The Iran Factor, the Sunni States, and the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict

By Robert Zelnick

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When George H. W. Bush was contemplating the removal of Saddam Hussein following the Persian Gulf War of 1991, the Saudis and Egyptians advised him not to do so. It could lead to civil war in Iraq, they argued, which would weaken the country as a bulwark against Iranian expansion in the region. Coupled with intelligence reports predicting the overthrow of Saddam by humiliated military men, the administration decided to follow its allies' advice. Saddam was spared, Bush lost his bid for reelection, and the United States under Bill Clinton maintained a policy termed "dual containment" – degrading Iraq's military capabilities through sanctions and air strikes while keeping Iran in the disfavored category of state sponsors of terrorism.

That period ended with the U.S. invasion of 2003. With the occupation that followed, the United States unintentionally threw open the door to the expansion of Iranian influence. Tehran had previously organized Shia militias from the community of expatriate Iraqis during its own war against Saddam in the mid-1980s. Now, with an American-backed commitment to majority rule, the Shia took political control of the country via a constitutional process sanctioned by the U.S. Neighboring states watched in horror as Iran's groping tentacles—already entwined with some of the more incendiary and threatening movements in the region, including Hezbollah in Lebanon, the terror-supporting Syrian government, and the rejectionist fanatics of Hamas—wound deep into

the heart of the new Iraq. Meanwhile, with U.S. attention diverted, Iran's nuclear rhetoric grew bolder and the country's intention to produce enriched uranium, first announced by President Mohammed Khatami on February 9, 2003, became the refrain of the nationalistic tune sung by his successor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Like a playground bully grown into a full-fledged thug, a once meddlesome Iran had emerged as a legitimate area threat, shifting the balance of power in the region toward an expansionary state led by a radical president. And as concern changed to anxiety, the priorities shifted among nations whose articulations of policy with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute had long seemed to consist of little more than anti-Zionist sloganeering.

Three days after the Hamas takeover of Gaza, I arrived in Israel on the first stop of a five-pronged tour through Israel and the West Bank, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. My intention was to explore how the twin earthquakes of Iraq and Lebanon, coupled with the Gaza coup, might have altered the landscape for peace in ways that might not be immediately evident. To this end, I conducted dozens of interviews with political leaders, diplomats, intelligence sources, legislators, journalists, and academicians. And although I found that events in Gaza were the immediate preoccupation, the dominant issue on the minds of all save the Palestinian players was Iran—what could be done to check the rabid influence of this expansionary power? "Iran is working on two things: building the bomb and building an empire," said one senior Jordanian intelligence official. "You know as well as I do that they are trying to become a major regional power. Oil prices, the failure to achieve peace, U.S. problems in Iraq, and the marginalization of moderate Arab countries is helping." So deep and overriding is this concern, both in Israel and among traditional Arab states, that once implacable

positions have become pliant and uncooperative parties now stand ready to compromise. The end result could be a new paradigm for relations between Israel and its Arab neighbors, one that could—with a well-timed dose of courageous leadership—end the 40-year conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

The Best Tool in the Box

The Saudi Peace Plan had modest origins. Conceived in 2002 by then Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, it offered a simple trade-off to the Israelis: full withdrawal from lands occupied in 1967 and acceptance of the "right of return" of Palestinian refugees from the 1948 war in exchange for "full normalization" of relations with the Arab states. To the visiting *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, Abdullah indicated that he had not made the document public because of his anger over Israeli strong-arm tactics in dealing with the second Palestinian intifada. At Friedman's urging, Abdullah did publish his plan and, as anyone conversant with its terms would have predicted, it went nowhere.

For one thing, the Israelis, having long since rejected an open-door right of return for Palestinian refugees and having staked a permanent claim to some of the larger West Bank settlements, found it unduly rigid. Abdullah also had trouble with Syria, which took offense at its exclusion from consultations leading up to the proposal and the document's failure specifically to mention the Golan Heights. Furthermore, Syria had no intention of establishing "fully normalized" relations with the Israelis because the phrase implies not only political recognition but economic, cultural, and tourism exchanges as well. And, of course, in terms of emergency powers, police state tactics, and restrictions on free political expression, the minority Alewite regime in Damascus

had far too much invested in the long-running conflict with Israel to alter the fundamentals overnight.

Syrian president Bashar Assad traveled to Lebanon and Saudi Arabia hoping to force changes in the original Saudi language. To the plan's great misfortune, he succeeded. At its Beirut meeting, the Arab League settled on "normal relations" with an Israel willing to meet its terms. For good measure, the League also passed a resolution supporting the Palestinian suicide bombers of the second intifada -- a provision Saddam Hussein, present and voting "Aye," must have loved, given his flair for subsidizing the families of Palestine's "martyrs." Indeed, sharing the headlines with news of the adoption of the Saudi plan were reports of a suicide bombing in Netanya that had killed twenty Israeli innocents.

That the debased plan faded into oblivion for five years is no surprise. But the significance of its 2007 resurrection, accompanied by new flexibility on borders and refugees, as well as a return to the language of full normalization with Israel, should be neither diminished nor dismissed. The reformulation of the plan and its subsequent endorsement by the Arab League last March was no public relations exercise. Rather, it was a signal to the world that the Palestinian problem had become an unaffordable luxury--one that more moderate Arab regimes are not only ready, but eager to unload for a reasonable price. "The sooner negotiations happen, the better," said Jordanian senator and former prime minister Fayez al-Tarawneh. "We cannot lose time. The major enemy in the region now is Iran, not the Palestinians." The sentiment was echoed in Egypt, where a senior official expressed concern over Iran's appropriation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to serve its own agenda, "One of the main assets of extremism in this

region is the absence of a deal or even the meaningful prospect of one. If I have to choose a bad deal or no deal, I'll take a bad deal."

