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The President's Middle East Trip: An Opportunity to Promote Security, Freedom, and Peace

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President George W. Bush arrives in Israel today to begin an eight-day trip through the Middle East, a volatile region roiled by persistent Arab–Israeli tensions, the war in Iraq, the rise of Iran, and continued instability in Lebanon. President Bush will weigh in on all these issues and highlight his own freedom agenda for the Middle East in a series of private meetings and public appearances in Israel, the West Bank, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. The President should remind Middle Eastern leaders about the common challenge they face from Islamic extremists—many of whom receive extensive support from Iran—and that such extremists threaten progress toward greater freedom in the Middle East. He should give reassurances that they can count on the U.S. as a reliable ally and press them for greater cooperation to contain Iran and combat the Islamic radicals whom Iran exploits to destabilize Iraq, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, Afghanistan, and other countries in the region.

Poor Prospects for a Breakthrough on Arab–Israeli Negotiations. President Bush will spend the first three days of his trip in Israel and the West Bank, primarily focusing on reinvigorating the lagging Israeli–Palestinian negotiations. The President hopes to nudge both sides toward achieving his oft-stated vision of “two states living side by side in peace.” The Palestinians seek a detailed blueprint for gaining statehood in the shortest possible time with the fewest possible limitations on their sovereignty, while Israel seeks guarantees that a Palestinian state will not become a terrorist sanctuary.

This will be a difficult diplomatic knot to unravel. The radical Hamas movement, which seized control of Gaza in a coup last year, not only rejects negotiations with Israel but also continues to seek Israel's destruction. Hamas and other radical Islamic groups, such as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, launch indiscriminate missile attacks against Israeli civilians from across the border on a daily basis. Recently, they launched a Katyusha rocket, reportedly built in Iran and smuggled through Egypt, which has much greater range and destructive power than the homemade Kassam missiles that they have rained down on Israel in the past.

The Palestinian Authority, led by President Mahmoud Abbas, has pledged to fight terrorism but has a poor record of doing so. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert reportedly will seek an American commitment to allow Israel a free hand to fight terrorism during the negotiations and to support the strict demilitarization of any future Palestinian state. President Bush should agree to give Israel considerable latitude in fighting terrorism and should agree in principle on the demilitarization of any Palestinian state, while pointing out that this needs to be negotiated with the Palestinian Authority, not Washington.

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Six weeks after the Annapolis conference, it is clear that Israeli–Palestinian negotiations will be a grueling and protracted process. Resolving complex final status issues is unlikely as long as Hamas remains in a position to explode the prospects for peace, the Palestinian Authority is too weak and unreliable to clamp down on terrorism, and Israel’s shaky ruling coalition is susceptible to implosion in the event that the Olmert government agrees to territorial concessions.

Therefore, President Bush should not seek to force the pace of negotiations in search of a presidential “legacy.” The Arab–Israeli problem is too complex to resolve during the waning days of his administration. The best that President Bush can hope for is to pass on a viable negotiating framework to the next administration.

During the trip, President Bush should press America’s Arab friends to isolate Hamas while strengthening their support for negotiations with Israel led by the Palestinian Authority. He should press Saudi Arabia and Egypt to halt their efforts to broker a rapprochement between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, which would kill any chances of a genuine peace settlement. Although Hamas has hinted that it might accept a temporary truce with Israel, it adamantly rejects any peace agreement. Bush should prod Egypt to permanently crack down on cross-border smuggling of arms and money into Gaza. He should also urge Egypt to stop using the issue as leverage for trying to pry Israeli concessions on allowing Egypt to boost its military presence in the Sinai Peninsula, which is restricted under the terms of the 1979 Egypt–Israel peace treaty.

Iran’s Lengthening Shadow. While it is unlikely that the President will spark a breakthrough on convoluted Arab–Israeli issues, he may have more success in eliciting greater cooperation from the Arab Gulf States, nervous about Iran’s growing power, to contain their radical non-Arab rival. The President next travels to Kuwait, an important ally supporting the war effort in Iraq; to Bahrain, the home port for the U.S. Fifth Fleet in the Persian Gulf; to the United Arab Emirates, where he is to give a speech that is expected to highlight progress on his freedom agenda; to Saudi Arabia; and finally to Egypt, before returning to the United States.

All of these Arab states are threatened, to various degrees, by the rising power of Iran. All but Egypt are members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), an alliance formed in 1981 to counter Tehran’s potential threats. Bahrain’s government has suppressed several coup attempts and terrorist plots supported by Iran over the years and fears that Tehran may revive territorial claims on Bahrain, a former province of the Persian Empire. The United Arab Emirates also has a long-running territorial dispute with Iran, which occupied three islands near the mouth of the Persian Gulf that it claims as its own. Saudi Arabia, which sees itself as the guardian of Sunni Muslim orthodoxy, has long waged an ideological cold war with Iran, which adopted Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s radical Shiite ideology after its 1979 revolution.

Recently, the Saudis and other members of the GCC appear to have taken out an insurance policy by improving relations with Iran. President Ahmadinejad was invited to speak at the GCC summit in December, and Saudi Arabia hosted him during the haj, the Muslim pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca. President Bush should seek to prevent the GCC states from going wobbly on Iran and sliding into an appeasement strategy. He should also stress that the United States will maintain powerful air and naval forces in the Persian Gulf and can be counted on as a reliable ally against Iranian hegemony.

The President should drive home the fact that greater Arab cooperation is needed to contain Iran and dissuade it from supporting Islamic extremist movements that threaten the stability of Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, the Palestinian territories, and all of the GCC states. Greater Arab support is also needed to support Iraq’s elected government, Afghanistan’s elected government, the beleaguered government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora in Lebanon, and Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayad, all of whom face violent challenges from Iran’s radical allies.

A Bush visit to Iraq is rumored to be possible at some point during the tour. This could provide greater opportunity to meet with General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker, who lead U.S. military and diplomatic efforts in Iraq. (These meetings are currently listed as taking place in

Kuwait.) Bush should note that the improved security situation created by the U.S. surge strategy is a necessary but insufficient condition for political progress. He should call on Iraq's Shia leaders to engage moderate Sunni Arab Iraqis and integrate them into the coalition government to broaden its popular base of support. This could help create the political basis for a sustained Iraqi surge in 2008 that can consolidate the gains of the American surge in 2007.

Conclusion. President Bush's trip to the Middle East comes at a time when many Arab leaders are facing greater challenges from radical Islamic forces, often supported by Iran. The trip presents a better opportunity for improving Arab cooperation against Iran than for achieving a diplomatic breakthrough in the complicated Israeli–Palestinian negotiations. Given the strength of Hamas, the weakness of the Palestinian Authority, and the political fragility of Israel's coalition government, dra-

matic progress in the peace talks is not likely in the immediate future. Instead of risking failure by forcing the pace of the talks, the Bush Administration should prudently seek to build a solid foundation for negotiations that can be passed on to the next administration.

Security is the key to maintaining momentum for peace, not only on the Israeli–Palestinian front, but in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon. The President must hammer this message home and work to secure greater cooperation from all of the countries he visits in the struggle against Islamic extremism and in efforts to contain and counter potential Iranian threats.

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