Old City accounts for only about 2 percent of the total land area of the municipality.

The United States has progressively credited Israeli claims to exclusive sovereignty in Jerusalem. This denies Palestinian claims to the Old City, as well as to venerable Arab neighborhoods of East Jerusalem and especially Salah al-Din Street, the traditional Palestinian commercial and intellectual center and the very heart of the PA. The United States position validates the large chunks of West Bank territory that have been arbitrarily incorporated into Jerusalem. Indeed, 25 percent of West Bank territory has been arbitrarily absorbed into Jerusalem. In effect, Israel says: any land that we say is part of Jerusalem is part of our sovereign capital and we will not divide our capital.

Israel is free to assume any negotiating position that it chooses, but the United States has progressively come to support the Israeli perspective, and this undermines United States credibility. Thus, when the Camp David summit between Arafat and Barak failed in July, Clinton vented his displeasure at Arafat for refusing to accept Barak’s offer of control short of sovereignty over Jerusalem. No administration

spokesperson made it clear why one side’s claims to sovereignty in Jerusalem were valid while the other’s

claims were not. Clinton even threatened to move the United States embassy to Jerusalem before the end of his term, but United States officials who understood that this would be a disastrous step corralled the threat.

Left to their own devices, the PA and Israel will not easily escape from the present paroxysm of violence. Not only does a gross asymmetry of military power exist between Palestine and Israel, but the Palestinian economy is utterly dependent on the Israeli economy. Until Barak’s recent closures of the borders, 125,000 Palestinians worked in Israel, mostly at menial jobs. The closures continue to cause losses of tens of millions of dollars a day to the local economy; total losses to the Palestinian economy exceeded \$500 million by late November, or 10 percent of annual GNP. Palestinians working in Israel pay taxes that Israel is obligated by its agreements to return to the PA. Those payments have slowed to a trickle. Restoring these obligatory reimbursements would be a small gesture of goodwill by Israel.

DEFUSING THE CRISIS

This is not enough. Security must be restored for both sides, not just for Israel. The case of Hebron

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illustrates the dire conditions of Palestinians. In this southernmost West Bank city, 40,000 civilians have been under curfew and confined to their homes for two months to permit 400 Israeli settlers to go about their business.⁵ The desperate situation in Hebron has occasioned no statement of concern by United States officials, but respected UN Human Rights Commissioner Mary Robinson, the former president of Ireland, noted in a November fact-finding visit to the West Bank and Gaza, including a trip to Hebron, that rarely have people been in such need of international protection.

In mid-November, Israel imposed complete closure on the Palestinian territories, the modern equivalent of a medieval siege. Arafat wants an armed UN peacekeeping force of 2,000 soldiers, but Israel is unlikely to accept an armed force under any auspices but its own. A sizable observer force is another matter, and support is growing. Britain and France already back the idea.

At the latest Sharm al-Shaikh summit, held in October 2000, Israel agreed to the establishment of an American-led fact-finding mission, meeting Palestinian demands (although they preferred a UN-led commission). The new Commission of Inquiry is under the leadership of former Senator George Mitchell, the European Union's Javier Solana, former Turkish President Suleyman Demirel, and Norway's Foreign Minister Thorbjørn Jagland. Arafat's effort to include former South African President Nelson Mandela failed. In early December, Barak acceded to Clinton's entreaties and agreed to permit the commission's visit. A balanced report undoubtedly will help defuse the situation.

ON THE SYRIAN-LEBANESE FRONT

In the Arab world, as well as in Israel, considerable hope was invested in the Geneva meeting between Presidents Bill Clinton and Hafez al-Assad in March 2000. The sole significant stumbling block was Israel's reticence at vacating all occupied Syrian land. The ailing Syrian president expected that he would find a deal waiting for him in Geneva, especially after a "warm up" call from Clinton promised "good news." The deal Assad was offered was not the one he had in mind, however. Israel was unwilling to return Syria's waterfront property fronting on Lake Tiberias, Israel's most important watershed, supplying 40 percent of Israel's water. Clinton faithfully summarized the Israeli offer to return all occupied territory except for that adjacent to the lake,

apparently confident that Assad would accept the compromise (privately, informed United States officials describe the Israeli offer as "over-reaching" and the president's willingness to carry Israel's position as "naïve"). If distinguishing Israel's negotiating position from that of the United States has been a major challenge during the Clinton administration, Clinton's faithful reproduction of Israel's negotiating position only illustrates the syndrome. Within five minutes of its opening, the Geneva meeting was effectively over.

