

America and the Middle East, circa 2006

Jan 25, 2006



Brief Analysis

On January 11, 2006, James F. Hoge Jr. and Stuart Rothenberg addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Mr. Hoge is the Peter G. Peterson chair at the Council on Foreign Relations and editor of its flagship journal, *Foreign Affairs*. Mr. Rothenberg is editor and publisher of the *Rothenberg Political Report* and a twice-weekly columnist for the Capitol Hill newspaper *Roll Call*. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

JAMES F. HOGE JR.

Barring any unforeseen developments in the region, there will be very little change in U.S. policy toward the Middle East this year. Terrorism will remain the top priority overall. In addition, the Bush administration will continue to maintain the priorities that have defined American approaches over recent decades, such as preserving energy supplies, containing strife, ensuring Israel's existence, and working with allies such as Turkey. Further, the White House will reiterate its condemnations of the Syrian regime -- though it will refrain from more active policies of regime change for fear that a new government would be even worse. However, the issues of democratization, Iraqi development, the Iranian nuclear program, and the Israeli-Palestinian issue will also be high on the agenda in 2006.

Democratization. Democratization in the Middle East will follow a more sluggish pace in 2006 than the one envisioned at the beginning of the Iraq war. Last year witnessed some important efforts in countries like Egypt, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia, yet these will not lead to a great deal of progress in the near future. The systemic changes the president seeks will not happen overnight and may take a generation to unfold. The United States should focus on laying the groundwork for coming generations through an emphasis on assisting local reform groups, the rule of law, and economic growth.

Iraq. Democratization in Iraq is no longer the administration's primary objective. Rather, the United States's top priorities are to secure the country, protect American troops, and withdraw some soldiers -- though the White House will not immediately rush to the exits. Indeed, no more than 50,000 will likely be removed in 2006. Since true democracy in the short term is a lost cause, the president will accept an Iraqi government that is relatively stable and that largely respects human rights. Much effort will be spent to avoid civil war by convincing Shiites and Kurds to establish an inclusive governing coalition, and encouraging Sunnis to participate in the political process. An important component of this will be pressing for an amended constitution. The overwhelming abundance of negatives in Iraq -- strong insurgency, lack of consistent electricity, widespread instability -- and their probable detrimental impact on Republicans in 2006 and 2008 elections do not appear to affect the president's drive to stay the course and build a legacy for his tenure.

Iran. The emergence of Iran's nuclear program presents a significant shift in American concerns about the Islamic Republic. Iran is seeking ways to extend the range of its missiles, which, though inaccurate, will be extremely dangerous for Israel and Europe when armed with nuclear warheads. As two camps have formed within the White House on this issue -- one claiming there is room to work with the Iranian regime and the other searching for paths to regime change -- the United States has yet to voice a coherent policy. The United States must establish a unified

external front with the Europeans, Russians, and Chinese that focuses on options aside from military strikes, such as containment, sanctions, and other measures to prevent the spread of dangerous nuclear technology and materials.

Israel and the Palestinians. In the current context, there are no prospects for permanent-status negotiations. Israeli politics is in a stopping period; all eyes are focused on what support and authority a post-Ariel Sharon government will possess. Until these internal uncertainties are resolved, there will be little interest in addressing Palestinian issues and engaging in any serious talks. A government led by Ehud Olmert would be the most preferable outcome for the Bush administration, as it will be most likely to continue Sharon's approach. On the Palestinian side, corruption in Fatah, dysfunction in the Palestinian Authority, and the anticipated rise of Hamas in upcoming elections pose a huge risk to the stability of the situation. In order to realistically disarm and moderate Hamas, however, there must be a strong government in the territories, which is unlikely to happen. There have been no moves by the Bush administration to become more deeply involved in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and no significant intervention appears on the horizon.

STUART ROTHENBERG

In the years following the Cold War, domestic policy emerged as the focal point of national and local elections. The September 11 attacks in 2001 dramatically altered the face of American politics and shifted the emphasis back to national security and foreign affairs. As voters grow increasingly impatient with the negative turns in Iraq and public opinion polls display a significant reversal in support for the war, this year's political developments and the outcomes of midterm electoral contests will be shaped by U.S. policy in the Middle East, the war in terror, and the conflict in Iraq.

The president and the GOP. The last year proved disastrous for the president due to a combination of high gas prices, the poor response to Hurricane Katrina, a Supreme Court nomination, exposure of the National Security Agency's domestic spying operations, corruption scandals, and legal troubles. However, the war in Iraq and negative developments in the Middle East remain the dominant issues plaguing the administration. Since his reelection in November 2004, President Bush has watched his approval ratings drop from 53 percent to 42 percent, has lost backing for his handling of the war on terror, and has seen support for the Iraq war decrease significantly. Americans' decreased backing for the White House approach in Iraq has been the chief issue undermining the president's credibility. Unless the situation in Iraq improves dramatically and the president can take credit for a brighter outlook, the country's opinion of the president's leadership will become increasingly negative. As a result of these shifts in public opinion, the administration and the Republican leadership across the board are much weaker now than they were a year ago. While current signs indicate continued GOP control over both houses of Congress following the 2006 elections, there is the potential for significant Republican losses.

The Democratic Party. For many Democrats on the campaign trail, the emphasis still rests with health care, education, and ethics issues; indeed, Iraq and foreign policy as a whole are considered afterthoughts for many candidates. The Democrats do not currently possess a clear alternative to the president's strategy on Iraq and most are not rushing to join the ranks of Representative John Murtha or Senator Russell Feingold in calling for a timeline for withdrawal. Despite attempts by conservative pundits and Republican leaders to use this perceived disunity against the Democrats, the Democrats see no need at this time for a specific proposal about Iraq. The portrait of failed Republican policies is far more effective than any vague proposition the Democrats could establish. Considering this changed outlook, the Democratic Party is very wisely treating the upcoming elections as a referendum on the leadership of President Bush and the Republicans Party.

Beyond electoral politics, in the realm of policymaking, the Iraqi conflict continues to tie the administration's hands on attempts to stymie Iran's nuclear ambitions and promote greater democratization efforts in the region. In addition, the White House has not made a major push to engage Iran in talks or actively participate in multilateral

negotiations, thereby failing to convince Americans that the Iran issue is important. Further, though it is coming incredibly late in the game, increased funding for Arabic language training would be an easy sell in Congress, since it hits at the heart of reforms in the intelligence community and vital national security concerns. Regardless of the debates that may arise in legislative sessions, however, Iraq is poised to dominate the national discourse and dictate political developments in 2006.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Jonathan Powell.

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