

New Policies and Old Realities in the Middle East

by Harvey Sicherman

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Abstract: Shortly after Barack Obama's victory in November 2008, the author addressed the "old realities" of U.S. interests and challenges in the Middle East, as well as the "new policies" the president-elect may choose to establish in this "perpetually troubled region."

American Interests

Let me begin by noting that the U.S. literature on American policy in the Middle East is hypercritical. In reading it, one could conclude that the sky is falling down or that the sky will fall down tomorrow or that it fell down yesterday, but Washington is too dense to understand it. I propose that, although we have failed to reach our ultimate goals, we have come a very long way and quite successfully.

Since 1948, all U.S. administrations have eventually settled on three vital American interests: (1) access to oil at a tolerable price, (2) the security of the State of Israel, and (3) preventing the region from coming under the domination of a hostile power.

Over the course of these sixty-odd years, we've managed to move the oil question from one of access to one of price. Israel has moved from a very vulnerable state to quite a defensible one, and as far as the region's being dominated by hostile powers, no one today would prefer to go back to the era when we were competing with the Soviets. The situation has changed from one that threatened a global confrontation to one that threatened a regional confrontation to one that threatens a basically local conflict.

We have not entirely secured access to oil at a reasonable price, the State of Israel still faces considerable dangers, and there are always people who think that the Middle East belongs to them. Although we have succeeded

very well compared to our starting point back in the late 1940s in meeting these three objectives, today we face several challenges to our interests.

Challenges to U.S. Interests

Iraq: The Three Negatives

The first is Iraq. Now that the idea of Iraq as a beacon of democracy has been retired by reality, our interest in Iraq may be stated succinctly: we do not want it to become a base for an al Qaeda-like terrorist operation nor do we want it to become a subsidiary of Iran. These objectives and Iraqi stability are within reach, if we understand that Iraq has a natural constitution, what may be called the “three negatives”: (1) the Shiites and Kurds will not accept another Sunni dictatorship; (2) the Sunnis and Shiites will not accept an independent Kurdistan; and finally (3) the Kurds and Sunnis will not accept a Shiite Islamic republic. Any political system that respects those three negatives may be called a democracy, in that it reflects the popular wishes.

The main U.S. political objective then is to get the various groups to understand that they cannot achieve their most far-reaching objectives: the Sunnis’ to restore the dictatorship, the Shiites’ to create some kind of Shiite Islamic republic, or the Kurds’ to go independent.

The counterinsurgency military policy we have employed to pacify the country thereby facilitating an inter-communal accommodation around a three-negative constitution seems to have mystified a lot of people but it is actually fairly easy to understand. It consists of what I call “the three Cs”: co-opt, corrupt, and coerce.¹ We need a coalition government in Iraq that co-opts the major political figures, corrupts those who will be corrupted, and therefore reduces the numbers who have to be coerced. In counterinsurgency, when the number of those who have to be coerced begins to drop, success is in sight.

The so-called surge was basically the application of counterinsurgency under Gen. David Petraeus, and it worked extremely well. We had to do a good deal of the co-option and the corruption, because the current Iraqi government either didn’t know how or was unwilling to do so. But by now the success of this policy has been manifested and we can see how something similar has to be used in Afghanistan.

The reality we face with Iraq is that the American military enterprise there is going to wind down, either on the basis of what’s happening on the ground or because the new president has pledged to do so in a certain time frame. Whatever decision he makes, we can foresee the gradual withdrawal of most American military forces. If the result is an Iraq that is neither an al Qaeda base nor an Iranian puppet then several important consequences will follow.

¹ See Harvey Sicherman, “Iraq Endgame,” FPRI *E-Notes*, January 2007.

First, Iran will have been dealt a serious blow, because Iraq will not be a subsidiary of Iran and Baghdad is far more important to Tehran than Beirut or Damascus. Second, the terrorists will have been dealt a heavy blow. Ideologically, it was very important for al Qaeda to capture Baghdad, which was once the seat of an important Arab caliphate. Finally, it will have an impact on the Arab-Israeli peace negotiations. We should recall that the Madrid Conference of 1991 came about only because Saddam Hussein and the Rejectionist Front were defeated in the war over Kuwait.

The three-negative constitution, however, has still not taken firm hold in Iraq. To complete that, the country needs an army willing to back it up and an equitable division of oil revenues, and these pieces should be put in place before U.S. forces leave. Such an outcome will not have the region-wide revolutionary effect that some progenitors of the Iraqi operation believed, but nonetheless it can secure some basic U.S. interests.

