

The Democratic Party's Platform and the Middle East

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Brief Analysis

The 2004 Democratic Party platform, "Strong at Home, Respected in the World," which will be formally adopted today at the party's convention in Boston, reflects the prominence of foreign policy in this year's election. Indeed, nearly half the document is devoted to strengthening American security policy after September 11 and U.S. Middle East policy writ large, including terrorism, weapons of mass destruction (WMD), democracy promotion, Arab-Israeli peace, U.S. military readiness, homeland security, and energy independence. By comparison, only ten of the fifty pages in the 2000 platform were devoted to foreign policy, and the Middle East did not stand out as a region of particular concern.

The War on Terror and Alliance-Building

A major motif of the Democratic platform is the correlation between building alliances and enhancing national security. The platform states: "Agents of terrorism work in the shadows of more than 60 nations, on every continent. The only possible path to victory will be found in the company of others, not walking alone." In the same vein, the platform repudiates President George W. Bush's doctrine of unilateral preemption, declaring that it has alienated allies "and cost us the support of other nations." The platform cites Afghanistan as an example of the need to deepen already existing multilateral action. It also puts forward the need to deal with other failed and failing states by providing international assistance as part of an effort to close down terrorist havens. Finally, it advocates a concerted effort against terrorist financing, proposing a "name and shame" campaign against those nations that finance terror, in addition to barring them from the U.S. financial system.

Intelligence and WMD

On the issue of intelligence reform, the platform embraces a key recommendation of the 9/11 Commission: the creation of a true "director of national intelligence" post with real control over intelligence personnel and budgets. Regarding WMD, the section of the platform titled "Keeping Weapons of Mass Destruction Out of the Hands of Terrorists" calls for an ambitious international effort to lock away existing fissile material and limit the production of new stockpiles. On Iran, the platform declares that a "nuclear-armed Iran is an unacceptable risk to us and our allies." Yet, it does not indicate what an administration led by John Kerry would actually do to prevent that occurrence, nor whether Iranian nuclear development short of actual weapons would be acceptable.

Democracy Promotion

The platform states that the United States is facing a fundamental battle of ideas, one that pits democracy and tolerance against those who would use any means and attack any target in order to impose their narrow views. In that context, fighting terrorism "requires a major initiative in public diplomacy to support the many voices of freedom in the Arab and Muslim world, establishing a cooperative international education initiative, and supporting human rights groups, independent media, and labor unions dedicated to building a democratic culture from the grassroots up." The platform declares, "Democracy will not blossom overnight, but America should speed its growth by sustaining the forces of democracy against repressive regimes and by rewarding governments that work toward this end." This declaration in favor of democracy promotion over cooperation with repressive regimes makes clear that -- at least in principle -- the party is choosing democracy over stability, despite a recent interview in which Kerry suggested that Middle East democratization would not be a top priority for him.

Iraq

The Democratic plan for handling Iraq appears in the democracy section of the platform, providing a rationale for continued U.S. involvement in that country: "We will restore America's credibility and commitment as a force for democracy and human rights, starting in Iraq." In an attempt to unify the party's approach to Iraq by leaving behind past disagreements, the platform concedes, "People of good will disagree about whether America should have gone to war in Iraq." It then castigates the Bush administration, alleging that it exaggerated its case for war, acted without the support of allies, stopped short of exhausting diplomatic alternatives, underestimated the number of troops needed for the war, and failed to plan for postwar contingencies. From this litany, the platform builds an agenda based on internationalizing the presence in Iraq, strengthening Iraqi security, and improving the economic situation. It also asserts that an improvement in relations abroad will trigger greater international troop contributions. The platform's only other concrete policy prescription regarding increased internationalization is the creation of an "international High Commissioner to serve as the senior international representative working with the Iraqi government." This commissioner would oversee elections, assist with drafting the constitution, and coordinate reconstruction. Since first proposing this idea in May 2004, the Kerry campaign has yet to detail how such a commissioner would carry out those responsibilities. The platform also calls for increased security efforts in the form of improving conditions and equipment for U.S. troops and intensifying programs aimed at training Iraqi security forces. The platform depicts such training as pivotal for a U.S. exit strategy.

The Middle East Peace Process

The first paragraph of the platform's discussion of the Middle East -- which contains a pledge of support for the "special relationship" between the United States and Israel -- is lifted directly from the party's 2000 platform. Interestingly, the subsequent statement that "Jerusalem is the capital of Israel and should remain an undivided city accessible to people of all faiths" does not appear to account for the Clinton Parameters of December 2000, which called for the establishment of a Palestinian capital in Arab east Jerusalem and divided sovereignty over the city's holy sites.

The platform stands out from its predecessor in its call for "the creation of a democratic Palestinian state dedicated to living in peace and security side by side with the Jewish state of Israel," and in its commitment to "work to transform the Palestinian Authority by promoting new and responsible leadership, committed to fighting terror and promoting democracy." This support of a democratic Palestinian state and a reformed Palestinian Authority mirrors the Bush administration's policies. The platform also reiterates the commitments that President Bush made to Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon in their correspondence of April 14, 2004, calling for Palestinian refugees to return to the Palestinian state, not to Israel, labeling Israel a "Jewish state," and recognizing that "it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949" -

- a de facto acknowledgement that Israel will retain some West Bank territory as part of a final settlement.

The only divergence between the platform and Bush administration policy is the implication that Kerry would engage in direct negotiations between the parties "with the kind of resolve to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that President Clinton showed." This statement reiterates a critique offered by Kerry in a recent interview: "This administration disengaged for fourteen straight months in an unprecedented fashion, allowing the Middle East to sort of spiral down. I believe we should be consistently engaged."

Singling Out the Saudis

The platform makes two mentions of Saudi Arabia -- one explicit, one implicit, and both critical of Riyadh. The explicit mention concerns terrorist financing: "In the specific case of Saudi Arabia, we will put an end to the Bush administration's kid-glove approach to the supply and laundering of terrorist money." The platform also alludes to the Saudis in discussing a U.S. "plan to end dependence on Mideast oil." It suggests that Washington is often forced into silence regarding democracy in the Middle East due to "the practices of some governments" on whose oil the United States depends. The platform asserts that "a strong America must no longer rely on the cooperation of regimes that do not share our values." It also calls for developing an array of alternative energy sources and moving away from OPEC by investing in infrastructure and natural gas in non-OPEC countries. This year marks the first time since Jimmy Carter led the party's ticket that energy policy and the call for energy independence have figured prominently in a Democratic platform, further highlighting the impact of September 11 and the desire to free Middle East policy options from the constraints of oil needs.

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