

Slow and Steady, Bush's Mideast Race

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The Bush administration has many problems to keep it preoccupied in its remaining three years, including the challenges of post-Katrina reconstruction and a massive budget deficit. Plus the president and the Republicans in Congress have been weighed down by allegations of misconduct. So it is hardly surprising that some worry that the United States will have little energy to devote to the Middle East other than the stabilization of Iraq.

But the Bush team and many U.S. foreign service professionals would say this concern is misplaced. Their view is that the Middle East is full of chronic problems, but not necessarily acute crises. What is needed is hard work at the ministerial and sub-ministerial level, not major presidential initiatives or energy-consuming legislative debates. And this is what the permanent government, guided by the political leadership on foreign and security policy, is good at, even if the White House and Congress are preoccupied with domestic problems.

The most obvious case in point is Iraq. The Bush team thinks that defeating the insurgency and strengthening the weak and fragile Iraqi government will require a lot of hard work to stay the course, not a complete rethinking of the U.S. approach. Gone are the expectations of the first year after Saddam's fall that the decisive corner is about to be turned, leading to the end of resistance by former regime dead-enders and to a new Iraqi government, which could take over full responsibility for the country's future.

Ever since the Fallujah/Najaf offensives of April 2004, the Bush approach has been to work for one modest step forward after the next, and to prepare for a long and stubborn counter-insurgency campaign. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has spoken about the insurgency lasting ten years or more. The strategy adopted since then has made steady if unspectacular progress at strengthening Iraqi institutions, which is the prerequisite for later success against the insurgency. The new Iraqi security forces are improving, though at the slow place which historical precedent should lead us to expect; the prospect is that they will take on much of the fight in the next few years. Only they can defeat the insurgency, not least because they have the staying power: One day, the Americans will leave.

Nowhere has Bush's rhetoric been more grand than about promoting democratic reform in the Middle East. Whereas many critics focus on the obvious shortcomings in the region, the Bush team argues that evolution even if at a modest pace is the best approach. Instant democracy does not work in totalitarian states; where tried in the former Soviet Union, the result was a reversion to the past antidemocratic practices, only in a new form. Revolutions have not brought progress to the Middle East, whether in Iran in 1979, Iraq in 1958, or Egypt in 1952. And so the Bush

team is encouraged by the small changes in Egypt and the Gulf monarchies, as well as the unexpected progress in freeing Lebanon.

For the Bush team, the challenge is keeping up the pressure for additional progress toward the goals these regimes have set for themselves. While one may be cynical about how committed long-time authoritarians are to opening up their regimes, it would be hard to deny that today, compared to three years ago, democracy is much more on the agenda of Arabs, elites and ordinary people alike.

Iran's nuclear program is another area where the Bush team sees slow progress. The key here has been forging an international consensus, with the prospect that Iran will back down when faced with a united stance among the great powers. After all, Iran did agree in 2003 to freeze its overt nuclear fuel-cycle program when confronted with European-U.S. unity. Tehran restarted the program only when it persuaded itself that Russia and China would stand by it. Already, those two countries -- and indeed nearly every country which spoke in the September debate at the International Atomic Energy Agency -- agree that Iran's nuclear fuel-cycle program is unacceptable, although they disagree on what to do about it.

There is good reason to hope that Russia will take a common stance with its G-8 partners, rather than risk blowing up next summer's Moscow G-8 Summit, on which Putin places such high priority, and there is a reasonable prospect that confronted with such unity, Iran will refreeze its open program. That will hardly be the end of our concerns, but it should considerably slow down Iran's covert programs.

Much the same approach -- grand vision, slow and difficult progress from steady, hard work -- is applied by the Bush team toward defeating terrorism and promoting Israeli-Palestinian peace. While it is easy to focus on the problems of the war against terrorism, for the Bush administration the most basic fact is that the United States has had no attacks on its soil since September 11, 2001 -- and not from lack of effort or desire. Similarly, on the Israeli-Palestinian front, problems abound, but a fair observer would have to say that the last year has seen progress in containing terror attacks, improving Israel's international standing and giving Palestinians in Gaza greater control over their own lives.

Indeed, in most of the Middle East's trouble spots, the Bush team sees reasonably positive trend lines. The progress is not as fast as would be hoped and there are many setbacks, but the overall tendency is for the better. The tone of the second Bush term is to accept modest progress toward its grand visions. That is at variance with the first Bush term when the grand visions were stressed, often with the implication that with only enough resolve, those visions could soon become reality. That said, this President Bush has a clear sense of where he wants to see the region end up; he does not suffer from his father's problem about the "vision thing" (to use the phrase of a decade ago). George W. Bush sees full consistency between the bold and sweeping language of his 2005 inaugural address, "the expansion of freedom in all the world . . . is the calling of our time," and the slow progress the foreign and security policy professionals are plugging away at. Expect that to be the pattern of the next three years.

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