

The Bush Administration's Busy Year in the Middle East: A Preview of 2003

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Brief Analysis

DENNIS ROSS

Dilemmas for U.S. Middle East policy will arise in the immediate post-Saddam aftermath. Foremost will be America's preoccupation with stabilizing Iraq and transforming its new government into a democracy. Vague at present is whether U.S.-led forces will focus on existing institutions (e.g., the Iraqi military) or build new ones to achieve these goals. Such decisions will affect the degree and nature of Iraq's transformation, and the new regime's composition could be significantly different if the United States were to depend on a reformed Iraqi military to promote stability. Moreover, Iraqi transformation corresponds directly to a region-wide transformation, because increased efforts to transform Iraq with a broad-based, representative government will send signals of political reform to Iraq's neighbors. U.S. policy must stand ready to assist other Middle Eastern regimes in their transition to more responsible governments that offer their people hope and the prospect for change.

Simultaneously, the United States faces at least two other prominent dilemmas: the war on terror and the Arab-Israeli conflict. First, a U.S. victory in Iraq may translate into increased support for the U.S. war on terror, which has key military, law enforcement, financial, and psychological components. The latter is particularly crucial, as the Bush administration must demonstrate its commitment to democratic growth in the region in order to win the hearts and minds of the Arab and Muslim worlds. This alone, however, does not mitigate U.S. concerns, given the conjunction of rogue states and global terrorist groups -- the marriage of the worst weapons with the worst offenders. Although Washington is likely to focus anew on regimes such as Syria and Iran that support, fund, guide, and equip terrorist groups (e.g., Hizballah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad), the administration has a range of options, from direct confrontation to engagement with various packages of carrots and sticks.

Second, a post-Saddam Iraq will represent a seismic change in the region, creating a moment conducive to engaging Israelis and Palestinians (a well as Arabs more generally) in a new way. Currently, both sides have difficulty believing that peace is really possible, and it is unclear whether the Bush administration should launch an initiative in this context, particularly if it encounters difficulties advancing negotiations. Although in principle a diplomatic roadmap offers a structured approach, the current Quartet proposal is flawed in design. Without substantial improvement in the roadmap, and without a change in the political constellation (e.g., the formation of a Labor-led government in Israel), the administration is unlikely to invest heavily in the path of negotiations.

ROBERT SATLOFF

This is an unusual moment in discussing America in the Middle East: a period of uncertainty based on a certainty. On the one hand, U.S. objectives are more transparent -- and perhaps more dominant compared to other foreign policy items -- than ever in recent memory. The Bush administration is committed to disarming Iraq, either peacefully or forcefully, and the larger array of Middle East issues -- Iraq, Iran, terrorism, weapons of mass destruction (WMD), democratization, the Arab-Israeli conflict -- has collectively emerged as the top foreign policy priority, rather than as an important but secondary regional side show. But the clarity of the administration's priorities today is not determinative of where the administration's priorities will be a year from now, as the first two years of Bush's term bear out.

Three prognostications:

1. Today, the United States faces WMD-based challenges from four sources: Iraq, North Korea, Iran, and terrorist cells, like those in North London caught manufacturing Ricin. At the moment, Iraq and North Korea are on the front page; we should not be surprised if the other two threats -- Iran's nuclear program and the marriage of terrorism and WMD -- are on the front page by year's end. The latter are, in many ways, more complicated, because they both lack a single, megalomaniacal leader; in Iran, the pursuit of nuclear weapons is a nationalist as well as Islamist project; among terrorists, the "address" is so diffuse (e.g., London, Rome, Tokyo) that there is no address at all.
2. The Arab-Israeli conflict itself is unlikely either to demand or receive as much attention by the administration in the post-Iraq war period as many believe; however, managing U.S.-European differences over the Arab-Israeli problem is likely to be a major preoccupation of the administration. On its own terms, the situation between Israelis and Palestinians is neither so ripe for progress nor so urgent in terms of its impact on the lives, liberties, and properties of American citizens that the administration will make resolving the conflict a high-level presidential priority. Four variables could change this: Israel's Labor Party forms the next government; Israel harms or forcibly removes Arafat; others -- Palestinians or Arab leaders -- force Arafat's removal; Arafat dies at his ripe old age. The first three scenarios are unlikely (though with a narrow, Likud-led government Arafat's fate is not certain), and the fourth is not a wise bet. Europe sees the situation differently. Its elite believes that the conflict threatens European security interests directly, and its "street" is clamoring for pressure on Israel for a quick and imposed solution. That feeling will be magnified a hundred-fold by a war in Iraq, and a thousand-fold if that war lacks a quorum of international support. While evident in France, these sentiments are growing even in Britain, a reality that may eventually force President Bush to choose between his friend Tony Blair and his friend Arik Sharon.
3. Arab elections to watch in 2003 are the legislative vote in Jordan and the local vote in Morocco, two of the Arab countries most supportive of U.S. policy. Because these are countries in which elections actually mean something -- not everything, of course, but something -- they are useful signals as to whether America's friends have the popular backing to persist in their generally pro-U.S. approach. More generally, these elections are key indicators as to whether 2003 is a year in which (as in 2001 and 2002) U.S. policy focuses on the problems posed by our adversaries (Afghanistan, Iraq) or a year in which Washington becomes more entangled in the problems posed by our friends (Saudi Arabia, Egypt).

