Looking Ahead:

U.S. Policy in the Middle East

Sep 19, 2003

In-Depth Reports

There are many different strategies for addressing an audience as distinguished and well-informed as this one. Mark Twain, one of my favorite American authors, said his approach was to keep talking until he had his audience cowed. I will try to spare you that particular strategy this morning. Instead, I hope that my remarks will be part of an ongoing dialogue between my colleagues and me, in the American government, and all of you who have thought so long and worked so hard on the profoundly important issues of American policy in the Near East. I know this may shock you, but the Department of State has no monopoly on wisdom on any of these issues. And if you do not believe me, there is no shortage of people in Washington, D.C., these days who will confirm that fact for you.

It seems to me that four interconnected challenges frame the American policy agenda in the Near East today: First, the challenge of helping Iraqis, liberated from the tyranny of Saddam Husayn, to build the secure, stable, and prosperous country they deserve. Second, the challenge of renewing progress toward the two-state vision for Israelis and Palestinians that President George W. Bush has outlined, and which is so deeply in the interests of both peoples. Third, the struggle against terrorists and their state sponsors, as well as against the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). And fourth, not least, the historic challenge of supporting home-grown efforts at economic and political reform in a region that has, for too long, known too little of either.

I am not naive. These are enormously difficult problems, and change will not come easily, neatly, or quickly. But taken together, they offer a positive agenda for the region and for American interests and values. They offer a basis for making common cause with people and leaderships struggling against the militant minorities who threaten us all. And they offer a basis for hope, the ultimate antidote to the despair on which violent extremists breed. Let me touch briefly on each of those four challenges.

I returned a few days ago from my second trip to Iraq in the past month. I came away with a sense of how big and complicated a task we and the Iraqi people face after decades of brutal misrule by Saddam Husayn, and of how powerful are the possibilities before us. There can be no doubt that security and the restoration of power and basic services are daunting and immediate problems. So, too, are the issues of economic reconstruction and accelerating a political process to return to Iraqis control of their own affairs. But there can also be no doubt that Iraqis are finally free from the terrible atrocities and waste of the regime of Saddam Husayn.

Last week, I joined Secretary of State Colin Powell on his visit to the memorial at Halabja, where 5,000 Kurdish men, women, and children were gassed to death by Saddam in 1988. Last month, I visited the mass grave at Mahawal, where more than 10,000 Shi'i victims of Saddam were executed in 1991. I cannot imagine anyone visiting those places and not understanding the fundamental wisdom of President Bush's decision to act against Saddam Husayn. Saddam's "republic of fear" is gone, and it will never return.

Ambassador Bremer and our coalition partners are hard at work with Iraqis to shape a more hopeful path. Forty-six thousand Iraqi police officers have been rehired, and Jordan has agreed, in principle, to host training programs for

thousands more. Essential services are being restored, with electrical generation nearly back to prewar levels. Jobs programs are in place to employ Iraqis in rebuilding transportation and municipal infrastructure. The Iraqi Governing Council and new Iraqi cabinet ministers, some of whom are with us at this conference, are taking on more and more responsibility for national policy. A legal framework for a truly independent judiciary has just been announced. A new central-bank governor has been appointed, who will be in charge of introducing Iraq's new unified currency next month. The Governing Council has recently endorsed new tariffs and is now discussing worldclass reforms to open the country to productive foreign investment. The process of drafting a constitution for a democratic Iraq and preparing for elections is beginning. The Arab League has taken a very important step in accepting Iraqi representatives, and more progress toward Iraq's reintegration will come next week at the UN General Assembly.

It would be foolish to underestimate the obstacles on the path ahead. But it would be equally foolish to underestimate what is at stake. Continued progress will take enormous effort and resources, as the president's request to Congress for $20 billion to help rebuild Iraq's infrastructure makes clear. Progress will require Iraqis to retake ownership of their nation's future as rapidly as possible. And it will require a steady widening of international support through the new UN Security Council resolution now under discussion in New York, as well as the Donors' Conference in Madrid in October. Nothing is more important to America's agenda in the Near East today than getting Iraq policy right. We and the Iraqi people, with our partners in the international community, have our work cut out for us, but we are pointed in the direction that can, and must, succeed. We simply cannot afford the alternative.

