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## **Elections and their Consequences**

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The first month of 2005 saw the inauguration of President Bush, further developments in the formation of his second administration, the consolidation of the position of the newly elected Palestinian leader, Mahmoud Abbas, and a series of events leading up to the elections for a Transitional Assembly in Iraq.

In President Bush's inaugural address, there was a persistent emphasis on the spreading of freedom, and remarkably little mention of events in Iraq. At the same time, the Republican successes in the November elections, not least in both Houses of Congress, meant that there was a real sense of mandated purpose, with further indications that the new administration would take a particularly hard line with Iran and Syria.

Although precise details of levels of turn-out in the Iraqi elections remain uncertain at the time of writing, there is substantial evidence that the intensity of voting was high in the major Shi'a and Kurdish provinces of Iraq, and slightly higher than the very low turnouts anticipated in Sunni towns and cities. At the very end of the month there was therefore a sense of vindication in Washington, with this likely to further strengthen the position of neoconservative elements in the capital. Whether this will be a sustained position will depend very much on the developments in the next two to three months, but it is also relevant to make a careful analysis of some of the more recent trends, especially in relation to the Israeli/Palestinian confrontation, the Iraq insurgency, and political developments in Washington.

### **Israel and Palestine – A Possibility of Progress**

The clear-cut election of Mahmoud Abbas as the Palestinian leader has resulted in a more positive attitude in Washington towards a two-state solution. This, coupled with the initial ability of the Palestinian leadership to enforce some control of the more radical paramilitaries, means that there is relatively more pressure on the Sharon government to make concessions in any future negotiating process.

At a superficial level, the provisional decision to enforce the withdrawal of several thousand Jewish settlers from Gaza would seem to be a sign of good intent, as would some limited withdrawals of settlements from peripheral areas of the West Bank. In reality, both of these moves have much more to do with internal security problems than the peace process, and further progress will therefore depend more on future offers that relate specifically to potential negotiations on a lasting peace.

In Gaza, the level of opposition to Israeli occupation has been so intense that maintaining the security of the Jewish settlers has become steadily more untenable for the Israeli Defence Forces, in spite of the persistent use of considerable military force including targeted assassinations. The 7,000 settlers control a sizeable minority of the

land area of Gaza which otherwise has 1.2 million Palestinians, a third of them crowded into refugee camps with no prospect of returning to their original homes in Israel.

If the settlers are indeed withdrawn, what will be crucial will be the future Israeli policy towards Gaza. One possibility is that the territory is enabled to undergo rapid economic development, with the airport reopened, port facilities developed and rapid industrialisation encouraged. Although the pattern of recent years has been for many educated young people to leave Gaza for the wider Middle East and the western world, there is a high level of education among the population remaining, and much potential for rapid development, especially if serious assistance is available from Gulf Arab states, European and American agencies and international financial institutions. Such a process, in concert with developments on the West Bank, could greatly improve the prospects of a viable Palestinian state, but will be impossible without the constructive assistance of Israel.

The other possibility is a development of the current situation in which Gaza is akin to a huge open prison. Israel controls its own extensive land borders with Gaza and the small Egyptian border. It has clear control of the limited sea routes and effectively determines the water supplies as well – a crucial commodity for Gaza. The airport remains closed. With near-total control of entry and exit, Israel has almost complete dominance of the Gaza economy, which is currently close to being moribund. In due course, the Israeli authorities may allow more movement of Palestinians into industrial areas close to the border with Gaza, either in Israel or Egypt, but they will be able to continue to maintain rigorous control of all substantive economic activity. The Israeli view is that the extreme control exerted over Gaza is essential to ensure Israel's domestic security, but the paradox is that this very control, and the levels of poverty and marginalisation within Gaza, provide a continual recruitment incentive for Islamic paramilitaries.

If developments in Gaza are likely to give some indication of long-term Israeli intentions, then it is the complex of policies in the West Bank that is even more significant. Over the past 38 years there has been widespread colonisation of many parts of the West Bank by Jewish settlements. The pace of settlement construction has varied with the political climate, but the last ten years has seen a particular expansion, backed up by a quite remarkable level of Israeli security control, made even more tough in the wake of the al-Aqsa intifada which started in September 2000 following Ariel Sharon's incursion onto Temple Mount in Jerusalem. There are now over 300,000 Jewish settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, in a land area occupied by over 2 million Palestinians.

Prior to the major violence and Israeli incursions into a number of centres of Palestinian population in April 2002, there was already substantive Israeli security control of much of the West Bank, but this has since increased greatly to encompass over 80% of the land area. Moreover, the distribution of settlements, the numerous strategic "settler-only" roads that link them, and more than a hundred road blocks on other main roads mean that Israeli control of the Palestinian population, and indeed the economic and political life of the West Bank is virtually complete.

Again, from an Israeli perspective it is argued that this is all essential for Israel's internal security, not least as the impact of the suicide or martyr bombings of recent years has had a profound effect on Israeli perceptions of vulnerability. Over the past two years the response has reached the level of building the "wall" around much of the West Bank. The wall does not separate off the West Bank, leaving Palestinian communities to get on with their own lives, since the internal security patrols and almost all the settlements remain. What it does do, though, is to give Israelis an impression of security. From a Palestinian perspective, though, it takes into Israel substantial areas of Palestinian land, adding to a further perception of marginalisation. This is heightened by the persistent controls of population movement within the West Bank, particularly the near-impossibility of moving between the north and south of the West Bank across the area dominated by Jerusalem and its immediate environs.