But what exactly are the Arab states prepared to offer? Before heading to the Middle East, I met with a senior Saudi diplomat who assured me that the Arab states endorsing the package understood the need for flexibility on both borders and the right of return and were prepared to say so publicly. For example, he suggested the "right of return" to Israel might be limited only to those surviving refugees from the 1948 war. In no event, we were told, was it anticipated that large numbers of refugees would be permitted to return anywhere besides the new Palestinian state that would be created through negotiations.

The position was quickly seconded inside Saudi Arabia and supported unconditionally by senior officials in both Egypt and Jordan. "The refugee issue was a sticking point, but the Arabs are realistic. Nobody thinks that the next day they'll be put on a bus back to Tel Aviv," said one Jordanian official. Another put it more bluntly: "Everyone knows it is suicide for Israel to accept back all the refugees, but they must agree to the right of return at least in principle." In Egypt, Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboulgheit spoke approvingly of Bill Clinton's approach to the refugee problem, which encompassed five options: refugees' admission to Israel, rehabilitation in the country where they now live, resettlement in a third country, placement in the new state of Palestine, or settlement in parts of Israel to be transferred to Palestine as part of a settlement-related land swap. In each case, the decision to accept or reject refugee resettlement would be made by the host country. Questions about the right of return were almost universally followed by calls for a "creative solution." "The Arab League agrees

that the Palestinians can negotiate any deal that is suitable for them," we were told in Jordan. "The role of the Arab League will be to provide political cover." No less explicit was the Saudi columnist Jamal Kashoggi, who is considered an authoritative interpreter of the views of Saudi Arabia's royal family: "What the Palestinians accept, we accept. For example, if they accept the right-of-return for some of the refugees and compensation for the others, we will accept that."

Regional circumstances argue strongly that the Egyptians, Saudis, and Jordanians, backed by the 22-member Arab League, are sincere not only in their desire to settle this conflict but in their willingness to set ideological rhetoric aside in favor of pragmatic compromise. Indeed, many with whom we spoke pointed not only to Iran but to the internalization of the extremist threat in their respective countries. For those who once saw Islamic fundamentalists as a threat primarily to Western powers, destabilizing attacks at home have proved a jolt of reality. "After the May 12 bombings, many things changed," observed one Saudi journalist, referring to the 2003 attacks that killed 34 people in Riyadh. "We felt what it was like to have terrorism on our own back door. The Saudis are starting to look differently at extremism—at the role of mosques, mullahs, imams. Hundreds of imams have been fired since May 12." A senior Western diplomat in Riyadh estimates that some 3,000 suspected terrorists or their supporters are now behind bars. Jordanians refer similarly to the bombing of three Amman hotels on November 9, 2005, which killed 57. "You have your September 11, we have our November 9," said Jordanian prime minister Marouf Al-Bakheet. "You understand terrorism and I understand terrorism, but we may differ on how to combat it. Our main

advice is to solve the Palestinian issue. It will take away the inspiration for so many extremist groups."

While in Riyadh, we had a lengthy discussion with members of the Shura Council— the king's national consultative council-- that began at the residence of a Western diplomat and drifted over a period of hours to the homes of two council members, with others dropping in and out as the mood struck. The tone was set by one member who defined Saudi foreign policy interests as follows: "Saudi Arabia has three priorities, which all fall under the umbrella of fighting terrorism: ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, containing Iran, and quieting the situation in Lebanon." Iran--Shiite and non-Arab, with the goal of becoming the dominant regional power, a string of impressive successes, and an apparent intention to develop nuclear weapons--is the chief Saudi nightmare. The Saudis have watched unwise U.S. decisions create what could become an Iranian proxy regime in Iraq; Syria, another Iranian, client wreak havoc in Lebanon; Hezbollah, armed and trained by the Iranians, hold its own against mighty Israel; and Hamas, a Sunni ally of Iran, seize sole power in Gaza. "There has been an earthquake at the regional level," declared one Shura Council member. "Our internal problems are nothing compared to Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran." Seconded another, "We consider ourselves in crisis." A Western diplomat described Saudi Arabia as "a frontline state in the new conflict between Sunnis and Shia. . . The Saudis are very serious now about settling the Arab Israel conflict. They see the need to wind up old conflicts so they can deal with new ones. They want a peaceful west so they can face north and east."

The Saudis' effort to make a Palestinian government work by brokering a February 2007 meeting with Fatah and Hamas in Mecca proved a bitter failure. The parties agreed to a division of power and swore, facing the holy Kabbah, to honor its terms. Within months however, a Hamas attack broke the back of Fatah power in Gaza. When the dust settled, Hamas--branded as terrorist by the United States, Israel, and the European Union–had complete control over the Gaza Strip while Fatah maintained its authority on the West Bank. Angry at the betrayal, the Saudi monarch referred to those initiating the battle as "oath-breakers." In retrospect, by skirting the problem of partisan militias and by failing to reach accord on the means by which Hamas could be invited to membership in the international Palestine Liberation Organization, King Abdullah had left the parties tethered to political moonbeams. After a perfunctory effort to restore the status quo ante, King Abdullah decided to bide his time, possibly until some action-forcing event—such as an Israeli deal with the Palestinian Authority--occurs.

As of yet, no one appears to have any idea how to restore consensual rule to Gaza while preserving the current level of cooperation between the Palestinian Authority(PA), Israel, and the United States. Yet the feeling is widespread that a point will come when the effort must be made. According to Egyptian foreign minister Ahmed Aboulgheit: "Eventually we will have to put Humpty Dumpty back together again, but we will fail if we try now… We must show Hamas that the way to a political solution is through building understanding, not through armed struggle."

One Western diplomat spoke with some optimism about eventually splitting Hamas. Gaza cannot exist in perpetuity as a bastard state, he noted, and the Hamas leader in Gaza, Ismail Haniya, has said he will accept the results of a referendum on any

deal reached to end the conflict. An agreement on terms for ending the conflict may be just the wedge senior Western diplomats need: "We would like Hamas to come to Abbas, not the other way. We won't get all of Hamas, but if we can splinter them it will be a good thing."

