

The Bush Administration and the Middle East:

Agenda for 2005

Jan 11, 2005



Brief Analysis

As the Bush administration prepares for the next four years, there are clear indications that there will be a greater focus on domestic policy issues -- such as Social Security -- during the president's second term in office. But the transformation of the Middle East is among the four broad priorities on the foreign policy agenda, along with the Doha Round on trade, managing the rise of China, and building regional structures capable of managing failed states. The administration has been frustrated that governments in the region emphasize economic transformation but not political transformation. It wants transformation across the board, not merely a few token nongovernmental organizations and some empty declarations. The sense is that one has to go deeper into cultures and societies, and the United States should be involved in doing this through gentle pressure and better public diplomacy.

There are two specific policy areas in the Middle East that the administration will be dealing with. The first is Iraq. Within the administration some are hopeful about Iraq, others are extremely pessimistic, and yet others express a mixture of optimism and pessimism. One of the areas where there is uncertainty is in regard to the Shiites and the Sunnis. Initially, it was assumed that the people the United States were supporting were the secular groups, who were facing Baathists and Islamists. Now, however, the debate has shifted to how to understand these two religious groups. While some observers have argued that Iraq's Shiites want a religious democracy modeled on neither Tehran nor Ankara, others warn of the threat of an Iranian takeover of Iraq. For the administration, many issues remain unresolved: Who are the Shiites? How salient is the split between them and the Sunnis? Are Grand Ayatollah Ali Husayn al-Sistani and the clerics our salvation? Are the Sunnis willing to accept Shiite rule? How successful have Iraqi prime minister Ayad Allawi's efforts been in reaching out to the Sunnis? There are no clear answers over how positive a role the Shiite clerics can play, just as there is uncertainty over the strength of the insurgency.

The second policy area is the Israeli-Palestinian situation. Here, too, there has been a shift in the mood of the debate: it has been toned down, with both sides sounding like people preparing to enter into their fourth marriage. It now focuses on the nature of the regimes, rather than the borders of the regimes, a shift that President Bush tried to create by addressing the need for accountability in the Palestinian areas. While the death of Yasser Arafat was important, so too was defeating the intifada, because it created the sense that suicide bombings and violence would not lead to concessions. All this has contributed to the cautiously optimistic moment we now find ourselves in. Within parts of the administration, there is the sentiment that the last time Abu Mazen was prime minister the Israelis did not take advantage of the opportunity, and that this time measures such as prisoner releases might help move the situation forward. On the Palestinian side, the emphasis is on whether they can wisely administer and spend the aid money they receive as part of greater efforts to be more responsible. Overall, the sense is that the two sides should take the lead while avoiding a rush toward final status talks.

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There is much cause for pessimism right now with regard to the Middle East, largely though not entirely due to the

situation in Iraq. It is abundantly clear that Iraq is not ready for elections on January 30 in anything but a symbolic sense, as the climate, particularly in Sunni areas, makes a real election almost impossible. Indeed, there is even reason to fear that the elections will make the situation worse because the elected government may be seen as being the result of a "Shiite moment." This makes it crucial that Sunni interests be incorporated into the new Iraq. Yet while it is clear that a kind of civil war has already begun, it is also a fact that many parts of Iraq -- in the south as well as in many of the Kurdish areas to the north -- are stable and secure. This has resulted in a de facto partition in the country, which is not entirely a bad thing. On the ground, the reality is that in Sunni areas the insurgents are winning. Their campaign of intimidation and terror has been successful. Mosul, for example, was a success story a year ago, but through a systematic campaign by the insurgents many of the accomplishments there have been unraveled.

So what is next? There are three ways by which the situation might be turned around. First, the United States can capitalize on the de facto partition of the country by pumping money into stable areas of the country, thereby making those areas showplaces. Second, the insurgency must be tackled, in part by improving the state of our intelligence. Finally, Iraq's Shiite religious leadership must recognize that a condition of American support for their goals is what the United States would regard as inclusive, responsible behavior -- that is to say that the rights of Sunnis must be respected.

In addition to Iraq, the United States faces several other issues in the region. With regard to Iran, the United States should embark on a discreet, even secret effort to see if there is some way to address both countries' interests in a solution that will provide openness and exchange. The worst thing this country could do in terms of its strategic desire to see a different Iran would be to keep it in quarantine. In the Israeli-Palestinian arena, there is certainly cause for careful optimism. The essence of good policy for the United States is to respect and protect the desire of the majority of both Palestinians and Israelis to move out of the zero-sum situation toward something that may bring negotiation and change. Finally, there is the broad strategy of democratization. One of the biggest things that changed after September 11 is that the United States moved from being a status-quo power to being a transformative power because of the judgment that the status quo was deadly. While many observers were overly optimistic about this process in the Arab world, things are still going in the right direction. Despite all the U.S. mistakes in Iraq, reform is the top priority in every Arab society. It is important to keep in mind, however, that Arabs have to make their own history, and U.S. efforts to make it for them will not succeed.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Naysan Rafati. ❖

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