The Israeli-Palestinian Relationship

A second challenge is the Arab-Israeli conflict. Two models of peacemaking have been tried. In one, the outside powers impose a settlement on the locals with more or less rough justice. We had an example of that in 1957, when in the aftermath of the Suez crisis the United States and others imposed an armed truce. There was no peace involved but at least it was quiet until June 1967.

That agreement failed because the guarantors failed to live up to their guarantees when the test came. Afterwards, and particularly after 1973, Henry Kissinger led the way in discovering a new model of peacemaking. Arab and Israeli leaders—Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin—convinced each other that they wanted to make a deal and were capable of delivering it. Once that happened, the role of the United States and other powers was to reduce the would-be peacemakers' risks in doing so. If the Middle East leaders are to take the risks involved in this negotiation, they also expect an America president to be there with all four feet at the right time in order to bring them together.

As to the success of this model, we have had two peace treaties (Egypt-Israel and Israel-Jordan) based on it. Those treaties have been very sturdy, outlasting assassination, war, and recession. At Oslo in 1993, it was believed that Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat had begun a similar process and, after a transition of five years, would arrive at a final agreement.

The failure of the 2000 Camp David Summit, followed by the Intifada, convinced the United States and Israel that Arafat was not the partner, a view reinforced by his behavior after 9/11. Following Arafat's death in 2004, the new leader Abu Mazen lacked strong control over the Palestinians. After an extremely unwise election in 2006, Hamas came to power and the model fell apart.

Today, we have a Palestinian leader who rules the West Bank primarily because the Israeli army is still there but who is willing to negotiate a two-state solution. Simultaneously, a Hamas-run operation in Gaza, supported largely by guns and money from the outside (Syria and Iran), rejects a two-state solution. How exactly do you reach any kind of a deal? There are several elements that have to be understood as we go forward.

First, all this notwithstanding, by late 2006/early 2007 and certainly by early 2008, everyone—except for Hamas and other violent groups—became convinced that you had to have some kind of a negotiation. The Annapolis process promised a virtual peace, where the Israelis and the Palestinians might reach an agreement that would remain on the shelf until that wonderful day when the Palestinians were able to carry out their part of the bargain. This was, and is, a full-employment act for diplomats, but motion-making is not the same as movement. Nonetheless, there is some virtue to it.

Second, Arafat's most precious legacy was lost when, in summer 2006, the kidnappings of Israeli soldiers and the resulting crisis moved the power of decision on the Palestinian issue from Ramallah, the headquarters of the Palestinian Authority, to Damascus and Tehran. The Palestinians have got to recover that one way or another if ultimately they are to form a state.

Third, there is the military problem that the Israelis discovered in 2006, in the second Lebanon war, and we discovered in Iraq.² Our military organization as well as that of the Israelis and most Western powers is very high tech. Relatively small numbers of forces—a couple of brigades with high-precision air bombardment and all the rest—have firepower that in the old days would have taken a division or two. Against that, various terrorist forces, such as Hezbollah, with the aid of the Iranians, developed a very well-trained force—up to infantry standards, including body armor and the rest—but using civilians as both targets and shields. They deploy themselves among a civilian population and then attack another civilian population.

How do you deal with that? If you go with firepower, you're going to kill a lot of civilians. If you go with infantry, it's hard, street-by-street work. You lose your technical advantage. The Israelis have experimented with a third way, which is to kill the mid- and upper-level commanders. That's fine, if the other side doesn't have the power of escalation. The six-month lull between Israel and Hamas came about in part because the Israelis feared that rockets with greater range, fired much deeper into Israel, could compel them to act before they were ready.

Worse, if you go into Gaza to evict Hamas, what you get as a reward for your success is the responsibility to run Gaza. That's why the Israelis haven't been in a hurry to go there. [Author's note: Israel's current Gaza campaign tries

² See H.R. McMaster, "Learning from Contemporary Conflicts to Prepare for Future War," *Orbis*, Fall 2008.

the middle way once more, namely, severely weakening Hamas' military capability without reoccupying Gaza.]

We've used a middle way between firepower and infantry quite successfully in Iraq to get at this particular problem not only against al Qaeda but also against the Iranian agents there. But we're going to face that problem in the future. Our opponents are convinced that that's the best way to handle our military superiority. If we can persuade them otherwise then we may find them far more amendable to diplomacy.