So the Saudi initiative remains on the table waiting to be noticed, debated, employed. It stands unique at this moment as a document solid enough to enjoy the full support of the Arab League yet malleable enough to be stretched into almost any shape the Israelis and Palestinians can both abide. And although many in the Arab world continue to campaign for it, there is a growing frustration with the United States, Europe, and Israel for ignoring what the Arabs consider a groundbreaking overture. "At the Arab summit, we wanted to push forward the Arab initiative," complained a Jordanian official, "We thought it would be tough to reject this time—we offer total peace for total land, we are soft on the refugee problem. But Israel's response was not clear. It was negative."

At the Egyptian Council on Foreign Affairs, where we held a freewheeling session under Shura Council-type ground rules, several speakers urged Israel to take full advantage of the Saudi plan: "Who could have imagined Saudi Arabia supporting something like the Arab initiative?" urged one former cabinet minister. "Who could imagine them with an embassy in Jerusalem? The problem is that you give Israel something and they take it for granted. Do they really want peace? Here is the opportunity for peace with justice for all. Israel will be established in the Middle East for all time." And although there was universal recognition that the document remained an imperfect thing in need of further discussion and revision, many worried that ignoring the

gesture altogether may have the unintended effect of further marginalizing the already endangered moderate camp.

That fear is widely expressed. “Right now we have radical groups feeding on the Arab-Israeli conflict and a very weak moderate camp that wants peace but is losing day by day,” said Ayman Safdi, the young editor in chief of Jordan’s *Al Ghad* newspaper. “I fear the area will be radicalized because of our failure to deliver the peace. I fear that in ten years people like us will be followed in the streets by people with stones.”

It is widely argued that the Achilles’ heel of Camp David was Clinton’s failure to line up Arab world support in advance of the negotiations. When Arafat spooked, there was no one to stop him— no one to urge him back to the table, no one to offer political cover for what by necessity involved changes in opening positions. On the contrary, the Arab world was still feeding the Palestinians a steady diet of positions impossible. When the deal fell apart, Arafat saved face; the Arab world saved its intellectual purity, and the actual parties to the controversy were left to suffer the consequences of the second intifada. If nothing else, the updated Arab initiative represents a true opportunity to learn from past mistakes and avoid the high price of repeating history.

Reconfiguring the Road Map

Any involvement by the Arab League, of course, must be preceded by both the will and the capacity of the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships to make peace. As I arrived in Israel, facts on the ground were changing rapidly: Gaza had fallen to Hamas, Abbas was struggling to defend his emergency government, and Olmert’s approval rating had dropped to an all time low of 3 percent--which might actually be negative, joked Israelis,

if you factored in the margin of error. Confronted with "Hamastan," the United States, Israel, and conservative Arab states raced to bolster Abbas and his besieged PA. There was talk of removing roadblocks, releasing prisoners, and turning over withheld tax and duty funds.

This most recent round of peacemaking is the product of weakness rather than strength. Every significant player bears the scars of recent combat, the loss of political confidence at home, or the fears of being overtaken by events. The Palestinian Authority's Mahmoud Abbas is only one of several "losers". He went from a figurehead minister in Yasir Arafat's regime to a hollow presidency of the Palestinian Authority after Arafat died. At all stages, he lacked the ability to control private militias, provide security and other essential services, and prevent massive corruption. It is a myth to suggest—as many did after the Hamas Gaza coup--that he and his Fatah organization were weak in Gaza but strong on the West Bank. In the 2006 elections, Fatah lost decisively on the West Bank, capturing, for example, only one out of the five parliamentary seats at stake in Ramallah, the organization's historic power base. In Nablus, it was two seats for Fatah and four for Hamas. In Hebron, zero for Fatah and nine for Hamas. As Israeli columnist Israel Harel noted, "In the cities of Judea and Samaria, Hamas won thirty parliamentary seats, Fatah got only twelve."

What distinguished the West Bank from Gaza was the simple fact that Israeli security had free rein to move against Hamas on the West Bank but not in Gaza after the Israelis decided to abandon the territory unilaterally. On the West Bank, Hamas had considerable political support but no infrastructure able to challenge the Israeli Defense Forces' roadblocks, raids, and arrests. In Gaza, on the other hand, Fatah was so poorly

led that it may well have collapsed in the face of an accidental coup. When I interviewed Hamas's official spokesman Fawzi Barhoom by telephone just days after the Hamas takeover, he maintained that Hamas had not intentionally set out to expel Fatah but had instead wanted only to move against the Fatah militia headed by its longtime enemy Mohammed Dahlan. "This was a battle against one militia, not against Fatah," Barhoom stated. "We are against splitting Gaza, against splitting Gaza and the West Bank. We are for the unity government, for the unity of the people." Whether Barhoom is telling the truth is academic. Hamas attacked, Fatah leaders fled, and Gaza was suddenly and completely in Hamas's hands.

Abbas is now established on the West Bank because it is in the interests of the United States, Israel, and the conservative Arab states in the area to have him there along with his independent prime minister, Salaam Fayyad. They can indeed help him through these early months by making funds available for his government, releasing prisoners, stopping the hunt for wanted militia-types, and easing the network of checkpoints and detours. But in the longer run—a term in this context meaning weeks or months rather than years—Abbas must deliver a genuine peace or wind up on the political scrap heap. "The popularity of Abbas is connected to how fruitful the peace process was," explained one Palestinian intellectual. "People could see that in the era of negotiations they witnessed only the doubling of checkpoints and settlements." A senior Fatah official went even further: "The people are under the influence of extremists now, who say the U.S., etc., will not compromise—that Israel wants all the land, wants to take you out. They trade in simplified ideologies. In the last election, the main slogan of Hamas was

'Three years of Qassam rockets equals ten years of negotiations.' Isn't that convincing? It was really convincing to me."

