



The Heritage Foundation Executive Memorandum

No. 700

October 13, 2000

HOW CLINTON'S TROUBLED MIDDLE EAST POLICY HAS COLLAPSED ON TWO FRONTS

JAMES PHILLIPS

President Bill Clinton's Middle East policy is collapsing on two separate fronts that may soon combine into one dangerous crisis. Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's "battle for Jerusalem" has exploded the foundations of the U.S.-sponsored Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, and the conflict could expand into a war that spreads to Lebanon and Syria. Meanwhile, vengeful Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, who has outmaneuvered the Clinton Administration on weapons inspections and economic sanctions, is poised to make a big comeback in the Arab world. On October 3, Saddam called on all Arabs to help the Palestinians destroy Israel, stating that Iraq alone could do so if given access to Israel's borders. The Clinton Administration both overestimated Arafat's commitment to peace and underestimated Saddam's ability to threaten U.S. interests in the region.

The Jerusalem Jihad. The current spasm of violence—orchestrated by Arafat to stake Palestinian claims to the heart of Israel's capital—has destroyed hopes for a negotiated settlement in the near future. The Clinton Administration contributed to this crisis by persistently pressuring Israel to make concessions that undermined its own security in exchange for Palestinian promises that often have gone unfulfilled. Instead of forcefully confronting the Palestinian violations of the 1993 Oslo accord and subsequent interim agreements, the Administration repeatedly cobbled together new agreements, which the Palestinian Authority soon violated. The

Administration's mild reaction to this chronic non-compliance, combined with its continued diplomatic pressure on Israel, undoubtedly has led Arafat to conclude that he could pocket whatever concessions he could extract from Israel at the negotiating table and then resort to violence to attain his remaining goals at minimal cost.

The July 2000 Camp David summit, which set the stage for the latest Palestinian riots, may also have been negatively affected by the lame-duck President's drive to shore up his "legacy." The summit failed in part because of the Administration's inadequate diplomatic groundwork. President Clinton seemed to assume that he could forge an agreement by force of personality and underestimated the difficulties in reaching a settlement on the thorny issue of Jerusalem.

But the chief flaw distorting U.S. policy on the peace negotiations has been wishful thinking about the strength of Arafat's commitment to the negotiations. Arafat cooperated as long as the negotiations

Produced by the
Kathryn and Shelby
Cullom Davis Institute for
International Studies

Published by
The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C.
20002-4999
(202) 546-4400
<http://www.heritage.org>



This paper, in its entirety, can be
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went his way; when they bogged down, he was quick to resort to violence to prod Israel to make further concessions.

Clinton may have set a dangerous precedent by failing to denounce the orchestrated Palestinian violence following the September 23, 1996, opening of an exit to an archaeological tunnel in Jerusalem. Although the tunnel exit was located 250 yards away from Muslim holy sites on the Temple Mount, Arafat used the opening to mobilize Palestinians. He used official Palestinian television and radio stations to incite his followers and exploited the ensuing riots as a negotiating tool to gain leverage over Israel. Given Washington's failure to denounce those tactics, it is not surprising that he repeated this pattern to provoke the current riots.

The Administration's approach may have raised Palestinian expectations as well. For example, President Clinton's December 14, 1998, visit to Gaza had many of the features of a state visit. Palestinians even displayed banners featuring President Clinton and Arafat that read, "We have a dream: Free Palestine." Additionally, after the Netanyahu government suspended negotiations with Arafat because of repeated Palestinian violations of the Oslo agreement, Hillary Clinton gratuitously stated on May 6, 1998, that it would be in the "long-term interests of the Middle East for Palestine to become a state." This contradicted official U.S. policy that sought to head off Arafat's threatened unilateral declaration of Palestinian statehood in violation of the Oslo accord.

The Clinton Administration has repeatedly pressed Israel to make concessions that have undermined Israeli security while turning a blind eye to the Palestinians' non-compliance with their Oslo commitments. It has treated Arafat's Palestinian movement, which has been responsible for the deaths of several Americans, as the moral equivalent of long-time ally Israel. In practice, this has meant bringing U.S. diplomatic pressure to bear on Israel to make such concrete concessions as territorial withdrawals in exchange for Arafat's restated pledges to cooperate on security matters and to end his inflammatory rhetoric, even though he has

ignored those pledges whenever it suited his purposes.

The Iraqi Threat. Saddam's threats cannot be dismissed as mere propaganda. He made good on his April 1990 threat to attack Israel when he launched 39 Scud missiles at Israel in the 1991 Gulf War. He probably has reacquired the capability to do so again, this time perhaps with chemical warheads. Since expelling the U.N. weapons inspectors in 1998, Iraq has had more than two years to rebuild its missile force and weapons of mass destruction. By launching a missile attack or confronting Israel in some other manner, Saddam could reassert his claim to Arab leadership and further undermine dwindling Arab and Muslim support for containment of Iraq. Saddam already has achieved a breakthrough by being invited to attend the October 20 Arab summit in Cairo.

The Clinton Administration claims that Saddam has been put in his box. It has dragged its feet on supporting the Iraqi opposition. Alarmed by this passivity, Congress passed the Iraq Liberation Act in 1998, authorizing the transfer of up to \$97 million of military equipment and training to the opposition forces. But the Administration has not followed through and delivered this aid. Despite Saddam's growing boldness, the Administration clings to its faltering containment policy rather than seeking to oust Saddam.

Conclusion. Because of such inept Middle East policies, Clinton's legacy is likely to be growing chaos and anti-American violence in the Middle East. Regrettably, he will leave his successor a more dangerous Middle East situation than any President has left since Jimmy Carter in 1981. More wishful thinking about Arafat and Saddam will not bring stability and peace to this troubled region.

—James Phillips is Research Fellow for Middle Eastern Affairs in the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies at The Heritage Foundation.