

# TIME FOR REALISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST

ONLY RENEWED, SUSTAINED AMERICAN DIPLOMATIC LEADERSHIP AND PARTNERSHIP CAN REDEEM OUR REPUTATION AND STABILIZE THE REGION.

BY PHILIP C. WILCOX JR.

**R**epairing the wreckage of American policy in the Middle East is the most urgent and complex foreign policy challenge President Barack Obama will face.

The Bush administration's radical plans for creating a "New Middle East" through pre-emptive war, regime change, other coercive measures and democratization have failed dramatically. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has deepened. The war in Iraq, waged at a staggering human and financial cost, has produced neither stability nor democracy there, but has upset the regional balance of power to the advantage of an assertive and potentially nuclear Iran. And the war in Afghanistan looks ominously like another quagmire.

Meanwhile, U.S. efforts to undermine Syria, and Hezbollah in Lebanon, have backfired. And terrorism, which has propelled U.S. policies in the region, has hardly been defeated. These failures, along with the abuse of detainees, have fueled strong anti-American hostility and undermined our influence.

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Our new Middle East policy should be based on realism. It should start with a clearer understanding of the troubled history of the region and its relations with the West. It should pay respectful attention to the views of Middle Easterners, and abandon fantasies of American hegemony and rapid transformation through democratization. And it should put aside simplistic classification of regimes as good or evil.

A return to realism also calls for a renewal of diplomacy as America's principal tool of national security and a better understanding of the limits of military power. Such a rebalancing will require changing our hugely disproportionate assignment of resources — and therefore bureaucratic power — to the military. It will mean restoring the leadership of the Department of State and the Foreign Service, and redressing the gross deficit of resources, staffing and leadership within our civilian national security apparatus.

The next administration will not have the luxury of dealing with these problems piecemeal, or in phases. All present immediate dangers, and there are many linkages. A new strategy must be comprehensive, integrated and sustained. Success will take years, but the process of articulating and launching a new policy to restore confidence and cooperation should begin immediately. New policies should address the following problems.

### **Terrorism and Islam**

The “war on terrorism” led by our armed forces has been the organizing principle of U.S. Middle East policy since 9/11. But terrorism and violence are symptoms of conflicts that can ultimately be mitigated only by understanding their causes and applying diplomatic, economic and other tools. Military force is usually a blunt and counterproductive weapon, since it tends to kill civilians and breed more terrorists and anti-American animus.

While many terrorists have been caught or killed since 2001, terrorism has expanded in the Middle East and elsewhere (although the U.S. has prevented new attacks at home through better intelligence and security). The next president should give higher priority to traditional counterterrorism methods — diplomacy, intelligence and law enforcement — and expand efforts to deal with root causes. Military force should be used sparingly. The emotive phrase “war on terrorism” has a strong patriotic resonance, but it creates strategic confusion and should be dropped.

The militarization of counterterrorism and the war in Iraq, along with the deaths of thousands of Muslim civilians, have helped extremists promote the myth of primordial conflict between the West and Islam. Our chronic use of the ambiguous phrase “Islamic terrorism” offends Muslims and compounds the problem. Although public support for al-Qaida has waned, it is still dangerous. Barack Obama’s administration will also need better public diplomacy to show that America wants mutually respectful relations with Islam and partnership against common criminal enemies.

An urgent part of this new strategy is a clear repudiation of torture and other abusive detention policies that violate the rule of law and civilized standards. These disgraceful practices — born of panic, cynicism about American values and gross ignorance about effective interrogation techniques — have devastated our image in the Middle East and elsewhere, crippled our counterterrorism efforts and dishonored our Constitution.

### **The Israeli-Palestinian Impasse**

Peace between Israel and Palestine will not by itself bring stability to the region. But perceptions run deep there that the U.S. has become part of the problem by protecting Israeli policies of occupation and settlement and ignoring Palestinian demands for justice and sovereignty. No other U.S. policy has caused more Arab and

Muslim anger, weakening our ability to win cooperation with Arab governments on other regional problems.