The Israeli side, meanwhile, has problems of its own. Although the second Lebanon war probably turned out better than it appeared to many Israelis at the time, there is no question that it was a grievous blow to the standing of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. Never viewed as a military strategist, Olmert was blasted by an investigative commission he himself appointed for his lack of understanding of the training and readiness of the forces at his command, his failure to consult with more knowledgeable parties, and his utter failure to appreciate the gap between his stated military and political objectives and the means employed to achieve them. Yet, despite his plummeting approval rating, Olmert's 79-seat parliamentary coalition appears stable, and his alliance with the Labor Party's Ehud Barak, and strong support from the United States, provide him with the opportunity to lead his country back toward a peace agreement. Indeed, Olmert would probably be strengthened were he perceived as moving the country toward the final settlement of the Palestinian dispute. A peace deal, it seems, could salvage the standing of both Abbas and Olmert, the area's two 97-pound political weaklings, while striking a blow to extremists around the world.

Twice in recent years efforts to achieve a settlement of the Israeli/Palestinian dispute have relied on process and timetables to achieve their aim. The Oslo process followed mutual recognition of the parties and a commitment to achieve a two-state solution so firm that the Israelis permitted Yasir Arafat to return and set up a governing authority in areas heavily populated by Palestinians, starting with Gaza and Jericho. Eventually better than 90 percent of the Palestinian population lived under PA

administration, but the arrangement collapsed with finality after Camp David when the parties were unable to agree on the four "final status issues."

The intense hatred brought into bold relief during the second intifada convinced many Israelis that a majority of Palestinians would force rejection of any deal with Israel because in their hearts they did not accept Israel's right to exist. Yet, thoroughly disillusioned as they were, many believed that it was not in Israel's interest to control a population of Arabs that would soon achieve majority status. Such a regime, it was argued, would create a fundamental and irreconcilable conflict between Israel's claim to be both a Jewish and a democratic state. The response of the government headed by Ariel Sharon—who rose to political prominence as an advocate of Jewish settlement in the conquered territories and a refusal to trade land for peace—was unilateralism. Withdraw from the entire Gaza Strip and its overwhelming Palestinian population, as well as from those parts of the West Bank where Jewish settlement was sparse. Do not rely on good Palestinian behavior but rather provide for your own security through checkpoints, an active counterterrorism effort on the ground, and construction of a security barrier or fence separating the two communities.

Critics warned that unilateralism was doomed by its own contradictions. Rather than a sign of strength, it would be interpreted by the Palestinian community as a sign of weakness, if not panic. Radicals in that camp would control the narrative, just as they had after Israel unilaterally withdrew its forces from South Lebanon. Palestinian radicals would urge continuation of the armed struggle from ad hoc bases in territory recently evacuated by the Israelis. The result would be less Israeli security, less support in the international community, and less influence for moderate Palestinians. The alternative

was better: await the emergence of a true negotiating partner. Meanwhile, provide for your own security while keeping Palestinian terrorists off guard, on the run, or in jail.

Although the Bush administration supported, to an extent unprecedented in the history of the U.S.-Israeli relationship, stern Israeli measures to combat Palestinian terrorism even after the flames of the intifada had receded, the United States also produced a plan intended to achieve Palestinian statehood within a defined three-year period. Presented by the United States in April 2003, to fellow members of the so-called "Quartet"—the United States, the United Nations, the European Union, and Russia—the measure quickly won the endorsement of that group. Styling itself "A Performance-Based Road Map to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict," the plan envisioned concrete steps to satisfy the demands of mutual security, good governance, and economic and political cooperation. In the first stage of the plan, the principle burden was on the Palestinians to establish effective government, eliminate partisan militias, and end acts of terror and violence against the Israelis as the two sides cooperated in maintaining security throughout the area. As these provisions were fulfilled, the Israelis would assume the obligation to "normalize" Palestinian life and to withdraw from areas occupied after the start of the intifada. All Palestinian security organizations were to be consolidated under the minister of the interior. Illegal Israeli settlements would be disbanded. After one year the parties could consider establishing a Palestinian state with provisional borders as they continued negotiating the fine points of their deal. After three years--2005, according to the initial schedule—all final status issues would be resolved and the Palestinians would have their state.

The plan had more trouble getting off the ground than the legendary "Spruce Goose" of Howard Hughes. For one thing, the administration had already declared there was no need for Israel to negotiate with those "tainted by terrorism," thus ruling out Yasir Arafat, the only Palestinian with both the regional and the international standing to represent the Palestinian cause. Arafat named Mahmoud Abbas as his prime minister, but Abbas's lack of influence was transparent. By the time Arafat died in 2004 it had become clear that Abbas would inherit not a state but a corrupt personal fiefdom with divided, or perhaps redundant, authority; such organization as there was intended solely to prevent anyone from rising to challenge the leader. Asking Abbas to control Fatah's own militias, let alone those of the rival Hamas organization, was like asking him to carry running water barehanded.

Abbas faired little better on matters of governance. Some of his ministers, of modest means at the time of their entrance into government, had grown fat and rich while in power. An independent judiciary was lacking. Public services were nowhere to be found. Human development seemed to most Palestinians an alien concept unrelated to the actions of the political establishment. Israel, meanwhile, failed not only to halt the construction of new settlements but to dismantle those deemed unconstitutional by its own Supreme Court. With Abbas unable to meet phase I requirements and Israel unwilling, the Road Map languished as a regional joke.