Alongside Iraq, there is a second compelling, complicated, and endlessly frustrating challenge on our policy agenda: how to rekindle some sense of hope for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. I hardly need to tell any of you in this audience that such hope is in short supply right now. It is evaporating because of the understandable rage of Israelis suffering through horrible acts of terror. It is being swallowed up by the frustrations and the daily humiliations of Palestinians living under occupation. And what is being lost in the process is the vision of two states that President Bush laid out on June 24, 2002. The president made clear the logic that had implicitly governed the project of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, at least since Madrid in 1991: the aspirations of Israelis and Palestinians can only be realized through a peace negotiated between them that gives Israel security and acceptance in the region and the Palestinians a viable independent state of their own.

The simple fact remains that such a Palestinian state cannot be built upon a foundation of terror and violence. It cannot. On that, there can be no concessions, no flexibility, no turning a blind eye. Palestinians will have to be honest with themselves on this point, and they will have to confront those among them who would drag Palestinian dreams further down a tragic, dead-end path.

As President Bush has emphasized repeatedly, a transformed Palestinian leadership is essential. Ending violence and reforming Palestinian political institutions are not favors to any outsider -- they remain deeply in the Palestinians' self-interest. They are the only workable path to statehood and the end of occupation. Arab states have a critical responsibility to encourage such an approach, and to fulfill their pledges at the June 2003 Sharm al-Shaykh Summit to cut off funding and other forms of support for extremist groups. The rest of the international community has responsibilities, too, and the recent decision by the European Union to designate Hamas as a terrorist group is a welcome step. All of us must act decisively and be willing to take risks for peace if hope for a two-state solution is to be preserved.

But the emergence of a Palestinian state alongside a secure Israel is not just a dream of the Palestinian people. Its realization is intimately connected with Israel's future, too, and the kind of Israel that Israelis will pass on to their children and their grandchildren. The demographic picture is stark. By the year 2020, Jews will be a minority in the area encompassing Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. As Israeli settlements expand and their populations increase, it

becomes increasingly difficult to see how the two peoples will be separated into two states. Settlements continue to grow today, encouraged by specific government policies and at enormous expense to Israel's economy. And this persists, even as it becomes clear that the logic of settlements and the reality of demographics could threaten the future of Israel as a vibrant Jewish democracy. For friends of Israel, the conclusion is hard to escape: Settlement expansion should stop, because it ultimately undermines Israeli, as well as Palestinian, interests.

The course of the security fence, not its existence as a barrier between Israel and the West Bank, is a problem as well. Its planned route inside the West Bank further isolates Palestinians from each other, prejudices negotiations, and reduces hope for a two-state solution.

Just as it is essential to drive home to Palestinians that violence and terror will never achieve their aspirations, so too is it important to preserve the possibility that a viable state can be achieved by a new leadership committed once and for all to ending terror and incitement.

That reality underpins the president's continued personal commitment to his June 24 vision, to the Quartet's Roadmap to Israeli-Palestinian peace as a means of achieving it, and to holding all parties accountable for performance of their obligations. The simple fact remains that roadmaps do not implement themselves. As Dennis Ross and other former practitioners of policy in this audience know, there can be no substitute for hard work from all of us, for a willingness to face up to hard truths about what is required to rekindle hope, and for hard choices by all the parties' Palestinians, Israelis, and Arab states alike.

A third policy imperative for the United States in the Near East is the ongoing struggle against terrorism and the spread of WMD. I will touch on a few of the major challenges we face in this area.

The United States and an increasing number of other countries have profound concerns about Iran. The International Atomic Energy Agency has painted a troubling picture of Iran's nuclear program and its noncompliance with its responsibilities under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. We are determined to bring maximum pressure to bear against Iran's continuing pursuit of WMD programs, as well as its continuing support for Hizballah and the Palestinian extremist groups bent on destroying hope for any workable peace process. And we will continue to encourage the Iranian people in their calls for democracy, human rights, and economic reform, which they richly deserve to achieve and which the current clerical regime will never bring them.

