

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THE NEXT AMERICAN PRESIDENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Richard Falk

It now seems all but certain that John McCain will be the Republican candidate for president of the United States, and will be likely opposed by Barack Obama or possibly by Hilary Clinton. At first glance such a contest poses a clear choice, especially as McCain is being driven further and further to the right by the ultra-conservative and evangelical right-wing of the Republican Party. McCain identifies closely with George W. Bush on most foreign policy issues, above all on Iraq policy, and does not devote much political energy to such major domestic agenda items as jobs and health care.

McCain is still somewhat engaged in a battle for the Republican nomination with Mike Huckabee, who although trailing badly in the delegate count, has mounted a surprisingly strong challenge with the ardent backing of both religious and secular social conservatives (that is, all those strongly opposed to abortion as a permissible option for pregnant women, hostile to giving equal civic rights to homosexuals, especially the right to marry, as well as those who are want to seal the border with Mexico with armor and security fence, but also deporting resident illegal immigrants to their countries of origin, and those express in their life style family family and church-based faith). After he gets the Republican nomination McCain will have to gain the support of these right-wing forces if he is to have a serious chance of winning in the November election, but this should be doable as such voters have no other place to go. On policies toward the Middle East McCain and Huckabee speak with one voice, and its reliance on military solutions to outstanding conflicts is indistinguishable from what we have been hearing these past seven plus years from George W. Bush and Dick Cheney.

It is on Iraq that the Democratic candidates are presenting the American people with the contrasting image of a future leader who is ready to break with the Bush approach to counter-terrorism starting with Iraq. Both Obama and Clinton favor phased withdrawal from Iraq over the period of a year or so, but leaving some American military presence behind, but no longer making these troops available for combat operations. Obama has the far cleaner anti-war record on Iraq having been against the war from the outset, and persuasively challenging the thinking that could ever have supposed that the invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a useful counter-terrorist move, rather than one that was diversionary from the real challenges facing the United States and almost certain to make matters worse. Clinton voted back in 2003 to give Bush authority to use force against Iraq, and lent her support to the war in its early stages when it was popular with the American people and promoted ardently by Israel. She began criticizing the way in which the occupation was carried out a couple of years ago, and has now come to advocate an approach to withdrawal that seems superficially similar to that of Obama. She remains unwilling to admit she had been wrong when she favored the war, and voted to support it, and

more importantly, her main foreign policy advisors are 'liberal hawks' who backed the Iraq War at the outset, and are generally disposed to use military force. Clinton now argues that on the basis of what she knew in 2003 made war the right move to make then, but given the changed circumstances of 2007 and the irreversible incompetence of the occupation, withdrawal seems right now.

I think Obama's clarity on Iraq, plus advisors that are less enamored of military solutions and rather emphasize multilateralism, the United Nations, and international law, does make a difference both in the primary campaign and subsequently. Obama seems less likely to choose a military option when confronted with a hostile regime in the Islamic world. He has strongly endorsed a creative approach to diplomacy, offering to meet with hostile leaders in the Middle East, including President Ahmadinejad of Iran. Clinton sharply criticized him for this, seeming to want to do diplomacy in the old way by viewing a meeting of an American president with a foreign leader as of enormous benefit to the latter, and as a sign of American weakness and Obama's inexperience. Clinton proposing relying on power, status, and threat rather than on the 'soft power' options of discussion, mutuality, and accommodation.

Obama seems much more aware that uses of American military power to achieve 'regime change' rarely, if ever, produce success. Only Obama of the candidates on either side seems to have this understanding. That this principal lesson of America's defeat in Vietnam remains unlearned by most influential Americans is sad but true, as is evident from the debate in the U.S. Congress and elsewhere about Iraq policy. The failure to heed this same lesson led to the Soviet defeat during the 1980s in Afghanistan, which in turn contributed to the implosion of the Soviet state. Unless this lesson is learned by American leaders the prospect of more Vietnams, more Iraqs remains high.