Both the Bush and Clinton administrations have urged Israel and Palestine to negotiate bilaterally on the core issues of settlements, borders, Jerusalem, refugees and security. This approach failed during the Oslo years. There is no sign that the bilateral talks President Bush launched in Annapolis last year, after seven years of neglect, will agree on anything more than general principles.

Indeed, it is now clear that peace cannot be achieved bilaterally, given the huge power imbalance between the parties and their divided, dysfunctional internal politics. On both sides, radicals who cling to a zero-sum concept of “victory” block the way to peace. In Israel, an entrenched settler lobby opposes a workable territorial compromise. Palestinian policy has been paralyzed by a bitter split, which the U.S. has encouraged, between the pragmatic but feeble Fatah-led Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, and a militant, rejectionist Hamas in Gaza.

The consequences of this impasse are stark and dangerous. Settlements, in which about 500,000 Israelis now live, are already close to creating a de facto single, Israeli-controlled state, in which Palestinians will soon be a subject majority. This threatens Israel and the entire region with a permanent, violent rebellion by Palestinians who demand liberation. It also corrupts Israel’s Jewish, democratic values. Without renewed hope for statehood, Palestinians may abandon their two-state goal and wait for demography to overwhelm Israel.

Unless our enduring alliance with Israel is coupled with diplomatic leadership designed to change self-destructive Israeli and Palestinian policies and bring peace, the conflict will become a permanent millstone around our neck, impeding our ability to pursue our other interests and relations in the region. In particular, it opens the door to the specter of a nuclear Iran, pitted against a nuclear Israel.

Given these high stakes and the failure of previous peace “processes,” strong new American leadership will be needed to help rescue Israel and Palestine from a disaster. At an early stage, Washington should announce a compelling American vision of peace that would meet the core interests of both sides. Mediation by a senior U.S. envoy, not just exhortation, should follow. In addition, Palestinian internal reconciliation is essential to peace, and must be part of a new U.S. policy.

There is a good chance that over time Israelis and Palestinians, and ultimately their leaders, would respond positively to such American leadership. Today, both groups are traumatized and have virtually abandoned hope for peace. Yet polls show that pragmatic majorities on both sides want a two-state accord and would accept big compromises in final-status solutions, whose outlines are now well known. Here at home, a strong, compassionate approach to peace supporting both Israel and Palestine would mobilize domestic support, including from American Jews, and confirm that the president, not the "Israel lobby," makes policy in Washington.

### **Getting Out of Iraq**

Bowing to the Maliki government, weary American opinion and the need for an agreement by Dec. 31 to replace the United Nations mandate for U.S. forces in Iraq, the Bush administration has signed a draft agreement, subject to parliamentary approval, calling for the departure of U.S. forces in 2011. In doing so, the administration seems to have abandoned its entirely unrealistic plans for permanent military bases in Iraq. As of November, there was growing opposition to the draft agreement from Iraqi factions who want an earlier U.S. withdrawal or fear the text could enable our forces to stay after 2011.

The logic for an early withdrawal is powerful, and not just because Iraqis resent the continued presence of foreign troops. The "surge" was supposed to buy time for a long-awaited political reconciliation. While security has improved, Sunni-Shiite and intra-Shiite relations are still tenuous, and there is no consensus on the nature of the Iraqi state and how Iraqis can coexist and share their oil wealth. It is now clear that a prolonged American troop presence discourages political reconciliation, which only Iraqis can accomplish; and without that, there will be no security.

While the threat of renewed civil war and breakdown of Iraq's fledgling institutions cannot be ignored, the next administration should give higher priority to other U.S. goals in the region besides an illusory "victory" in Iraq. In

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measuring national interests, the Obama administration should focus on reducing the huge cost of the war to our troubled domestic fabric, including the monthly drain of \$10 billion and the massive toll on our overextended armed forces and their families.

