

# America, the Middle East, and U.S. Politics circa 2012

Jan 20, 2012



Brief Analysis

**O**n January 17, 2012, Stanley Greenberg and Susan Glasser addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Mr. Greenberg, the chairman and CEO of Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, has served as polling advisor to an array of world leaders, including Bill Clinton, Al Gore, Tony Blair, Nelson Mandela, and Ehud Barak. Ms. Glasser is editor-in-chief of *Foreign Policy* magazine and a former editor and foreign correspondent for the *Washington Post*. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

## STANLEY GREENBERG (@StanGreenberg (<https://twitter.com/#!/stangreenberg>) )

**F**oreign policy is unlikely to be an important issue in this year's presidential election given the current economic climate. At the same time, political changes taking place in the Middle East and elsewhere could affect the American election in unforeseen ways. The candidates will inevitably have different perspectives on how to move forward.

The election will also be incredibly close; while the Democrats currently appear to be in the lead, they have also trailed for long periods. And constituencies such as blue-collar workers and voters without college degrees -- concentrated in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and similar states -- remain undecided, indicating that the election will indeed be difficult. Given the widespread public contempt for political parties, processes, and institutions, the election could also involve a serious third-party candidate such as Ron Paul, Michael Bloomberg, or Donald Trump. Most of the votes for such a candidate would come from the Republican side. A third entrant could also change the debate about foreign policy issues such as China.

American voters have proven to be generally comfortable with President Obama on foreign policy matters. His approval ratings on foreign affairs and the war on terror are sometimes ten points higher than his overall or economic performance ratings. He is viewed as being willing to do what needs to be done while simultaneously moderating U.S. engagement abroad at a time that requires addressing America's domestic problems. Yet his perceived success in dealing with al-Qaeda, Libya, Pakistan, and disengagement from Iraq are unlikely to be significant factors in the economically charged election climate.

Meanwhile, Iran poses a significant challenge for the president. The administration would clearly prefer to avoid taking any action against Iran that might affect oil prices in the lead-up to the election. This does not mean that the Republicans would gain an advantage if the situation with Iran were to escalate. On the contrary, candidates tend to do well when they have control of national security resources and a large stage from which to advance American interests.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, Obama is unlikely to spend political capital on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process at the moment. Significant improvement on the economic front might have produced a climate in which he could embrace that task, but instead he will be forced to focus almost completely on jobs and related issues during the campaign season.

Some evidence suggests that tensions with Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu at the outset of Obama's tenure reduced the president's lead among Jews to something closer to his lead among the general population. Yet there is no evidence that current events in the Middle East have had any impact on his standing among Jewish voters. The candidates' stances on social and economic issues will be much more important for such voters than Israel and other foreign policy issues.

Like Obama, Netanyahu is unlikely to move forward on the Palestinian front when faced with such a clear domestic cost. It is possible, though unlikely, that he will decide to push for early elections. The national security challenge presented by the Iranian threat has created a political window for the Likud Party and the Israeli right in general; indeed, Netanyahu emerged so strongly in the previous election largely because of the security climate at the time.

## **SUSAN GLASSER**

In a shift away from the traditional mass media paradigm of past campaigns, foreign policy issues have not been headline news in the American presidential campaign thus far, falling instead to increasingly niche subsets of the electorate. Although such issues are therefore unlikely to swing the outcome of either the primary or general election, many factors might yet bring foreign policy to the forefront.

The debate over Iranian nuclearization demonstrates the extent to which foreign policy has been relegated to the background for most voters. Iran may frame the political discussion in Washington -- indeed, senior administration officials have called 2012 the "year of Iran" -- but this is not necessarily the case for the majority of Americans. The public certainly opposes allowing Iran to gain nuclear weapons and has formed a broad consensus on sanctions being the preferred course of action. Yet when it comes to the presidential election, this remains the year of jobs and the economy. These are not completely unrelated conversations, of course; the price of oil and the ability of the fragile U.S. economic recovery to sustain further foreign shocks are indeed integral to the domestic economic discussion. On its own merits, however, the Iran issue is unlikely to drive electoral outcomes.

This dynamic could shift if Mitt Romney secures the Republican nomination. In that scenario, Romney would inevitably attempt to draw clear distinctions between himself and Obama on national security policy. Yet Obama's record as the president who ordered Usama bin Laden's takedown and who has not been afraid to employ the full range of American force may undercut some of the Republican arguments against him.

Changes abroad could also affect the American electoral discussion. Many potential political transitions are set to take place this year: elections in Russia, Israel, France, Egypt, and even Mexico could have ramifications that shift the domestic debate. China's leadership transition, slated for October, has also been largely unappreciated as a potential shaper of the election. In fact, differing perspectives on U.S. policy toward Beijing illustrate how important the narrative of American decline will be in the coming campaigns. Concerns that the United States has fallen off as a superpower -- and that the tools available for dealing with security challenges have therefore become increasingly limited -- will inevitably be connected to the debate on the Middle East as the election unfolds. The lack of discussion on Afghanistan stems from a similar dynamic, reflecting in part a political consensus that this is not the time for muscular imposition of American will abroad.

Of course, 2011 should serve as a reminder that foreign policy predictions can be drastically inaccurate. Only a year ago, the notion that three Middle Eastern leaders would be ousted and several others would be on the ropes would have sounded absurd. Many more such surprises could unfold this year, including the potential for events in Europe to affect the global economy and, in turn, the U.S. election.

*This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Cory Felder. ❖*

---

## RECOMMENDED

### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



### ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

#### [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆  
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

### TOPICS

[Arab-Israeli Relations \(/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations\)](#)

[Energy & Economics \(/policy-analysis/energy-economics\)](#)

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](#)

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](#)

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](#)

