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# Recent Developments in the Middle East and North Africa

By

**Martin S. Indyk**

**Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs**

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Mr. Chairman, distinguished members of the Committee, I am pleased to appear before you to review recent developments in the Middle East and North Africa. I would like to focus my remarks on the most recent developments in the region and their relationship to our overall strategy for the Middle East.

It has been nearly 18 months since an NEA Assistant Secretary appeared before you to discuss a broad range of regional issues. It might therefore be useful to review the central elements of U.S. policy in the region:

- Achieving a just, lasting, and comprehensive peace between Israel and all its Arab neighbors, based on UN resolutions 242 and 338.
- Maintaining our long-standing, ironclad commitment to Israel's security and well being;
- Nurturing close relations with our Arab allies, and ensuring Western access to the area's vital petroleum reserves at market prices;
- Combating terrorism, and countering the spread of weapons of mass destruction.
- Ensuring that Iraq complies fully with all relevant UNSC resolutions, and thereby preventing Iraq from threatening its neighbors and our interests in the region.
- Encouraging change in Iranian policies which threaten our interests;
- Promoting democracy, respect for human rights, and for the rule of law, and;
- Enhancing opportunities for American companies.

In the six months since I became Assistant Secretary, we have had to face some difficult issues. These include, most notably, the need to deal with Iraq's defiance of the Security Council, and its intransigence toward the UN-led efforts to eliminate its weapons of mass destruction and offensive missile capabilities. In addition, the President and Secretary have expended considerable effort to rescue a stalemated peace process.

A potentially positive development, on the other hand, was the desire for change in Iran as manifested in the election last May of a new Iranian President, a relatively moderate cleric by Iranian standards, who espouses the "rule of law" as his guiding principle, and advocates a "dialogue of civilizations" as a means of reducing tensions between nations. We are watching to see whether this positive rhetoric will be matched by positive deeds—the record of the Iranian government since Khatami's inauguration last August is still mixed. But recent unofficial contacts between Americans and Iranians have gone well. We would like to see these

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unofficial exchanges accompanied by a government-to-government dialogue which, in our view, is the only way to address effectively the serious issues that have divided the U.S. and Iran for nearly 20 years. Because of the importance of these issues, I would like to lay out in some detail where we are now and how we intend to proceed in order to protect and promote U.S. national interests in this vital region.

On the Middle East Peace Process, we have been engaged since August 1997 in a vigorous effort to put the peace process back on track. This has been an ongoing effort, its dynamic determined solely by the need to overcome the prolonged stalemate on the Israeli-Palestinian track which has stopped all progress in the peace process for more than one year.

Our approach is aimed at creating the conditions necessary for a fast track permanent status negotiation; to this end we have been working for months to facilitate an agreement between the parties on our four part agenda. In order to create a sound basis for negotiations to proceed, the parties need to address the following elements:

- enhanced security cooperation and intensified and verifiable efforts to fight terror and its infrastructure;
- further redeployments in accordance with the existing agreements;
- a time-out regarding unilateral steps which undermine confidence in the negotiating process;
- and, acceleration of permanent status negotiations with a mutually agreed target date.

These four points are not an end unto themselves, but an instrument to create the environment for fast track direct, permanent status negotiations. Only through accelerated negotiations on permanent status will we get the process going again.

There has been some narrowing of the gaps on the four points, but not enough to get the parties to an agreement.

Because it was apparent that the parties lacked the trust to respond to each other, the President provided some ideas to Prime Minister Netanyahu and Chairman Arafat on ways to advance the process, in the expectation that they would be able to respond to us. The parties need to make hard decisions soon so that we can achieve our immediate objective, which is to begin accelerated permanent status talks.

I want to emphasize here that we have no intention of "imposing a U.S. plan." What we are doing is what the parties have asked us to do: provide ideas and facilitate the process so that they can, very soon, make the hard decisions themselves and start direct negotiations on the fundamental issues that will shape the relationship between them. There will be no U.S. surprises; the parties know what our ideas are and we have discussed them with both sides in great detail.

But it is also important to remember that we have been engaged in this particular exercise for more than seven months. The President and Secretary of State have spent hours upon hours in direct discussions with Prime Minister Netanyahu and Chairman Arafat. We do not believe that more time, by itself, is going to break the current deadlock. What is needed now are the hard decisions by both sides that would allow an agreement to emerge, obligations to be implemented, and the final status negotiations resumed. We are now assessing what more we can do to get the parties to deal with the hard issues that divide them.