Now, chastened by developments in Gaza and the regional anxiety over a nuclear Iran, the Arab world, with fervent Palestinian advocacy, is pushing a new idea: reverse the Road Map. Move to final status negotiations immediately, while continuing to work on improvements in Palestinian governance, security, and transparency. Behind the

proposal is that, from the Virtual Geneva Accord to a recent exercise at Washington's Brookings Institution, reasonable Israelis and Palestinians have shown the ability to achieve consensus on all issues of substance relating to the two-state solution. In real life, however, the process has been pockmarked with assassinations, riots, overzealous security forces, suicide bombings, random acts of terror committed by out-of-control militias, roadblocks, barricades, and walls. Such circumstances have precluded meetings of substance for years at a time, when in fact a clear vision of statehood and an end to the Israeli occupation could induce a far more responsible approach on the part of the Palestinians.

Unsurprisingly, we heard that argument first from Palestinians, who view the Road Map as a kind of albatross around their necks. Yasser Abd Rabu was a leader of the Palestinian delegation that negotiated Virtual Geneva with the Israeli team headed by Yossi Beilin. When asked about the prospect of negotiations, he leaned forward in his chair, emphasizing his point with an outstretched finger. "There is always a reason to avoid the final status talks," he said. "Give me one logical reason the resumption of final status talks would harm Israeli interests? But I can give you 100 reasons why no talks harm us."

One central reason will suffice. Reflecting opinion throughout the moderate Arab states, *Al Ghad*'s Aymn Safdi said that for Abbas it is either peace or political oblivion. "If Abbas goes to the polls again without an agreement it will be over. He must have a deal for a two-state solution. Nothing short of this will end the conflict." Ahman Abd Alrahman, a friend of and aide to Arafat, concurred, arguing that "the issues of Fatah and corruption, and Fatah not appealing to the young generation, are secondary issues. The

main issue is that Fatah failed in its bid for peace." With a deal, each concluded, Abbas could go to the people and demonstrate once and for all that, compared to real negotiations, armed resistance leads nowhere.

A senior Western diplomat, while warning that reversing the Road Map was no panacea, still expressed sympathy for spelling out in greater detail the terms that might be included in a negotiated settlement. "Right now we're asking them to pay up front, and they don't even know what they're going to get," he noted. "We can provide a political horizon. We can offer a genuine state versus a gilded cage." Egyptian foreign minister Ahmed Aboulgheit, one of the plan's major backers, offered a similar view: "We keep saying, 'lets agree on an endgame.' Let's agree on where the Road Map is taking us. We need a plan: two states with such and such borders, some compromise on Jerusalem and on the right of return. Then we can consider in reverse how to achieve each of these."

For reasons having to do with relationships with Washington and the moderate Arab political community, the Israelis are unlikely to reject the plan categorically. Yet privately, many express skepticism, claiming that it was not the Road Map that failed dismally but rather the Palestinian political leadership. Few Israelis seem to regard the Abbas government as anything beyond their own creation supported by the United States and some of its European partners. As one senior intelligence official put it, "We cannot negotiate. Negotiate with whom? It would be like if I bought from you the Empire State Building. Can you sell it? They are in Chapter 11." Furthermore, having been blindsided by the intifada following the breakdown of the Camp David talks, and having seen their unilateral withdrawals from Lebanon and Gaza interpreted as acts of weakness

by Hezbollah and Hamas, many Israelis believe that, despite protestations to the contrary, the Palestinians have still failed to accept the permanence of a Jewish state.

Dan Schueftan, a professor at Haifa University, was an early backer of Israeli unilateralism. He said: “I see no real progress toward a two-state solution in the next eighteen months. I think the chance is zero out of one hundred. Less than zero. Not one in a billion. Israel would be cheating themselves.”

To date, Israeli leaders have tended to sidestep the issue. For example, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert suggested that he would be happy to discuss some of the ultimate questions with Mahmoud Abbas and has assigned some professional staff to the job of exchanging views with a Palestinian team appointed by Abbas. But this is a long way from full-dress final status talks backed by competent staff and well-constructed position papers. Indeed only by assuring his cabinet that no such talks were planned has Olmert kept the right-wing parties in his government. And although U.S. secretary of state Condoleezza Rice is putting together a so-called peace conference to be held later in Annapolis this fall and has urged Israel to show the Palestinians the kinds of benefits that dwell on the “horizon,” she has not yet embraced any single plan with the specificity needed to provide the missing substance.

The debate over the parties’ entrance into final status negotiations is likely to intensify during the period ahead. Many Israelis think that such talks are a dangerous way to breathe legitimacy into an Abbas government defeated at the polls and defeated in battle. A Fatah government would fall with its first test, many believe, possibly paving the way for reunifying the West Bank and Gaza under Hamas political control. Others say this formulation exaggerates the danger. Final status negotiations would not replace

the need to establish credible governance; they would simply precede it. In all likelihood statehood itself could not occur before the Gaza issue is settled and its citizens reintegrated into the Palestinian political process. In this view negotiating the final status issues may not be the best solution, just the only solution.

It is, in the end, hard to rebut the view that, with the Road Map in extremis, a move toward final status negotiations might at least restore a pulse. Implementation would be withheld until such issues as Gaza are resolved. Hamas would presumably be barred from direct participation in the political process until it disbanded all militias, recognized Israel, and agreed to abide by past agreements.

Beleaguered nations, no less than individuals, are sometimes at their most creative when the situation appears bleak. In the context of what is happening in the region, the Saudi Peace Plan appears to be a sincere effort to transform the relationship between Israel and the conservative Arab states. In trying to make the plan work, putting final status negotiations as the first order of business may represent just enough imagination to get things started. Those who shudder at the risks involved in trying a new approach ought to think hard about the documented risks of doing nothing.

The Syrian Factor

Syria enjoyed a brief moment in the sun last year when the Iraq Study Group recommended that the United States encourage Israel to begin negotiating with Syria on the return of the Golan Heights. James Baker, the cochairman of the group, suggested that, with skilled diplomacy, the United States might be able to “flip” Syria away from

Iran and into the camp of moderate Arab regimes. The benefits would include Damascas shutting down terrorist traffic into and out of Iraq while also leaning on Hamas to take a more constructive stance vis-à-vis talks with Israel. A few weeks later, the new Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, posed diplomatically with Syrian president Bashar Assad and declared somewhat innocently that the path to peace runs through Damascus.