At this point, even McCain, and for that matter Bush, vaguely favor withdrawal from Iraq, but only if it is in the context of an elusive American 'victory.' To achieve such a victory anytime soon is so improbable as to be irrelevant. It presupposes the emergence of an Iraqi government that shows the capacity to maintain public order throughout the country. There is almost no possibility of this happening as long as American troops remain visible and active in Iraq, and remain in the country without a timetable for complete departure from the country. McCain's version of withdrawal seems also to contemplate retaining military bases and a possible re-intervention in the country if conditions deteriorate. It is an American military presence that could last, McCain himself cheerfully acknowledge, for as long as one hundred years! According to McCain anything less than this level of American commitment would produce an American foreign policy disaster in the region that was totally unacceptable. The disaster of defeat in Iraq according to McCain/Bush consists of intensifying the terrorist threat, encouraging Al Qaeda, empowering Iran, setting off a regional race to acquire nuclear weapons by several Middle Eastern states, encouraging political Islam, and seriously jeopardizing American energy interests throughout the region.

As McCain seems much less equipped than either Obama or Clinton to address the economic challenges facing America he will continue to press the case for treating national security as the overriding challenge for the next American president, and claim that only he has the needed experience and credibility to uphold national interests. This electoral strategy of McCain is not likely to meet with success except on the right. The Iraq policy, despite reduced casualties after Bush's 'surge,' continues to be deeply unpopular with American voters. More than 58% of the citizenry favoring withdrawal regardless of consequences, with many thinking that the bad effects of persisting with the occupation of Iraq is more harmful to American national interests than would be a phased withdrawal to be completed within a year. In this sense, whoever becomes the Democratic candidate, it would seem obvious that he or she should avoid getting drawn into a national security debate beyond pointing to the importance of responsibly terminating the Iraq War as soon as possible, and to steer the debate about qualifications to be president back to managing the economy and overcoming the political despair that now afflicts the American people. Stopping the war in Iraq would have multiple political benefits for America's standing in the world, helping above all to regain its image as responsible global leaders. Such restored confidence would undoubtedly also benefit the sinking dollar, and immediately lift the economic burdens associated with the war effort in Iraq.

But aside from Iraq there are no significant foreign policy differences between the approaches taken by the three candidates so far as the Middle East is concerned. McCain is the only likely contender to have explicitly embraced the Bush approach to the region, although his attitude toward Iran has not been clearly expressed to this point, and this is likely to be crucial. There are still rumors floating about that there will yet be during the final months of the Bush presidency a major air attack launched against Iran. There are reports now circulating of additional deployments of American aircraft carriers and minesweepers in the Persian Gulf. It is known that Vice President Cheney, along with some neoconservative advisors and Israeli officials, have been pressing hard behind the scenes to discount the mostly reassuring assessment of the December 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (a high-level report from U.S. intelligence community) that Iran had stopped its nuclear weapons program in 2003. This pro-attack group seeks to revive a confrontational approach toward Iran that keeps the military option very much on the table. It still seems unlikely that such an attack on Iran will occur because of its anticipated costs: skyrocketing oil prices, retaliatory missile strikes, blockage of the Strait of Hormuz, a further overstretching of the already overstretched American military, the likely hostile reaction of world public opinion, and considerable opposition within the United States. If such attack occurs, and it cannot be ruled out despite its irrationality, the impact on the American presidential campaign would be decisive, pitting a Democrat who deplores and repudiates such a bellicose approach to conflict against a Republican who seems fully comfortable with the kind of militarist foreign policy associated with the Bush presidency, resorting to preventive wars

being an essential element in the 'war on terror' and the accompanying struggle to keep America safe.