Fourth, there are the unexpected Israel-Syria negotiations run under the auspices of the Turkish government. The Syrian regime is now riding high: it has survived its isolation and the events in Lebanon, has secured dominant influence there, and feels that it has a fairly strong political hand. But Assad has run out of oil. He needs investment, and he's much closer to the Iranians than he cares to be. So he's been negotiating with the Israelis. Where the issues of water and demilitarization on the Golan prevented an agreement with the Syrians before, those are not as big a problem as they used to be. Instead, the critical issue is the Syrian relationship with Hezbollah and Hamas and their alliance with Iran. It's not clear whether the Syrians are interested in negotiation for its own sake or if they're actually trying to reach a conclusion. The Syrian option may be a political mirage—the closer to it you seem to be, the further away it actually is, while the further away it seems to be, the closer to it you actually are. On this front, as well as the Israeli-Palestinian front, the parties may wish to prolong the negotiations but not necessarily come to a conclusion.

Iran: Arsonist into Fireman?

Iran, like Syria, is a country we hope to convert from an arsonist into a fireman. Since the 1979 Revolution, the country has become a curious hybrid. On the one hand, it's at war with the world—not only with the Western powers, but as a Shiite power, with the Sunnis. On the other hand, it is heir to the subtle traditions of Persian-inspired diplomacy. Iranian academics are quick to remind you of events that are 500-1,000 years old or even further back, when they were the premier power.

Coming to grips with this Iran has been very difficult for the United States. President Carter was arguably undone by it; President Reagan was almost undone by the Iran-Contra controversy; and Presidents Clinton and George W. Bush, who offered an olive branch to the Iranians, met little success.

Nonetheless, there were a couple of opportunities to do business with the Iranians that we missed. One came after the 1991 war, when the Iranians didn't expect us to do as well as we did. They were in a hurry after that war to talk to us about a new security arrangement in the Gulf. But the George H. W. Bush Administration, which was more interested in the Arab-Israeli conflict,

preferred an abortive initiative that would have posted Egyptian and Syrian troops to protect Kuwait. The Kuwaitis declined.

The next opportunity was probably in 2004, when our Iraqi venture still looked like a success and the Iranian government had halted its reprocessing effort on uranium, indicating that they wanted to talk about several subjects. But the Bush Administration wanted the Iranian government to fall, not to talk, and so did not open any overture with it. Now we're on the brink of what everyone thinks is going to be a most awful development, their attaining the capability to make a bomb.

Most analysts, including me, do not believe that if the Iranians got a nuclear weapon, they would immediately launch it. Nuclear deterrence still has an impact. Nonetheless, Iranians are the principal sponsors of regional terrorism, and if they think that their territory is inviolable because they have a nuclear weapon, this will encourage them to push their aims. Sooner or later that will lead to some kind of a confrontation.

How do you prevent Iran from possessing a bomb or the capability to get there? The last offer (2008) was made to the Iranians after 3-4 years of negotiations led by the Europeans. It had the signature of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and the presence in the room of the deputy secretary of state, which gave an American imprimatur to it. The Iranians were surprised by the American presence, but their reaction to it can only be described as insulting. So we've not gotten very far with the current attempt to give the Iranians some kind of incentive to stop their nuclear weapons or anything else.

The Iranians today do not fear any kind of an American military strike at their facilities. Because they assume that the Israelis need American permission to do so, they probably aren't very afraid of what the Israelis might do, either. They feel free of a military threat and at the same time haven't been responsive to any carrot or economic sanctions. The latter are more serious today than they were even six months ago because of the international economic crisis and the startling reduction in the price of oil. The Iranians were already in serious trouble when they had too much oil money; now they're in even more serious trouble when they don't have enough. That's because the economic team headed by Ahmadinejad believes that the best way to deal with Iran's economic development is to pay subsidies, especially to those who are out of work. Of course, giving purchasing power to people who don't produce yields inflation. Iran has terrible inflation which is affecting everyone. Because this is a regime that's careening from economic disaster to disaster, sanctions could have a serious effect on them. But I haven't met anyone who thinks that this will necessarily put them off their decision to go with nuclear development, unless of course the regime itself feels so threatened that they will seek outside assistance in order to survive.

If the three challenges—Iraq, Israeli-Palestinian, Iran—are not met, access to oil, the security of Israel, and a Middle East free of hostile domination will be jeopardized.

Incoming Administration

What kind of administration is President-elect Obama putting together to deal with these problems? The appointments that have been made so far represent a group I call the pragmatics. Obama evidently likes to find a consensus and then get a little bit ahead of it. He has put together a foreign policy team that includes the pragmatics in both parties. Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State on the one hand, Robert Gates as Secretary of Defense on the other, and Gen. Jim Jones as National Security Advisor are quite representative of this group. Obama has also read Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals*. He's got a bit of a Lincoln complex. What Goodwin forgot to mention was that the team of rivals, Lincoln's cabinet, proved wholly incompetent to run the war. Lincoln actually had to work around them. Secretary of State Seward was so embittered by cabinet discussions, he refused to attend them. The foreign policy business was done between the president and the secretary of state without benefit of the cabinet. It's one thing to get a team of rivals, it's another to make it work.