During our own visit to the area, we encountered no evidence that Israel was contemplating any initiative in the direction of Syria. We found no indication that it was under U.S. entreaties to do so. To the contrary, the view in Washington seems to be that the moment is not ripe for that kind of overture. And there appears to be no inclination among the moderate Arab states to pursue or to encourage others to pursue a policy of conciliation with the current Damascus regime. Indeed, the attitude of the moderate Arab world was perhaps most succinctly summarized by Tariq al-Homayed, editor in chief of a London-based Saudi newspaper: "For the collapse of the Syrian regime, leaders also say, 'I pray to God.'" This unpopularity strongly suggests that rejecting negotiations with Syria would cost Israel little, if any, backing in the moderate Arab world as long as it moves forward on the Palestinian front. Conversely, making a Baker/Pelosi type overture toward Damascus would gain Jerusalem very little.

From Israel's point of view there is, first, the question of priorities. Even at a point when an overture to the Palestinians would seem to hold promise, many Israelis remain skeptical. Maintaining political support for an opening to the Abbas-Sayyad government will tax the political energies of any government. Trying in nearly simultaneous fashion to rally support for an opening to Damascus would require the

expenditure of more political capital than the Olmert-Barak coalition has to spend. Indeed Barak himself is an authority on the subject, having seen the Israeli public turn against his effort to reach accord with Syria on return of the Golan Heights at talks brokered by President Clinton in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, just months before he joined the president at Camp David for a round of intense negotiations with Yasir Arafat. Clinton and Barak had hoped that the deal they had in mind would create a Syrian dependency on U.S. rather than Russian or European arms and also bring out a more moderate class of Syrian leadership. A successful diplomatic undertaking, they reasoned, could also encourage Damascus to rethink its perpetual open house for worldwide terrorists and squelch a budding symbiotic relationship between Syria and Iran. A wiser Barak, whose Labor Party is now part of the Kadima coalition, seems in no hurry to court Damascus. He knows that doing so now would have little impact on the growing Iranian threat to the region as that threat mainly involves Iran's developing nuclear capability. Nor, as noted by Giora Eiland in a March 2007 article, would the Palestinian problem, central to Israeli concerns, be nearer a solution the day after Israel and Syria reached accord than the day before. The same is true inside Lebanon, where Syria appears to have been up to its eyeballs in supporting Hezbollah and destroying (literally) its political foes. Eiland further points out that the move toward Syria would have practically no impact on Israel's relationship with other Arab states, given the unpopularity of the Bashar government. Israeli intelligence, of course, which keeps a close eye on Syrian military expenditures and capabilities, is well aware of large increases in military spending and a corresponding increase in capability. Most of the improvement, however, has come in artillery, and at least some intelligence officials believe that Damascus may

be equipped with chemical warheads. The Syrian air force, however, is far behind the Israelis in terms of combat capability, standoff firing capability, guidance systems, night vision, terminal guidance, and overall lethality. The Damascus officials doubted reports that the Syrians were in the process of acquiring advanced Russian aircraft. Still, Syrian actions tend to grate on those Israelis whose job it is to keep track of them, "Syria does not have peaceful intentions," complained one Israeli intelligence official. "They're always signaling that they are ready for a violent option. If they give up terror, maybe the negotiating option is real, but not for the time being."

Few observers with whom we spoke doubted that Syria's international conduct is a function of the domestic needs of its ruling ethnic minority, the Alewites. For Bashar Assad, as it was for his father, Hafez, the "crisis" with Israel justifies all manner of assaults on individual and political liberty. Hence crisis equals control or perhaps political survival. For that reason, Syria's international conduct is unlikely to change any time soon; for the same reason, any peace that could be achieved would likely to be grudging, technical, and incomplete. Nothing Damascus seems to be offering stirs the Israeli imagination as did Sadat's grand gesture of an earlier generation, when he declared his intention to terminate the state of enmity with Israel, instructed his subordinates to work out the details, and then magnificently appeared to address the Israeli Knesset in Jerusalem. In the years since 1978, the Egyptian/ Israeli relationship has at times proven rocky and stressful. But the spirit and magnanimity of Sadat have never completely eroded. Try though one might, it is hard to come up with a matching image of Bashar Assad. And for that reason, a serious Israeli approach to Damascus is likely to be very long in coming.

Iraq

As the United States moved toward invading Iraq, its longtime friends in the region wore out their lungs begging Washington to change its mind. When that proved futile, they offered other advice: Don't disband the Iraqi army. Limit retaliation against the Baath Party to its most senior officials. Do not occupy Arab cities with Western soldiers; let your friends in the area perform that task. Most of all, do not fan the flames of ethnic divisions. The Sunni/ Shia split may be ancient in origin but its more recent manifestation began only with the 1978 revolution in nearby Iran. Senior members of the military, diplomatic, academic and media outlets we visited claimed that, as they were growing up, they did not know or care which of their friends were Shias and which were Sunnis. Alaa El- Hadidi, now Egypt's ambassador to Turkey, spoke wistfully of a period that is no more. "This is the crisis we are all trying to avoid. Before the war these were historical terms only. They were never used in politics. Never in my whole career—as a diplomat, a student did I hear the 'Sunni state of … or anything like this. I never heard the Arab world divided by religious sects."

One Saudi member of the Shura Council said: "Iraq was a war of choice that was strategically not necessary… .Saddam was contained in a box. He had no WMDs, the U.N. options had not been exhausted, and all the allies said he was contained." A colleague of El- Hadidi's at the foreign ministry recalled, "We objected to dissolving the army… . We said you will have 2.5 million young, trained, armed men with no jobs who will go and kill. We also objected to dissolving the ministries, which they did anyway … what can we do now?" A member of the Shura Council offered this complaint: "The U.S. did not take the advice of countries like Saudi Arabia on how to deal with tribes.