Syrian behavior is another serious problem. In May, Secretary Powell made unmistakably clear to President Bashar al-Asad the range of our concerns and what it would take to build a more normal relationship. I reinforced the same message in Damascus in August. The Syrian regime has some tough choices to make. It can continue to harbor and support groups like Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad and engage in behavior that threatens our efforts in Iraq. Or it can act in ways that reflect the new strategic realities in the region: Syria can help restore hope for a resumption of the Syrian-Israeli peace process, encourage the emergence of a stable Iraqi neighbor, and create a better economic future for Syria. But Syria cannot have it both ways.

Libya is a different kind of challenge. Through long and determined diplomacy, backed up by multilateral sanctions, and in partnership with the courageous families of the victims of PanAm Flight 103, earlier this month we were finally able to achieve Libyan performance on obligations more than a decade old, chief among them acceptance of responsibility and payment of compensation. In the process, Libya has moved away from terrorism. The next problem before us, and it is a serious problem, is Libya's pursuit of WMD programs. We have made very clear to the Libyans that any possibility of movement on our bilateral sanctions, which remain firmly in place today, will depend on verifiable abandonment of WMD programs.

The fourth element on our policy agenda, integrally related to the other three, is the longer-term issue of supporting efforts from within the region aimed at democratic change and economic modernization. I have been an American

diplomat for twenty-one years, through four administrations. I have spent much of that time working on Middle Eastern issues. It is a fair criticism of all of our efforts during those years to say that we have never paid adequate attention to the long-term importance of opening up some very stagnant political systems, especially in the Arab world. This is not just a matter of American values or of ensuring basic human rights, crucial as both of those concerns are. It is also a matter of hard-headed American interests.

Stability is not a static phenomenon, and political systems that do not find ways to gradually accommodate the aspirations of their people for participation will become brittle and combustible. The Near East is no more immune from this reality than any other part of the world. I know there are some who argue for a kind of Arab or Muslim exceptionalism on this score, but I do not agree.

Of course, it is true that Arab societies have more than their share of problems and dilemmas to reconcile, and their own peculiarities and unique challenges, but that does not mean they are incapable of gradual democratic change. Assuming otherwise is a flawed analysis and a dangerous basis for policy. When I and other American officials talk about the need for gradual democratic change in the Near East, some may interpret our use of the word "gradual" to mean cosmetic or constantly postponed changes. That would be a mistake. Democratic change in most Arab countries will necessarily be gradual, given the host of challenges they face, the accumulated political pressures, and the sheer difficulty of building democratic societies and governments anywhere. But though I speak of gradual change, I am still speaking very much of the need for real change.

There is no single path by which countries achieve democracy, no one-size-fitsall prescription. But experience from our own country and from the dozens of other countries around the world that have launched into democratic transitions in the past twenty years, highlights several critical areas that must be part of the process.

Arab states will need to expand the space for the institutions of independent civil society -- independent media, citizens' advocacy groups, women's organizations, and many others -- to organize and actively carry out their work. Arab states need to improve their basic practices of governance. This means reducing corruption and cronyism. It means responding better to the daily demands citizens place on their governments and building genuinely independent judicial systems. Arab leaders must also take on the hard work of making elections more inclusive and more fair and giving more power to those institutions whose members are chosen through open elections, like the many parliaments that are now slowly gaining credibility and power throughout the region. As all of you know, elections alone do not a democracy make. Yet, without regular free and fair elections, no country can call itself a democracy.

These are ambitious tasks, ones that countries all around the world have struggled with in their hard climbs to better political futures. But to hold Arab states to any lesser standard is to insult the tremendous capacity for learning and development that the Arab peoples have demonstrated throughout history. Without urgent and significant economic modernization, it is hard to imagine how societies in the region will find the space within which to shape stable, evolutionary democratic reform. It will be hard enough, even with a renewed sense of economic hope.

As things stand now, the economic outlook for many Arab regimes is far from hopeful. Per capita incomes are stagnant or dropping; 45 percent of the population of the Arab world is now under the age of fourteen; the population as a whole will double over the next quarter century; and unemployment hovers at 20 percent. That is not exactly a healthy environment for constructive political change. And that is why President Bush, in his May 9, 2003, speech in South Carolina, and Secretary Powell, through his Middle East Partnership Initiative, have laid such heavy emphasis on innovative new steps, such as pursuit of a Middle East free-trade area over the next ten years.