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Why do we insist that it is time to move the peace process forward when influential voices on both sides argue for delay? It is because of our sense that the strategic window for peacemaking that opened following the Gulf War and the collapse of the Soviet Union is now closing. Where once there was hope, there is now disillusion; where once there was a process of confidence building, there is now growing mistrust; where once a regional coalition for peace was emerging, there is now a retreat to the dangerous limbo of "no war, no peace." It is a matter of history that, when there is no progress toward peace, a political vacuum develops, which is rapidly filled by political extremism and violence.

For all these reasons, we believe time is not on the side of the peacemakers. It is therefore essential that both sides find a way to move forward now.

We believe that the parties should also advance the process through implementation of agreements on the Gaza air and sea ports, Gaza Industrial Estate and safe passage. This would make a real difference in the lives of Palestinians and Israelis and go a long way to rebuilding some of the confidence and popular support for peace that was lost over the past discouraging year.

Given the centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian relationship to the entire peace process, we have been concentrating our energy on this track, but recognize that the Syrian and Lebanese negotiations are also crucial to the achievement of a comprehensive peace.

On these tracks, there is unfortunately little to report. We are exploring with the parties how to close the gaps between Syrian insistence on picking up talks from the point they left off in 1996 and Israel's position that all issues should be open.

The Israeli government has recently indicated its willingness to implement UN Security Council Resolution 425 on withdrawal of its forces from southern Lebanon, if it has appropriate security guarantees.

The U.S. supports the implementation of 425. The U.S. wants to see Lebanon free of all foreign forces and its sovereignty and territorial integrity preserved.

We support all efforts by the parties to engage each other on the issues which divide them. The security guarantees sought by Israel would require negotiations between the parties. The most effective guarantor of security, is, of course, a comprehensive peace.

Turning to the issue of most immediate concern, how to contain the threat posed by Iraq, it is important to understand the context of the most recent crisis.

Last fall, as UNSCOM inspections focused on facilities critical to Iraq's WMD programs and the mechanisms Iraq was using to conceal those programs, Iraq reacted by blocking inspections and creating false issues of "Presidential palaces" and "American spies" to undermine the effectiveness of the inspection regime. The crisis heated up in November with the expulsion of weapons inspectors and then again after their return in January, when Iraq tried put several categories of sites off limits to UNSCOM.

The U.S. pursued a dual strategy of active diplomacy--centered on the five permanent members and the rest of the Security Council--backed by the credible threat of force. That threat was made real by the deployment of a multinational coalition in the Gulf, including some 35,000 U.S. military personnel, two carrier battle groups and 350 U.S. aircraft.

So far, this strategy has proven successful. In the past week, an UNSCOM inspection team led by Scott Ritter has been granted access to a series of sensitive sites including Ministry of Defense buildings that Iraq previously declared off limits. This is unprecedented access for

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UNSCOM. More testing will be required and the Presidential site inspections are still to be undertaken. Nevertheless, the Iraqis have committed themselves before the world to full compliance with their obligations to immediate, unconditional and unrestricted access to all sites, as has been required by multiple Security Council resolutions of the last seven years. This is the central element of the memorandum of understanding signed by the UN Secretary General and Baghdad, which the Council endorsed unanimously in UN Security Council Resolution 1154. In that resolution, of course, the Council also warned Iraq of "severest consequences" should it violate the agreement and once again fail to comply with its obligations.

I want to emphasize that the most important element of the agreement with Iraq is not its precise wording, nor even the arrangements to carry it out, but rather its testing and implementation. If it is fully implemented, UNSCOM can carry out its mission:

- First, to find and destroy all of Iraq's chemical, biological and nuclear weapons;
- Second to find and destroy the missiles to deliver these weapons;
- Third, to institute a system for long-term monitoring to make sure Iraq does not build more weapons.

The key point is that UNSCOM is in charge of inspections in Iraq and has begun the process of testing Iraq's intentions. If Iraq implements the agreement it entered into with the Secretary General - well and good. UNSCOM would be able to carry out its mandate. If Saddam once again obstructs UNSCOM, the U.S. is prepared with our coalition partners to take the actions required to reduce the threat of Saddam's weapons programs and the threat he poses to his neighbors.