You did not use the Iraqi army as you should have. You could have immediately put the country back to work and eased their lives. Instead you said, 'you are a million soldiers, well trained, now go become our enemies.'"

Each state visited has been affected by the war next door. The Saudis came quietly to the aid of their Sunni brothers, mainly by not doing all they could have to block infiltration routes into Iraq. Jordan has accepted nearly one million refugees and runs an increased risk of major terrorist attacks such as the motel bombings of two years ago. Egypt too has seen a flood of refugees--more than 450,000 as of last count--and although the principal impact to date has been on housing prices, the Egyptians will soon face a tricky political transition from the aging Hosni Mubarak to a successor and are a trifle skittish about outside shocks to their society.

Representatives of each of the countries visited believe that the principal beneficiary to date has been Iran. The Iranians have close ties to more than one Shiite militia. They have close relations with Prime Minister Nouri Kamal al- Maliki and have threatened states such as Bahrain, which they talk of "reclaiming," and Israel, which they predict will one day face nuclear annihilation.

Perhaps surprisingly, the states most affected by U.S. intervention are precisely those who now urge the United States not to compound the felony by a careless withdrawal. Professor Haifa Jamalaillal, a Saudi foreign policy specialist, put it very simply, "There is an idea here that U.S. troops came and were not welcome. Now they are not welcome to leave. The U.S. has to consider more than its original goals. They have to consider the aftermath."

Time and again the message was driven home to us that, as much as Iranian strength is feared, a Vietnam-style U.S. evacuation leaving Iraq to suffer alone would carry an even more frightening message of U.S. unreliability. This concern can only be blunted by a United States with sufficient forces playing a sufficiently critical role to make the new Iraqi political establishment take its requests seriously. Each official in each country seemed to have his own list of reforms, differing one from the other only in minor degree. Everyone seemed to want a reconciliation package featuring a nonsectarian Iraqi army, a law equitably dividing oil revenues, the rehiring of all but the top layer of Baath Party officials, the expulsion of Iranian military advisers from the country, reform of an Interior Ministry heavily infiltrated by Iranian agents, accelerated training of Iraqi soldiers and police, the development of a strong central government, and a willingness to continue carrying the fight to Al-Qaeda.

That kind of commitment is not looked on as an act of beneficence by the United States but as necessary remedial steps for ill-considered actions previously taken, for good advice ignored, and for good lives erased by roving death squads and suicide bombers.

Although many of those we spoke with urged the United States to remove Maliki from office, others recognized how difficult this would be given multiple U.S. statements to the effect that, with a sovereign government now in place, the United States would honor any formal request for its withdrawal. That being the case, some states are calling for a conference of interested Arab parties with ideas for promoting reconciliation in Iraq. Obviously such a conference could produce reciprocal commitments of aid and advice as well as training and military equipment. But the price would be genuine steps toward

reconciliation, including further action against rogue militias, and a government neutral as to policies affecting the rights and welfare of the country's religious communities.

The area's moderate leaders are concerned that a Vietnam syndrome might soon afflict the United States, producing a scramble to leave the country to its own violent devices. Most of those with whom we spoke predicted a bloodbath in the wake of a precipitate American departure, probably spreading to the relatively peaceful Kurdistan and involving neighbors such as Iran and Turkey as well. Although one can easily fashion a moral case for the United States to see the war through to a political conclusion, the ministers and diplomats we interviewed spoke in more practical terms. Can the United States abandon Iraq and remain a significant factor in the region? Will it still have the same clout in mediating the Israeli/Palestinian dispute? Will its commitment carry weight both with its putative friends and with its adversaries? Many who respond in the affirmative to each of these questions would likely do so with far fewer doubts were the United States to see its commitment through with courage and integrity.

The 800-Pound Gorilla

There are many good reasons why the expansion of Iranian power is causing deep concern among the traditional Arab states. First, the Iranians were the region's first modern theocrats, their 1978 revolution heralding the birth of a new form of activism that was both political and Islamist. Second, the most senior Iranian mullahs, flushed with victory in a civil uprising, led at its early stages by the ex-patriot Ayatollah Khomeini, took the lead in encouraging the expansionary vision of their Muslim constituency.

Third, the Iranians have already scored some surprising victories. Said one Israeli intelligence officer, "They despise moderate regimes. They want revolution and have succeeded already in Lebanon and Gaza." Fourth, led by its radical president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iran has issued direct threats to Israel and Persian Gulf countries. Finally, Iran appears to have nuclear weapons in its future. The scope of its activities in seeking to reprocess uranium and produce new uranium far exceeds what the country needs to satisfy its power requirements.

The specter of a radical expansionary state--the product of a movement still infused with its own sense of mission and reinforced by regional triumphs by itself and its allies--has registered both on the Israelis and their long-term Arab enemies and may be at the point where it will begin to transform the region's traditional alliances and enmities. The thought of that expansionary state is today, for example, the primary incentive for the Saudis to offer a plan that effectively calls for integration of Israel as a regional power and for the Israelis to contemplate statehood for a Palestinian movement that, until this moment, would be considered seriously lacking in credentials. But listening to voices from the region reinforces the notion that this is exactly what is going on:

- A Senior Jordanian minister: "Our position regarding Iran is that we don't want to see any nuclear power in the region."
- An Egyptian academician: " Egypt would welcome U.S. action against Iran. I think many Arabs would. It's a difficult issue. If Iran has nuclear weapons it will be a disaster for the whole region."

- A senior Israeli Intelligence officer: “If we have even the image of one device, it will be enough to destabilize the Middle East. It will be an earthquake.”
- An Israeli opposition figure: “The ultimate problem is Iran, the others are all derivatives. Nuclear weapons will topple the equation. They will be able to heighten terror with a nuclear umbrella.” The same person also said that if Bush wants to improve his legacy the thing to do is take out Iran’s nuclear capability.