### **Engaging Iran**

Forging a new relationship with Iran and heading off its nuclear threat should be major goals of a new Middle East strategy. The crisis in U.S.-Iranian rela-

tions weighs heavily on our interests in resolving the conflicts in Israel and Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan. Washington and Tehran have strong mutual interests in promoting regional security, ensuring stable supplies of energy, and stabilizing Iraq and Afghanistan. The current standoff prevents exploration of a mutually beneficial new relationship and the kind of "grand bargain" that Iran offered in 2003, but the U.S. ignored. It is time to drop failed threats and sanctions intended to force Iran to accept preconditions for direct negotiations, and to move to unconditional bilateral talks.

A constructive relationship with Tehran is hardly assured, of course. But without this and other regional cooperation, stabilization in Iraq after the U.S. withdraws will be even harder. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein's Sunni dictatorship and U.S. sponsorship of a political framework that favors Iraq's Shiite majority have already given Iran major influence there and changed the regional balance of power. But Tehran understands it cannot control even a Shiite-led Arab Iraq, and it shares our interest in avoiding chaos there. U.S. policy should accept legitimate Iranian interests in Iraq and the region, and enlist Tehran's support for stability there.

On the nuclear issue, it may not be too late to influence Iranian plans for uranium enrichment with major incentives coupled with a new relationship with the U.S. and the West. Even if Iran cannot be dissuaded from enrichment, a capability it is permitted for peaceful uses under its Non-Proliferation Treaty obligations, a transparent regime of international inspection and accountability and mutually peaceful nuclear cooperation might work in the alternative.

## F O C U S

Improved U.S.-Iranian relations will also require an end to threats against Israel and Tehran's manipulation of the Israeli-Palestinian issue for political reasons. However, this is unlikely in the absence of a credible peace process under U.S. leadership.

### **New Policies Toward Syria and Lebanon**

The next administration also needs to open a fresh page on relations with Syria and Lebanon. Current U.S. efforts to sanction and isolate Damascus for its interference and suspected assassinations in Lebanon, support for Hezbollah and harboring of Hamas and other radical Palestinians are going nowhere and are self-defeating. The Bush administration has already toned down its antipathy to the Assad regime and its earlier opposition to negotiations by Israel, our close ally, with Syria over withdrawal from the Golan Heights and a peace accord. Turkey is now the go-between in these talks, and France is seeking a role. But Washington's full support and participation will be needed for Syria and Israel to make

peace. This would be a historic achievement for all sides.

A new policy of renewed U.S. engagement with Damascus and support for peace talks with Israel would require an end to Syrian support for Hamas and Hezbollah extremism. It should also involve an end to Syria's meddling in Lebanon — while recognizing its interests there — as well as a Syrian relationship with Iran that is not hostile to U.S. interests.

In Lebanon, the U.S. has failed to strengthen the moderate March 14 Movement's leadership against Hezbollah by treating the latter as simply as a terrorist organization, rather than an important political player in Lebanon. Washington's encouragement of Israel's 2006 war against Hezbollah (which Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice hailed as the necessary "birth pangs of a New Middle East") was a new low point for U.S. credibility in the region. Lebanon, with diplomatic help from Qatar, has since gone its own way with an internal compromise that enhances Hezbollah's influence.

Our experiences in Iraq and Lebanon show the pitfalls

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of viewing Middle East politics through an anti-terrorist prism and of picking favorites among the region's identity and religious politics. Likewise, our boycott and rejection of Hamas on grounds of its terrorist activity, rather than engaging it to influence its behavior, has also backfired. Another example of American myopia was Washington's short-lived proposal, floated in 2006, to create a moderate bloc of Sunni states and Israel opposing a "radical" axis of Iran and its Shiite allies.

#### **Avoiding a New Quagmire in Afghanistan**

Opponents of the war in Iraq have argued that Afghanistan is the right place to fight terrorism, and that tracking down Osama bin Laden and defeating the Taliban should be our main strategic goals. But today, seven years after the U.S. routed the Taliban before becoming preoccupied with Iraq, an aggressive insurgency threatens most of Afghanistan's provinces. Popular hostility to foreign troops and loss of confidence in the Karzai government are growing. The situation is deteriorating, despite the presence of almost 40,000 American troops who bear the brunt of an increasingly lethal and costly war, along with 35,000 other NATO forces.