Our quarrel is not and never has been with the Iraqi people - they are the victims of rulers imposed on them by force. Saddam has chosen to continue his efforts to retain his weapons of mass destruction program and to build a series of lavish palaces, rather than to meet the needs of his people. In contrast, the U.S. supported UN Security Council Resolution 1153 which has greatly expanded the "oil for food program" so that Iraq's revenues must be used for its people. This new resolution will allow the Iraqi people to receive the food, medicine and other humanitarian goods they need, but are being denied by the Saddam regime. The resolution will also allow the re-building of some services related directly to the Iraqi people, including schools and clinics.

Any expenditures under this program will be under close scrutiny of the UN, both in terms of scrutinizing the expenditures and monitoring the distributions of goods in Iraq. The UN is still studying the possibility of allowing some reconstruction of Iraq's oil production capability. We will ensure that such production is sufficient only for the purposes of the resolution and that UN controls are extended to the well-head. With the implementation of resolution 1153, we can ensure the needs of the Iraqi people will be met.

One somewhat misunderstood aspect of the latest confrontation with Saddam is the degree of international support we received. Despite the impression some might have from the media, the fact is that 23 nations offered to participate in military operations had they been required, while many others offered political support. We should especially express our appreciation for the strong and unequivocal position of the British, who were the first to join us in deploying forces to the Gulf. But they were by no means the only ones. Egypt and the countries in the Gulf were also ready to provide the support we needed when we needed it.

Mr. Chairman, this latest crisis with Iraq has reminded us how much better off the Iraqi people, the Middle East region, and the world would be if a new regime emerged in Iraq with a very different set of priorities. As Secretary of State Albright stated a year ago, we look

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forward to the day when we can work with a different government in Iraq, one which does not pursue weapons of mass destruction, threaten its neighbors, and oppress its people. We look forward to the day when Iraq, under a different leadership, can again resume its rightful place among the community of peace-loving nations.

We are therefore closely examining ways to reinvigorate our efforts to work with and support those Iraqis who advocate a democratic, pluralistic future for their country, one in which Iraq's resources are spent for the benefit of the Iraqi people and not to maintain in power a regime that engages in brutal repression at home and military aggression abroad.

While Saddam's rule of Iraq remains an unfortunately familiar problem, we have heard the voices of change in Iran. It is unclear yet whether those voices, represented in the election and continued popularity of President Khatami will prevail, but we are watching carefully the signs of change. While our focus continues to be on deeds, not words, we have sought to respond to President Khatami's calls for a civilizational dialogue and to encourage the changes in policies that we seek.

Change in the areas of greatest concern to us - terrorism, attempts to acquire WMD and support of violent opposition to the peace process -remains the focus of our policy. These are deep-rooted elements of Iranian government practice and it remains to be seen whether President Khatami can and will make positive change in these areas. It will take time to reach conclusions on this score.

Recent unofficial contacts have demonstrated that our two peoples have no quarrel with each other; in such contrasting realms as sports and academia, recent American visitors to Iran have found a warm welcome. We are prepared to take steps to encourage these exchanges which can help to overcome the mistrust in our relations. But we continue to believe that official contacts are the best way to resolve the serious issues of policy between us. The government of Iran has indicated it is not ready yet for such discussions

Before closing with some general remarks about the objectives of our policy, I wanted to mention Algeria. The horrendous slaughter of civilians in that country continues. It is unacceptable and we unequivocally condemn it. There are solutions for Algeria's problems, but unfortunately they are neither quick nor easy. President Zeroual has identified their main elements in political and economic reform and progress toward the rule of law. But it is critical that there be more concrete progress on the ground in implementing these programs.

Clearly, the Algerian government must live up to its responsibilities to protect its citizens. But it must do so within the rule of law, or it will jeopardize the hesitant steps it has taken toward democratic government. A long-term solution to Algeria's problems must include serious economic reform and a political process that includes all those who renounce violence. We are ready to help where we can. We are second to none in our commitment to the fight against terrorism, but Algeria should recognize that it cannot expect the international community, including its friends, to stand silently by while atrocities such as those we have witnessed continue. Algeria needs credibility if it wants support and it should work to provide greater transparency. There are ways to do so that does not impinge on Algerian sovereignty. I will be in Algeria soon and intend to discuss these issues with the government there.

Recent problems in the peace process and the difficulties of containing Saddam Hussein have demonstrated clearly that the new Middle East many of us saw coming into being at the beginning of this decade is not yet realized. If anything, however, the problems I have discussed show even more clearly that our vital national interests in the region, including the security of Israel and the commercial availability of Gulf oil are best protected in an integrated Middle East, in which market, not military, forces operate freely and in which weapons of mass destruction have no place.