

The Middle East in U.S. Global Strategy

May 23, 2000



Brief Analysis

On May 19, 2000, Leon Fuerth, national security adviser to Vice President Al Gore, and Robert Zoellick, a foreign policy adviser to Texas governor George W. Bush, jointly addressed The Washington Institute's annual Soref Symposium. Following are excerpts from their discussion. [Read an edited transcript.](#)

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LEON FUERTH

"If you ask where might the center of the world be in the twenty-first century, a not unreasonable answer would be in the Middle East. . . . First of all, for the obvious reason that it is still a flashpoint for war. Clearly no longer, at least for the time being, a flashpoint for war between ourselves and the Russians, but definitely a flashpoint for war between the regional combatants. And until that's settled, our security interests will never be entirely straight in the area. It attracts our attention because of our relationship with Israel. That is a relationship that is not based on economics but on shared values and principles. It also attracts our attention because of resources. That's too obvious really to go into. It also attracts our attention because therein is the Arab world, and in the future of our relationship with the Arab world as a whole there is much that affects the destiny of the United States. This is after all a world full of people who are struggling to reclaim a sense of place and glory in the world, who have great talents, great energies, and . . . through whose territories crisscross the paths of many of the most dangerous terrorists in the world."

Iraq. "With respect to Saddam Husayn, I think we have come to the same understanding, which is that so long as he is in power, he is a menace. . . . The issue will be settled in time with persistence and determination. He is well hedged in terms of the protection of his position and power. It would take an unusually cruel assault on Iraq as a whole to dislodge him by use of pure military force. So we will have to bide our time. . . . But I think we do agree that the peace is not safe while he is still in power.

"Ultimately, Saddam Husayn is going to make a mistake. He is going to make a mistake that plays into our hands. The art of it will be to be poised to respond to that mistake when it occurs, because that mistake will confer upon us the legitimate right to deal with him. Possibly the Iraqi opposition will be in a position to help that process along, but they are far from being internally united, far from being in a position to effectively use all of the money that Congress made available, far more prone to attacking each other and to concentrating on how to deal with their common enemy. So we are working with them, trying to encourage them to unite and to focus on what needs to be done. And we have begun to use some of these funds. But we need to see that they are ready to employ them with a degree of wisdom. And we are encouraging that."

Iran. "One of the interesting things to speculate about is if there is a sudden shift in the course of Iranian history as a result of the conflict which is now in a way in front of us. And if it is the modernizers who win, will they eventually work their way out of a frame of mind that insists on pursuing weapons of mass destruction and insists on engaging with state terror, and instead fully rejoin the family of nations with more responsible behavior? They might. One would have to see. And if we see an opening in this direction, one would certainly have to encourage it.

"The Russians have profoundly bet their own safety and future security upon a mistaken premise. The premise is that they could buy long-term Iranian friendship, and that Iran would not make trouble for Russia in the vulnerable parts of its former range; and that in places like Chechnya, Iran would back off; and that they also had common concerns with the Iranians about the Taliban and so on upon which they could concert action.

"We have been working over an extended period of time to awaken the Russians to the risks of what has been going on, to specify actions that we wanted to see from the Russians, to leverage our assets against Russian behavior in this regard. We have varying degrees of success--some of it good, some of it much work [is still] to be done."

Peace Process. "We see the painful choices that Israel is confronted with making. Our record in the region is I think matchless in terms of our support for the state of Israel, and not just under Barak and not just under Netanyahu and not just under Peres, but under Rabin. And we did that because we accepted as an axiom that the security of this state said something about our own definition about who we are, in addition to any reasoning that we can make about how it affected our material interests in the world.

"If we don't quite make a peace, then it falls to the next administration, whichever, to pick up the process. If we do make a peace, it falls to the next administration to have the imagination to figure out how to build on that, how to take it beyond signed pieces of paper to a reality."

ROBERT ZOELLICK

Iraq. "In my view, the U.S. position with Iraq has been substantially weak, and I think the coalition has basically come apart. I think the Gulf states are looking for leadership. . . . The direction you have to go--you have to reverse the momentum. This is not going to happen overnight, but it is going to have to be done with an administration that has some sense of power, has some sense of reliability, and some sense of credibility.

