

9-1-2008

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Recommended Citation

Zuhur, Sherifa D. Dr., "The View from There" (2008). *Articles & Editorials*. 237.
https://press.armywarcollege.edu/articles_editorials/237

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September 2008

THE VIEW FROM THERE

Dr. Sherifa Zuhur

A new U.S. President faces huge challenges in the Middle East. Unfortunately, he will not begin with a clean slate. Instead, some uncomfortable fabric has already been cut to fit various policy situations, and a deft tailor is needed to reconsider, redesign, and refit this ghastly, bulky, and multilayered garment we call a Middle East “policy” with an ear to objections from within the region. Granted, U.S. policy goals differ from those of Middle Eastern nation-states and national entities, like the Palestinians, who have not yet achieved their own states. What I noticed in a recent journey to the region was the heated tone in which different priorities were expressed, and often within a framework of “rights” (as opposed to the “needs” outlined by Dennis Ross). Saudis and Iraqis spoke from a discourse of rights to national sovereignty, and Palestinians spoke of basic and universal human rights, whereas Israelis spoke of rights to security. There were strong objections to ideas being touted in the U.S. media as great achievements on the peace or security fronts. The security force training program being pursued by Lieutenant General Keith Dayton and highly recommended by Anthony Cordesman was described by Palestinians as encouraging violations of human rights and torture, or at least as being highly divisive. These objections are quite important in light of proposals elsewhere in the region to dismantle militias and yet find a way to reincorporate their labor.

Various Arab pundits have criticized the U.S. aim to arm and strengthen the periphery of the Middle East in something like a reprise of the Eisenhower era Baghdad Pact. In this vein, many have critiqued the soon-to-be-finalized memorandum on security to be signed with the Iraqi government. Canvassing opinions in Saudi Arabia, one might expect a Saudi disapproval of Maliki’s government, yet there was agreement on the need for a firm date for U.S. withdrawal from Iraq. One must understand that the primary policy concern in Saudi Arabia is any prospect of war with Iran, and some tend to overemphasize the Maliki government’s ties with Iran in a version of the ‘Shi’i crescent’ threat. Some believe war with Iran is less likely, or that various nations should discourage Israel from an attack on Iran. Others maintain that if or when such a war comes, Saudi Arabia can quickly shut down oil production, and while the recent lowered oil prices might shoot up again, they can also be managed post-

conflict. Speculation—even mine—is, of course, dangerous and drives those prices up, but only underlines the basic fact about the Middle East that any incoming U.S. President must remember. Despite all that talk about alternative energy, dependence on oil is unavoidable (though reducible) for the next 30 or so years, and that the most likely alternative, G-4 nuclear energy is precisely what the Iranians claimed to be after to begin with. It might also bear remembering that at a certain point, Saudi Arabia will export less oil due to its growing domestic consumption. Even though the Saudis have been facing down an energetic local al-Qa'ida movement, and are apprehensive about a conflict with Iran, they disapprove of a prolonged American presence in Iraq on the basis of their interpretations of “rule of law” and national sovereignty. Some object to the form of the security agreement, a memorandum, rather than a treaty, which could be rescinded and would not necessarily require legitimization by the Iraqi parliament (as Ayatollah Sistani has insisted it should).

If the Palestinians (or Lebanese, or Syrians) are simply “troubles in the provinces” to the Saudis, the first group still has a strong symbolic claim and is a primary grievance in the Islamist resistance. Naturally, the Israelis and Palestinians place their own struggle ahead of others. An “Olmert deal” or offer leaked to *Haaretz* on August 12, 2008, reflects various aims of the Israeli administration and was apparently crafted with input from Washington. Israelis reported that Abbas saw the offer as a “positive step,” but the spokesman for the President emphatically rejected the offer. The offer’s tailor had ignored or demoted various basic Palestinian “rights” to unnecessary “needs.”

Timing is another problem. The clock ticks away on Olmert’s days in office, and the offer could affect the prospects of two potential successors, Tzipi Livni or Shaul Mofaz. But it coincided with the death and funeral of Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish, which filled the Arab media and blogosphere reminding everyone of the sharply negative contrast between that poet’s vision and the present. The present is a grim one for Palestinians. In the name of building security capacity—an echo from Iraq—one faction, Fatah, is receiving training and funds in a program that had already backfired by sparking Hamas’ conquest of Gaza. Now, the “anti-terrorist efficacy” touted by this program appears to be causing extraordinary friction in the West Bank cities, with Palestinian Authority (PA) forces carrying out raids, detentions, torture, and extortions of high bails in the evenings until midnight, with the Israeli defense Force (IDF) taking its place until dawn. Certain Hamas’ officials hint darkly that the response could be a new uprising. This would conflict with the truce conducted from Gaza. Simultaneously, the United States is said to be counting on Egyptians, Jordanians, and Saudis to promote an Arab deployment force in Gaza, intended to diminish Hamas’ control. The plan is fully backed by the current “brains” of the PA, Salam Fayyad, who may need to gracefully step down before he is disgraced by the ongoing, amazing corruption of the Fatah-led PA. Clearly, it is not intended to solve the Fatah-Hamas split, as a compromise requires input from both parties.

In all, it was a sad retrospective period for Palestinians who considered their great poet Mahmoud Darwish's legacy, and his opposition to the Oslo process. They see a divided Authority with no real authority, in some ways reminiscent of the period when Egypt controlled Gaza, and Jordan, the West Bank. They are critical of Olmert's offer which does not actually return 93 percent of the entire area of the West Bank. Like the Allon, Netanyahu, and Oslo plans before it, Israel excludes large tracts of land from the parts it will cede. That means that it does not include much of the Jordan Valley, the huge areas covered by settlements, the Wall, and the other settlements that are part of Jerusalem (or 98.5 percent of 100 percent of 22 percent of the West Bank, according to several sources). More importantly, the plan excludes East Jerusalem and the Palestinian right of return—both of which are "rights," not "needs." It also excludes any armed body for the Palestinians, and suggests a tunnel to connect the West Bank and Gaza with some 5.5 percent of Negev land that would be given to the Palestinians only when Abbas "controls" Gaza. The leaked draft plan did not mention whether or not a Palestinian airport or seaport was in the offing, or the status of Gaza's coastal waters. The Israeli settlers have firmly rejected the plan, although lukewarm discussions continue. Let us hope that a new U.S. president will initiate a major international effort to settle this complicated conflict, ranking it in importance along with the security situations in Afghanistan and Iraq, in order to craft a more wieldy and credible Middle East policy.

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