FRED BARNES

Two words will govern U.S. politics in 2003: "Bush rules." President Bush is more powerful than ever and has a unique agenda-setting capability, credited to both the aftermath of September 11 and the November 5, 2002, elections that produced Republican control of Congress. In domestic affairs, Bush recently declared a strong stimulus package with tax cuts aimed at improving a declining economy. In foreign affairs, Bush is solely responsible for putting Iraq back on the front burner of the international agenda, after the issue languished dormant for four years in the wake of the expulsion of the inspectors. On all of these issues, he has taken an approach opposite to that of his father -- cutting taxes instead of raising them, and embracing the potential for unilateral American action, if necessary, rather than placing an undue premium on the requirement for alliance participation.

Following a victory over Saddam, the United States will have clout that it can use to promote two policy options. First, Bush could follow his father's 1991 post-Desert Storm policy, reinvigorating the peace process under a new framework. As long as Yasir Arafat controls the Palestinian Authority, however, Bush is unlikely to court the Palestinians with peace overtures. Second, the United States could focus on building democratic institutions in Iraq and on working toward a domino effect in favor of region-wide democracy. This could force rogue regimes to end their support for terrorism, and a democratic shock wave could pressure them toward reform -- and perhaps encourage the Palestinians to finally expel Arafat. In Bush's calculation, stability is the problem, not the solution, and many Middle Eastern regimes should therefore first be destabilized, in a positive fashion, in order to facilitate democratic reform.

E. J. DIONNE

President Bush is the strongest party leader in modern American politics. He has broad-based support among Americans, and while there is an ambivalent center with regard to Bush's Iraq policy (and a small but vocal antiwar movement), a solid 35-40 percent support both an attack on Iraq and Saddam's removal. Bush is a polarizing, partisan leader for a few reasons: the administration's "Clinton aversion" and rejection of all Clinton policy objectives such as the Middle East peace process; Republican candidates' use of the national security issue in the 2002 congressional campaign to suggest that Democratic candidates are indifferent about American lives; and Bush's boldness in pursuing a conservative domestic agenda. Such polarity could foster problems in crafting and implementing U.S. Middle East policy in the coming year. Moreover, the potential for terror on U.S. soil during a U.S.-led invasion of Iraq complicates matters. Although in the short term it would galvanize support for the war, in the long term it could create problems and doubt concerning Bush's plan.

In a post-Saddam Iraq, there is a high likelihood of alliance scrambling, prompting liberals initially reluctant to wage war to accept the responsibility of "nation building." Yet, Bush, who is obsessed with avoiding the one-term presidency that was his father's fate, risks losing popularity if the economy continues to decline. One interesting issue will be whether the administration continues to court the Muslim vote, as in 2000, while the Jewish vote may, for the first time since the Reagan presidency, be open to Republican inroads -- given the administration's support for Israel and tough stance on terrorism. On the Democratic side, presidential candidates will likely improve their chances to defeat Bush if they engage, rather than evade, discussing his policies on the region in general, as well as the wars in Iraq and on terrorism in particular.

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