When, in separate interviews, the question turned to combating Iran’s push for nuclear weapons, two of our respondents reached forward and personally turned off the tape recorder before providing their responses. In both cases they recommended that force be applied to stop the Iranian nuclear program, assuming that both diplomacy and sanctions fail.

Not all those interviewed were comfortable with the thought of a military strike. One senior Jordanian official cautioned that a bombing campaign could last three weeks and generate a backlash of violence and terrorism directed against Westerners. And a member of the Shura Council urged caution: “With Iran people think the U.S. wants to strike militarily. This would be a mistake. You can force the hand of Iran with an embargo. We are afraid of more and more of a military build-up in the Gulf.”

There is, of course, precedent for taking out the nuclear facility of a potentially threatening state. On June 7, 1981, eight Israeli F-16s, protected by eight F-15 Fighters, attacked Iraq’s nuclear facility at Osirak. Each F-16 delivered two MX-84, 2,000-pound, “dumb” bombs, completely destroying the target but creating little if any collateral damage. Today, Iran has three main nuclear facilities: a uranium conversion plant at

Isfahan producing U-Hexafloride and U-Dioxide; second, an enrichment facility at Netanz, which will eventually employ thousands of centrifuges; and, third, a heavy-water plant and plutonium production reactor complex at Arak. In their report in the spring 2004 issue of *International Security*, "Osirak Redux?" authors Whitney Raas and Austin Long note that, of these, only the Isfahan facility, consisting of two large, 25,000-32,000-square-meter halls, is underground and protected by heavy concrete. The authors also observe however, that Israeli equipment today is vastly improved from 1981 and provides Israel with a substantial stand-off capability, laser-guided and GPS-guided bombs, together with sophisticated penetrating warheads. The authors suggest a very high probability that the attack aircraft would damage the underground facility beyond repair, effectively thwarting the Iranian program.

To conduct such strikes, the Israelis would have to traverse Jordanian, Saudi, Iraqi, or Turkish airspace, possibly leading to diplomatic complications. But the task seems infinitely doable by the Israelis. A U.S. strike would have an even higher probability of success. Given ongoing discussions involving the Iranians and the International Atomic Energy Association, the imposition of U.N. sanctions, and the near-total lack of diplomatic support for the Iranians, the United States would not seem to be facing an imminent decision regarding military action. That conclusion is reinforced by the thousands of centrifuges Iran must still install to have sufficient plutonium for any weaponry. It is worth recalling that Israel's prime minister in 1981, Menachem Begin, waited until the Osirak facility was on the verge of being fueled and operated before giving the command to launch the attack.

That might be a wise precedent for both U.S. and Israeli leaders to consider. The longer one waits, the more time for new relationships to take root, the greater the possibility of finding a solution based on diplomacy or sanctions, and the greater the setback to Iran's nuclear ambitions when the blow is finally struck.

No Time like the Present

We are standing now at an unusual and ironic crossroads in the Middle East at which the growing threat from Iran, coupled with serious U.S. setbacks in Iraq, is providing a rare opportunity to end what may be the most enduring conflict in the modern world. Leading Arab League states are convinced that their security would be enhanced by an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the full normalization of relations with Israel. They have signaled their enthusiasm for a compromise by reconfiguring the Saudi Peace Plan into a shape more in line with Israel's demands and endorsing the document. The bellwether Sunni states--Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan--have gone further, quietly adopting a flexible approach to such critical final status issues as the right of return of Palestinian refugees to Israel and the withdrawal by Israel to the borders that existed just before the outset of the 1967 war. But it will be up to the United States to turn goodwill into lasting peace. This translates into a series of steps the late Ronald Reagan might have characterized as "simple, but not easy":

First, in both public and private diplomacy, support the Saudi/Arab League peace plan. Hail its vision, its flexibility, it deference to the will of the parties themselves. Then lean on the parties to make the tough decisions that could lead to compromise—this time backed by the Saudis, the Egyptians, the Jordanians, and their Arab League colleagues.

Second, endorse the concept of an accelerated move toward final status negotiations. As long as the parties understand that accord on these issues does not obviate the need for compliance with substantive political and security commitments, the potential good would seem to outweigh the potential harm. Certainly any accord reached will become a target for extremists on each side, and certainly it will be tricky business for the PA to reclaim Gaza from Hamas. But the benefits of spelling out the promise of nationhood, freedom, and self-determination and letting people in both countries vote on it would dwarf any difficulties. In this respect the experience gained in settling the dispute in Northern Ireland holds some relevance in that the terms of a settlement were spelled out early but commitments undertaken by the parties to end violence and disarm had to be implemented before the accord took full effect. The accord also benefited from steady and consistent oversight by the government of Tony Blair, now actively engaged in minding Israeli-Palestinian developments.

Third, without rocking the boat with the sort of excess energy likely to capsize it, the Bush administration and its successors must continue to maintain that the possession of nuclear weapons by Iran is totally unacceptable. In all likelihood this means support for international diplomacy and--to the extent possible—sanctions. It also means the promulgation of a firm but classified presidential decision to take all necessary steps to prevent any such development. If President Bush leaves no legacy beyond a North Korea denuclearized by accord and an Iran denuclearized by all necessary means, his presidency will be viewed in a far more favorable light than otherwise.

Fourth, act prudently in Iraq. A lot is at stake there, including the ability of the United States to help shape the future of the Israeli/Palestinian relationship. No

conceivable U.S. interest would be served by a frenzied and hasty withdrawal leaving behind a country knee-deep in its own civil strife and terribly vulnerable to outside intervention.

Seized by the conviction that the moment for action is near, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is—at this writing—trying to engineer a peace conference too be held in Annapolis later this year. Her timing seems right. Out of weakness some critical parties may have no option except to be strong.