Arab political commentators later argued that Geneva was a skillfully laid trap (*fakhhk*) intended to undermine the impression that Syria was serious about peace and to facilitate Israel's exit from Lebanon. These suspicions ascribe more skill and perceptiveness to Israel and to the United States than is warranted. Clinton's diplomatic forays seem more like cramming for a key exam than the product of careful, sustained study. Barak probably doubted that he could sell the withdrawal that Assad envisaged to the Israeli public, and he simultaneously presumed—incorrectly—that the old Syrian leader's unrelenting insistence on the return of all occupied territory was not his endgame.

The United States, concluding that Barak's offer was the most that Israel would put on the table, and finding Syria's position inflexible, asserted that the ball was in Syria's court and made no serious attempt to engage the Syrians in further negotiations, despite clear and increasingly frantic signals from Damascus in April and May that the *suq* (market) was still open, provided that all occupied Syrian land was returned. Syria's respected but tough-minded foreign minister, Faruq al-Shara, emphasized that while Syria would not compromise over land, resources—namely water—were negotiable. Similar signals came from the heir apparent, Bashar al-Assad, who succeeded his father in June.

Syria badly misread the situation, specifically Israel's willingness to leave Lebanon without an agreement. One obvious cost of Syria's blunder, and Lebanon's by extension, was the absence of the serious, difficult work of preparing for the contingency of an Israeli withdrawal. Certainly in Lebanon no government official wished to be seen planning for an eventuality that undermined Syria's interests, especially when those same officials seemed to believe Israel was not serious.

Reality dawned in early April when former Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy notified UN Secretary General Kofi Annan that Israel would comply with UN Security Council resolution 425, which calls for

⁵See *The Economist*, November 18, 2000, p. 56.

the restoration of peace and security in southern Lebanon. The mood changed from cynicism and suspicion to panic, which was evident even on the face and in the words of Syria's usually unflappable Faruq al-Shara.

Most experts inside and outside Lebanon predicted chaos when Israel withdrew. Given the Lebanese government's failure to secure the border area, Hezbollah succeeded in filling the vacuum created by Israel's withdrawal. When Kofi Annan visited Beirut in June 2000 he met and conferred with Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary general of Hezbollah, in recognition of the crucial role that the party's "resistance" force was coming to play in Lebanese security. Annan left with a Hezbollah statement of cooperation in sustaining security and an expression of support for the UN force in the south. The Lebanese government refused to offer comparable statements.

Hezbollah's Nasrallah noted publicly that he would deny Israel the pretext to attack Lebanon, but he has played a risky game of brinkmanship. Hezbollah bided its time until the eruption of violence between Israel and the Palestinians in late September after Sharon's visit to Haram al-Sharif sparked the al-Aqsa intifada. Although the border region was generally quiet from May through September, it has become especially tense since. In light of Israel's unilateral withdrawal from southern Lebanon, Syria was intent to remind Israel that it still needed to make peace with Syria. The Lebanese government is a willing accomplice of Syria, and it has played its part well. Although Israel withdrew under the terms of resolution 425, the Lebanese have refused to deploy their army into the border region, despite intense criticism from Europe, the United States and the UN. Instead, security has been left in the hands of the 5,000-strong United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), and Hezbollah.

Even before the Israeli withdrawal, Nabih Berri, the speaker of the Lebanese parliament and a close ally of Syria, began raising the issue of Shiba Farms. This puzzled even savvy Lebanese analysts. The farms lie in Syrian territory on the occupied Golan Heights and are owned by 18 Lebanese families. Lebanon claimed that Israel must not only withdraw from south Lebanon but from the farms as well. Every map available shows that the farms are in Syria, not Lebanon. While Syria and Lebanon discussed adjusting the border 50 years ago, it never happened. Thus, when the United Nations certified the Israeli withdrawal in June, it excluded the farms. In early October, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad conceded Lebanese claims to the territory,

lending legitimacy to resistance efforts to recover the area from Israel.

ENTER HEZBOLLAH

In October, Hezbollah seized three Israeli soldiers in the Shiba Farms area. These men have become bargaining chips for the return of 19 Lebanese who have been held without charges and as hostages by Israel, some for more than a decade (Israel has imprisoned the men to gain information about the fate of an aviator, Ron Arad, who was shot down in 1986). Later, in October, Hezbollah stunned Israel when it announced it also held an Israeli colonel and intelligence agent. After a period of confusion, the captive was identified as businessman and reserve officer Elhanan Tannenbaum, whom Hezbollah claims to have captured in Lebanon after he was lured there by a Lebanese double agent. Israel has been surprisingly quiet about the affair.

Hezbollah has since launched two other attacks in the disputed Shiba Farms. In late November Israel responded by shelling and bombing southern Lebanon, breaking the longest period of calm that the south has known in 25 years. Meanwhile, the Lebanese government must confront its own responsibilities in southern Lebanon. If it does not do so by preventing dangerous provocations, the structure of deterrence will grow even shakier, especially as UNIFIL contributors inevitably withdraw their soldiers from a region that the Lebanese government has preferred to keep in turmoil.