A truism, but one that we as Americans ought to keep carefully in mind, is that enduring democratic change and economic modernization must be driven from within Arab societies. They cannot be imposed from without. The

extent of selfexamination under way across the region and the tangible steps that some countries are taking toward political reform are encouraging. The 2002 Arab Human Development Report has become a touchstone on this topic, but constant references to it only underscore the eloquence of its authors' argument that gaps in economic openness, political freedoms, educational opportunity, and women's empowerment obstruct the realization of the vast human potential of the Middle East.

The hard truth, as we enter the twenty-first century, is that countries that adapt, open up, and seize the economic and political initiative will prosper; those that do not will fall further and further behind. Across the region, there are signs that at least some leaderships and civil societies grasp that hard truth. Women voted and ran for office in Bahrain's elections last year. Qataris approved a new constitution, and a woman has been appointed minister of education. King Mohammed VI of Morocco, with whom President Bush will meet in New York this week, has launched an impressive reform program. So has King Abdullah II of Jordan, with whom President Bush met at Camp David a few days ago.

Reform is making a difference for Jordanians. As a former U.S. ambassador to Jordan, one statistic that I like to cite is that Jordan's exports to the United States have increased from barely $10 million in 1998 to over $600 million this year. That is no accident. It is the result of bold Jordanian decisions to reform and the creative use of U.S. policy tools, particularly qualifying industrial zones and the bilateral free-trade agreement we concluded in 2000. The rise in exports to the United States has created new jobs for Jordanians, as many as 40,000 in recent years, many of them for women who had never been able to work before. Leaders like King Mohammed and King Abdullah will not have an easy path, but they offer examples of a new, reformist generation of Arab leaders in whose success we ought to invest.

Saudi Arabia and Egypt remain critically important partners for the United States. Both face enormous challenges. Especially since the terrorist attacks in Riyadh last May, Crown Prince Abdullah has acted decisively to strengthen Saudi counter-terrorism cooperation with the United States. He has also begun to offer a vision of gradual domestic reforms and proposed a broader "Arab charter" for enhanced political participation in economic revitalization.

We will continue to work with Egypt to ensure that our assistance programs are harnessed to a sensible program for opening up more economic opportunities for a growing Egyptian population, and to bring Egypt's political weight to bear in support of shared regional objectives on Iraq and the peace process.

Let me conclude with a couple of thoughts about the policy agenda I have tried to sketch for you this morning. First, we have done a pretty good job since September 11, 2001, of making clear what we are against in the Near East -- about our absolute determination to win the war against the violent extremists who threaten us all. But we can do a better job of making clear what we are for in the region -- a stable and prosperous Iraq; a Palestinian state living in peace, security, and dignity alongside Israel -- and the sorts of economic and political changes that are so deeply in the interests of the peoples of the region.

My second point is that we will need to do a better job of listening as we push ahead on that policy agenda, especially on the broader issue of economic and political modernization. Americans, especially those of us in government, need to listen carefully to ideas, advice, and criticisms from the region -- not just from leaders, but from civil-society representatives, businessmen, and ordinary citizens alike. I know that sometimes seems like an unnatural act for American officials, but it is vitally important. And it is also important to listen to what all of you think about the way ahead.

That reminds me of a quotation attributed to the baseball player Yogi Berra. He was once invited to a formal White House dinner. Asked afterward what he thought about it, Berra expressed a certain degree of confusion about the art of conversation in Washington. "It was hard to have a conversation with anyone," he recalled, "because there were so

many people talking."

Let me pay tribute once again to Ambassador Ross, Robert Satloff, and everyone at The Washington Institute for their contributions to sifting through and making sense of all the voices out there on these very complicated issues. Now, I will stop doing all the talking, and listen to your comments and questions. ❖

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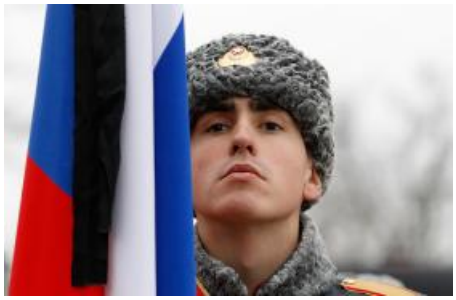

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