"Everybody knows [the Iraqi opposition] is weak, everybody knows they're divided. But they are going to have to get some substantial political support. Congress, over the objections of the administration, allocated about \$97 million in 1998; \$5 million of that has been drawn, \$60,000 has been spent. That doesn't exactly strike me as an overwhelming force. But beyond that, I think the reality is at some point we know Saddam Husayn will move further. And at that point, as opposed to letting him get an additional step, I think for one step forward he has to get two steps back. And what does that mean to me? To me it means that we eventually have to undermine his position within his own country. . . . And that means slowly taking away pieces of his territory. And we have started to do that in the North. I believe we could do that in the South. I believe that in part this involves air power--it might involve more.

"I believe that at a point where he makes a move, you have to seize control of parts of his territory with air [power]. My own view is that we did this in the North with a relatively small number of battalions at the end of the Gulf War [using] a combination of air power, a small number of battalions, and serious support to the Kurds."

Iran. "[Our allies] clearly want to engage Iran for their own economic and other reasons. I believe if the United States put a real focus on a few key areas, like weapons of mass destruction and terrorism, you could get some support.

"On the question of Iran, you [Leon Fuerth] make a very strong case about how the relationship you develop with Russian leaders gives you the ability to accomplish things. So accomplish them. Stop the flow of things to Iran. Stop the flow of missiles and nuclear technology. But you can't have that one both ways. If you have sacrificed to develop this good relationship, then use it, because I think we probably agree that there is still information and resources and dangerous aspects of a proliferation program going to Iran.

"I know there has been a spate of excitement about the transformation in Iran. But actually as I look at it I am a little bit more worried, because it strikes me that the people who are trying to hold back the change are still very much in control of the tools of security influence; and indeed when they are hunting down Muhammad Khatami's own family,

to say nothing of the action against Iranian Jews and the anti-Semitism, I don't see things moving in such a good direction. What that could suggest to me is that turmoil may build in this society. I do not have confidence that those who want to open up this society are necessarily going to be on the top of that turmoil."

Peace Process. "While I think--at least I hope--we probably have a general agreement about the nature of the Middle East peace process and the need for these decisions to try to promote peace based on Israel's own sense of security and ultimately Israel's own decisions, perhaps where there may be some differences is in the question of the overall environment and what this does to U.S. power and imagery and influence. . . .

"The world needs to know that the United States sees Israel as a strategic partner and would work with Israel on the questions that it faces. At this point in time--and as Leon mentioned--Israel faces some particularly difficult choices. And I think for Israel to make these choices it will be better able to do so if the United States is associated with those choices and works closely with Israel in that process. Ultimately these decisions have to be ones that are made by Israel, because they deal with Israel's security.

"My concern is, as I have tried to make clear today, is you can't just take these problems and look at them case by case. You can't just look at the Middle East peace process and not look at what's happening in the Gulf or what's happening with Iran. You can't look at them without looking at Russia. And you sure can't look at it without having a sense of how U.S. power is perceived in the world."

EXCHANGE ABOUT THE CLINTON-ASAD MEETING IN GENEVA

Robert Zoellick: "I was deeply troubled as an American to see President Bill Clinton go to Geneva and get stiffed by Hafiz al-Asad. Now, at times the United States gets stiffed--I understand that. But frankly, to be honest, that's one of the roles of a secretary of state, not the president of the United States. I was honestly surprised he went to that meeting without knowing what he was going to get. And maybe, the answer is, 'Well, we have to try.' But that's what Secretary Madeleine Albright's job was."

Leon Fuerth: "What makes you think the president didn't know what was supposed to happen? What makes you think that it wasn't Asad who for his own reasons flipped signals at the last moment, at the point of no return? And I am not sure exactly how to deal with that problem, if one is told that a thing is going to happen and one proceeds because the signal is clear. It's one of those things that happens, as you say."

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