In Syria, President Bashar al-Assad is embarked on the renewal and restructuring of the Syrian economy. Syria has a symbiotic relationship with Lebanon on the economic level: if the Lebanese economy is strong, Syria benefits in terms of the labor market in Lebanon and access to investment capital from Lebanon. But a rebound in the Lebanese economy also requires a stable security environment in Lebanon. It benefits neither Lebanon nor Syria for the south to explode again. Therefore, the Lebanese government must seriously address southern security and Syria, for its own self-interest as well as Syria's, and must assert its influence on Hezbollah to keep the south quiet.

The Hezbollah leadership has frequently proved itself astute, but it has misread the Palestinian situation. Hezbollah leaders have engaged in considerable hyperbole recently about the liberation of Jerusalem and the weakness of Israel. Underestimating the relative power of Israel over the Palestinians or in comparison to its neighbors would be a profound mistake. Ultimately, only compromise—not conquest—will

produce a modicum of justice in Palestine. Pouring gasoline on fire is dangerous.

People do not give their support to political parties and movements: they lend support. Lebanese history proves that support, like money, is fungible, and can be moved relatively quickly from one party to another. The Lebanese Shiite community has no real appetite for revolutionary adventures. This community wants equality, representation, and rights: it does not want war. No doubt, an adventuresome core within Hezbollah is inspired by revolutionary ideals, but that core totally misreads its own community if it believes that even a significant minority will follow it. Hezbollah has a stark choice: it can be a serious and important political party, or it can pursue the chimera of defeating Israel.

At the same time, Syria's relationship with Lebanon is being incrementally redefined. Turmoil in Lebanon may not serve Syria's interests on the economic or the political plane. Equally important, provocative operations in southern Lebanon raise the risk that Israel will lash out at Syria (Syria no doubt lent consent to Hezbollah's operations, if only in broad strategic terms). Although deterrence between Israel and Hezbollah has held for months now, the balance is tenuous. Miscalculation could have disastrous consequences for all parties.

TIME FOR A RECKONING

The potential for renewed violence between Israel and its northern neighbors has increased due to the game of brinkmanship being played in southern Lebanon. Neither Israel nor Syria wants war, but in the current crisis the possibility of miscalculation is serious. Given the provocations of recent months, Syria and Lebanon will not find much sympathy in the world community if Israel chooses to hit Syrian military positions in Lebanon. Of course, retaliatory Katyusha salvos will blanket northern Israel, and then the region will be enmeshed in an escalating crisis.

To the south, the struggle for Palestine has entered a new phase with the al-Aqsa intifada. Heightened tension will continue in the coming weeks and months. With time a rationalization and

consolidation of positions will be reached by both sides (perhaps involving Israel conceding some exposed settlements), and the unilateral withdrawal model that Israel exercised in Lebanon may yet prove attractive.

Over the past decade it has become fashionable in Washington to believe that only when a situation is "ripe"—that is, when the belligerents are "hurting"—should the United States expend diplomatic capital, and especially the scarcest resource of all, the president's time, to seek a solution. This perspective exhibits common-sense wisdom, but it also harbors a rationale for avoiding tough, complex issues. In the Middle East, the United States can hardly be accused of inattention, but it has been extraordinarily attuned to Israeli sensitivities and insufficiently attentive to the legitimate positions of others. Rather than defining a middle ground, American diplomats often simply repackage Israeli positions, as Clinton did at Geneva with Assad. Arguably, the failure of the "ill-timed and ill-prepared" Camp David summit also reflected precisely such repackageing.⁶

Clinton enjoys Arafat's confidence, especially after the former's visit to Gaza in December 1998. Arafat has been to the Clinton White House 22 times, so he and Clinton presumably understand each other. Yet when Clinton pushed for the three-way Camp David summit, Arafat did not think the time was right for such a meeting. In his words, "not long before the Camp David invitations were issued, I told Madeleine Albright in the clearest possible terms that such an important meeting was doomed to failure without proper preparation." Given Arafat's prescient reticence about meeting, one must wonder about Barak's and Clinton's priorities.

Although Clinton declared in December that he was committed to reaching an agreement between Barak and Arafat in the waning days of his administration, neither Barak nor Arafat was prepared or able to end the crisis on terms acceptable to the other. And Clinton's credibility as a mediator was not sufficient to bridge the differences.

This is the time for a reckoning and a serious reexamination of United States policy in the Middle East. We may be fortunate that the crisis coincides with a presidential transition and a new Middle East team. Welcome to the Middle East, President Bush. ■

⁶Chas. W. Freeman, Jr., "A U.S. Role Is Crucial for Peace," *The New York Times*, October 18, 2000.