On issues other than Iraq and Iran, continuity of American Middle East policy is likely regardless of who is the next occupant of the White House. Above all, the U.S. Government support for Israel will remain as unconditional as ever, which means little pressure on Tel Aviv to offer the Palestinians a fair solution on such issues as the future of Jerusalem, borders and territory, West Bank settlements, disposition of Palestinian refugees, water rights, and viable sovereignty. Only a dramatic political change in Israel, which seems highly unlikely in the years ahead, will move its government to offer Palestine the kind of peace that is based on sovereign equality, including the sharing of Jerusalem. In the meantime, the conflict will ebb and flow as it has for decades, although there is an increasing possibility that a humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza could produce a new resolve in the region and beyond to put sufficient pressure on Israel to end the occupation of Palestinian territory. Collective tragedy in Gaza is already a daily reality, but it has so far been mainly ignored by world media and regional leaders.

Whoever is the next president, certain red lines will be respected: no criticism of Israel; no challenge to the size of the Pentagon defense budget; and no serious questions of the market-driven assumptions associated with the promotion of free trade and unregulated financial markets.

It is also to be expected that relations with Turkey will remain positive no matter who the next American president happens to be, assuming an absence of turmoil within Turkey. The U.S. Government will continue to support Turkey's bid to become an EU member and will back Turkey's efforts to deal with genuine PKK threats, even accepting cross-border attacks against PKK base areas in the northern mountains of Iraq as occurred in late 2007.

As with Bush, the new American president will use Turkey to demonstrate its capacity to deal positively with a government that is treated as Islamic in orientation. This official American perception of the current Ankara government is dangerously misleading as it indirectly accepts the polemical position of the extremist CHP opposition that the Edogan/Gul is somehow challenging secularism whereas has been made repeatedly clear, the AKP effort is to democratize secularism by extending its benefits to religiously observant Muslim women. This misunderstanding in Washington of what is at stake in Turkey could have detrimental results if the current crisis relating to the treatment of women wearing headscarves. It is of great importance that the new American leaders better grasp what is happening, if only to lend support to these efforts to deepen democracy in Turkey. It is not a matter of making the governing process more Islamic, but of making democracy in Turkey more compatible with democracy.

In conclusion, aside from the Iraq/Iran unresolved situations, there is an overwhelming likelihood that existing policies will be maintained in the Middle East

unless something drastic happens that is not now anticipated. If things go forward without some important new developments there will be some small changes made, probably by whomever becomes president. For instance, some of the sharp edges of Bush's diplomacy are likely to be softened. Even a McCain presidency will not push nearly as hard for democratic reforms in the region as did Bush, and all the candidates have indicated their intention to give high priority to achieving a reduced dependence on Middle Eastern oil. It may well be that oil supplies and prices may become the defining issue in the next several years, and it would seem to make little difference as to policy whether there is a Democrat or Republican in the White House .

As far as counter-terrorism and nuclear counter-proliferation are concerned, there would also not be much difference. Even Obama has indicated that if 'actionable intelligence' discloses high value Al Qaeda targets in Pakistan, the United States would attack on its own if the Pakistani government did not give collaborate. It is likely that a Democratic president would do more than a Republican to restore American global leadership and respect, and that any new American leader who broke with the Bush approach to Iraq would have a far easier time promoting this goal than would a Republican who stayed the Bush course. Obama would have a big advantage over Clinton assuming that one of them will be elected. His position on Iraq appears principled and consistent, whereas hers seems driven by shifts in public opinion and the setbacks associated with a policy flawed at its inception. Also, Obama as a young and an African-American would send a powerful message to the world that the American political system is open to change, and is looking to the future. Obama would be the first American president who has genuine roots in the non-Western world and talks in a manner that is inspiring to those enduring poverty and other forms of deprivation. Obama's message and passion has already brought an excitement to the American political process that has been absent for a long time, possibly since the glory days of John F. Kennedy. In this sense, especially among the young, hope is being reborn in America, but it will not last unless Barack Obama is elected in November as the new American president.