What is required in the next few months is a series of major concessions from Israel. Time is short in that Mahmoud Abbas may have a relatively brief honeymoon period, and much of the prospect for progress rests on whether the Sharon government is genuinely committed to wholesale Israeli withdrawal and the consequent development of a viable Palestinian state. Two factors may militate against this. One is that internal Israeli politics have moved decidedly towards a more hawkish stance. In part this is due to the impact of the bombings, but it also relates to the immigration into Israel of around a million people during the 1990s from the Former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Many of these are utterly determined to achieve security and most are firm supporters of the current administration.

## **US Political Developments**

The second factor relates to significant if largely unrecognised developments in US domestic politics. Successive US administrations have long been seen as the strongest supporters of the State of Israel, with key lobbying groups such as the America-Israel Public Affairs Committee being highly effective in maintaining this outlook, not least with considerable support from Jewish communities in the United States. In recent years that support has tended to wane, but has been more than countered by the growing electoral significance of evangelical Christian communities that are directly committed to the survival of the State of Israel. Known most commonly as Christian Zionists, they form a large minority of the evangelical Christian churches in the United States that collectively involve over 100 million people. Moreover, they have a higher than average electoral commitment that is dominated by support for the Republican Party.

Christian Zionism is essentially a belief that it is part of God's plan that biblical Israel should be the home of the Jews in preparation for the Second Coming that will involve an Earthly reign for a millennium, centred on Jerusalem. This dispensation theology (God giving a dispensation to the Jews) now has at its heart the survival of the modern-day State of Israel with Jerusalem at its heart. It is a core part of the Christian Zionist stance and has resulted in numerous groups that are willing and able to work with the Israeli government and the Israel lobby in Washington.

More generally, Christian Zionism dovetails with many aspects of neoconservatism, but is especially significant in relation to the foreign and security policies of the Bush administration in the Middle East. It is a near-perfect match, in that electoral support

from many millions of evangelical Christians for the born-again President Bush provides a political base of real value to the administration.

There are thus two particular factors that have to be appreciated in analysing prospects for positive change in the Israel-Palestine confrontation – the changes within Israel with the influx of migrants in the 1990s, and the growing significance of Christian Zionists in the United States. Both are factors that may make moves towards an economically viable Palestinian state deeply problematical.

## **Iraq – Insurgency and Elections**

During the early part of January the insurgency in Iraq continued to gather strength against the earlier predictions from Washington that the assault on Fallujah would do it irreversible damage. In the period of November to January, the coalition forces lost 345 troops, 316 of them from the United States. In January alone, US losses were 107 killed and over 500 wounded, the third worst month since the war began nearly two years ago. By the end of the month, total US losses were approaching 1,500 killed and 11,000 injured since the start of the war. During the month, the Iraqi authorities also lost scores of police and security personnel in addition to numerous assassinations of senior security officers, members of the judiciary and government officials.

In the run-up to the election, US and Iraqi planners put into operation a programme to enhance security for the day of the election itself. The numerous measures included border closures, tight curfews and the banning of private vehicles from roads. US military forces conducted a series of major convoy operations prior to the election to ensure that in the electoral period itself there would be little need for the movement of vulnerable convoys. This measure also meant that the US military, already reinforced by 15,000 additional troops, could divert many of its logistics and support units to patrols and other security operations. The end result was to produce a high degree of “close-down” in many of the more insecure parts of Iraq, although it was a tactic that could only be maintained for the duration of the electoral period.

The early indications are that the Transitional Assembly will be dominated by Shi’a political groups, with the Kurds having a significant minority. With a boycott by most Sunni-orientated parties and a low voter turn-out in Central Iraq, the Sunni minority will have a minimal role in central political developments over the next year unless majority parties set out specifically, and successfully, to bring them in.

To a very large extent, the next three months will be the key period in terms of the insurgency and its contrast with possible political evolution in Iraq. It could be that the insurgency will diminish in the short term, although the US determination to maintain a long-term military presence in Iraq most likely means that there will be a persistent state of violence. Even in the short-term, the Pentagon is planning to maintain forces at close to current levels for the next two years, suggesting that military realities may be different from the political message of apparent progress now coming from Washington.

Behind this, there remains the Washington security paradigm and the manner in which it is dominated by the neoconservative political agenda. This embraces continued strong support for Israel, the determination to retain high levels of influence in Iraq

including a military presence, and a willingness to take action against other members of the “axis of evil” most notably Syria and Iran. There is no real change in this stance and, in this context, the rise of Christian Zionism could well be an additional hindrance to prospects for serious progress towards peace in the Middle East.

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Professor Rogers’ monthly briefings from May 2003 – April 2004 are published, along with analysis and discussion, in the Oxford Research Group international security report for 2004, *Iraq and the War on Terror*. Copies can be ordered from ORG at £7.99 plus postage. More information is available from <http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/books/iraqandwaronterror.htm>.

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