The appointment of Gen. Jones resembles another model, that of President George H.W. Bush. His National Security Advisor was Gen. Brent Scowcroft, who brought to the position a great deal of discipline and a refusal to be drawn into fights with the State Department. And so, unusual in postwar American history from the 1960s onward, that Bush Administration did not have serious combat between the NSC and the Secretary of State. Obama's appointment of Gen. Jones suggests that he wants to duplicate this feat.

What will the pragmatics advise the new president? A sample can be found in a document that is now somewhat forgotten, the Baker-Hamilton Commission that delivered some bipartisan advice to President Bush in 2006. They wanted us to get out of Iraq fairly quickly, with a diplomatic smokescreen to disguise the fact that we'd lost. Their advice with respect to the surge was not to do it, which was ignored. Another piece of advice was to try to detach Syria from Iran through negotiations that would settle the matter of the Golan between Syria and Israel and offer American guarantees of the Syria regime. I think we will see some kind of an initiative on that score although not necessarily as far-reaching as I have described it. Probably the willingness of the new administration to enter into the Syrian-Israeli negotiations will produce a direct Syrian-Israeli negotiation, which is different from saying an agreement. But it could elevate the process.

The pragmatics also favored a diplomatic approach to Iran, although it's hard to tell whether they meant unconditional or conditional (and I'm not sure those words have any meaning anyway), but their approach to Iran would have been "global"—i.e., that not only the nuclear issues but also all the other issues (Iraq, the Arab-Israeli conflict) should be taken up. Finally, on the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, they were anxious to have the process renewed, which did happen with Annapolis, but there is within the pragmatics

a sharp division, with people like Brzezinski and Scowcroft arguing that you have to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict first, while others want to focus on Iran first and don't think that the president should risk himself on an Israeli-Palestinian deal that may not be in the offing, not simply because the Palestinians don't have a functioning government, but because there's an Israeli election coming up so you're not quite sure whether you have any partners on this kind of a deal.

Last, but not least, Obama's national security appointments are people who know how to get from A to B. Once it is decided to move from A to B, they know how to do that. But don't ask them to define Point B, because their record on Point B is awful. If it had been up to most of the pragmatics, Saddam would still be in Kuwait and the surge would never have happened.

Conclusion

On *Meet the Press* on December 7, Obama said that his policy toward Iran would be to present a series of carrots and sticks, giving them a clear choice. He would say to the Iranians: get out of the terrorism business, don't build a nuclear weapon, and in return for that we'll end sanctions and you'll be brought into paradise, the U.S.-led international community. If you don't then we will make the sanctions tighter. He has said that military action is not off the table, but he clearly wants to try the diplomatic approach.

Other speakers in these Fox Lectures, including Kenneth Pollack on Iran, talked about this.³ The problem is that you're presenting an ultimatum to the Iranians, who are good at not saying yes or no. What happens then is not clear but indications are that Obama wants to accelerate or elevate both sides of the carrot and stick without getting into the military issue, in the hopes of bringing the Iranians to bear, and he thinks he's somehow going to get the Chinese and Russians to do this with him so that there will be a solid front.

Obama has a special idea about what he's going to do in the Middle East. He said on December 9, 2008, "I think we've got a unique opportunity to reboot America's image around the world and also in the Muslim world in particular."⁴ His message is that we're unrelenting with respect to terrorism but otherwise we'd like to be on a respectful and friendly basis. He probably will try to make some major address to this effect in a Muslim capital.

We see here the president-elect's belief that he himself, representing change and an improvement in America's image, will begin to change the way people think about the United States in the Middle East. Unhappily, whether the population likes or dislikes you doesn't make much difference in the Middle East. Polls and press coverage say that we're very popular among

³ See Kenneth Pollack, "The Future of Iran," FPRI *E-Notes*, September 2008.

⁴ See interview with Barack Obama in the *Chicago Tribune*, December 9, 2008.

Iranians, but that doesn't make any difference to Iranian foreign policy. These same sources say we're very disliked by Egyptians, but that doesn't make any difference to Egyptian foreign policy. It's better to be liked rather than disliked, but in the Middle East no one is particularly liked by anyone, even themselves.

In conclusion, I've spoken of the old realities in the Middle East, namely, our enduring interests and the challenges to them. I've also given you some idea of the "pragmatics," Obama's new appointees who will have to deal with this perpetually troubled region. Let me end this speech by advising you about another speech. That will be the one on U.S. policy delivered by either the President or the Secretary of State. And then we shall see whether Obama is leading the pragmatics or they are leading him.