Pressure is building to send more U.S. troops to Afghanistan as they become available from Iraq. At the same time, there is growing recognition that a military victory there is beyond our reach and that American forces risk being drawn into another bottomless quagmire in a large nation with a hostile terrain and a history of ungovernability. The fierce resistance of Afghan tribesmen to foreign armies, as the British and Russians learned to their regret, is legendary. General Dan McNeil, the former NATO commander in Afghanistan, estimates it would take 400,000 foreign troops to pacify the country. Given these realities, there is no reason to believe that more American soldiers are the answer there. Instead, we need a new strategy.

America's strategic goals should be to eliminate bin Laden and al-Qaida's command structure (believed to be in the tribal areas of northwest Pakistan, not Afghanistan) and to staunch the spread of extremism into Pakistan. Pashtun tribes in the Pakistani tribal areas are now har-

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boring al-Qaida members and offering safe havens for resupplying and training the Taliban. They continue to receive support from elements of Pakistan's Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence, as they have for decades.

A more realistic strategy for dealing with this mess would avoid a larger U.S. military commitment in Afghanistan and focus on a new relationship with Pakistan to win its support, which is essential, for containing the Taliban and ultimately eliminating al-Qaida. Washington and Islamabad are already discussing security in the tribal regions with Pakistan's new civilian and military leadership.

A broader strategic approach is needed to transform cooperation against terrorism and extremism, which are a grave threat to both the U.S. and Pakistan. This strategy would couple economic and security assistance to Pakistan, including the poor tribal areas, with efforts to gain support from India, China and Iran, who are also threatened by extremism in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

This will be a huge challenge. Given Islamabad's tortured politics and its past support for the Taliban to counter India in Afghanistan, relying on Pakistan may not succeed. But it is a more realistic option than a quest for military victory in Afghanistan, or unilateral U.S. military action in Pakistan's tribal areas.

To meet our obligation for continued support of Afghanistan, we should stabilize our military commitment, shifting the mix from combat to special operations and wider training of Afghan forces. We should also strengthen infrastructure and economic development in areas where this is possible. Other high priorities should be repairing international military and economic aid coordination, which is now dysfunctional; improving U.S. military-civilian cooperation; and conducting more effective poppy eradication. Washington should also send a clear message to the Karzai government that what its problems demand is a more serious Afghan effort to build government and security institutions and restore public support, not more American troops. Negotiations with some Taliban leaders and other militants, who are divided among themselves, should also be explored.

**Need for Change  
on a Grand Scale**

A new, integrated strategy of the kind described above toward Israel, Palestine, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon resembles the recommendations of the 2006 Iraq Study Group. These policies and a smarter approach to terrorism and nonproliferation would do much to restore America's battered reputation in the region and turn the political dynamics there in a more positive direction.

Success over time in the Middle East and Iran will be difficult, but not impossible. Progress in Pakistan and Afghanistan will be even harder. Thoughtful policies that deal with the causes of terrorism and wise diplomacy to help resolve regional conflicts, especially between Israel and Palestine, can restore respect for the United States. This would help to further reduce al-Qaida's appeal and its residual terrorist potential.

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Our current alienation from the Arab and Muslim worlds because of failed policies and inept diplomacy has created a vacuum. Regional states have tried to fill this void, bypassing Washington. Examples include the 2002 Arab League's conditional promise of peace with Israel if it withdraws from Palestinian territories; Saudi and Egyptian encouragement of Palestinian reconciliation; Egyptian-brokered ceasefires between Israel and Hamas; Turkish good offices between Israel and Syria; and Qatari unification efforts in Lebanon.

These initiatives are all welcome. But only renewed, sustained American diplomatic leadership and real partnership with the Middle East can redeem our reputation, protect U.S. interests and offer hope for the future. Doing this right will require change on a grand, unprecedented scale. ■

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