

# The Middle East in U.S. Global Strategy

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## In-Depth Reports

**O**n 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. The following is an edited transcript of their discussion. Read the [full, unedited transcript \(templateC07.php?CID=28\)](#) or a [summary \(templateC05.php?CID=1340\)](#).

Robert Satloff, The Washington Institute: This is a conversation -- not a debate. The idea here is for both of these gentlemen to engage each other and the audience about America's priorities in the Middle East and about where the Middle East fits into the larger global agenda. Leon, where do Middle East issues rank in the order of American national security priorities?

Leon Fuerth: They rank close to the core. In many ways the United States is still disentangling itself from recollections of the Cold War. Those people who lived through it still slip every now and then and refer to Russia as the Soviet Union. The United States still sees a map where the center of the world is the Fulda Gap in Europe. In the twenty-first century, however, the center of the world may be in the Middle East. Other coordinates could be placed in the center, but certainly the Middle East is going to be significant.

The most obvious reason for this is that the Middle East is still a flashpoint for war -- no longer between the United States and the Russians, but definitely between the regional combatants. Until that tension is resolved, America's security interests will never be entirely straight in the area. The region also attracts U.S. attention because of America's relationship with Israel -- a relationship that is based not on economics but on shared values and principles. Another obvious reason for U.S. interest in the Middle East -- too obvious to explain -- is the region's wealth of resources.

The region also attracts U.S. attention because in the future of the U.S. relationship with the Arab and Islamic world there is much that affects the destiny of the United States. The Arab world is full of people who are struggling to reclaim a sense of place and glory, who have great talents and great energies. The greater Islamic world also includes Pakistan, which has nuclear weapons, and through whose territories crisscross the paths of many of the most dangerous terrorists in the world. For all these reasons the Middle East -- if not necessarily at the top of the list of regions important to U.S. foreign policy -- is coequal with one or two others.

Robert Zoellick: Generally, U.S. policy must be prioritized. In his speech at the Ronald Reagan Library, Governor George W. Bush discussed the importance of U.S. power in terms of where it chooses to focus its energy so that it achieves a sense of strategic interconnection. At the start of that speech, he identified five priorities, two of which were defending America's interests in the Persian Gulf and advancing the process of peace in the Middle East based on a secure Israel. The United States has different interests in different countries in the region. In the case of Israel, U.S. policy is concerned with moral, philosophical, democratic, and security-related issues. There are other countries, like Saudi Arabia, with whose form of government Washington may not sympathize, but which, for reasons of energy and security against threatening states, the United States has various security commitments. It has interests in countries like Jordan because of Israel's security and for the sake of cooperation against other, more

risky, states. Another danger in this region is the presence of weapons of mass destruction and missiles.

The positions of the two presidential candidates may differ regarding the integration of analysis. The U.S. position vis-à-vis Iraq has been substantially weak, and the coalition has basically come apart. The Gulf States are looking for leadership. The roles of China and Russia, and their relation to this issue, have not been stressed enough in terms of their tremendous potential. Concerning Iran, the United States is at a point of flux; U.S. policy does not call for the right steps regarding weapons of mass destruction. The issue should not be a question simply of priority, but also one of the integration of policies. The former Israeli ambassador to the United Nations made comments about the "strategic envelope" the Persian Gulf is for the Middle East in terms of the peace process and how these issues affect one another. While there is probably a general agreement about the nature of the Middle East peace process and the need to promote peace based on Israel's own sense of security -- and ultimately predicated on Israel's own decisions -- perhaps there may be some differences on the question of the overall regional environment and how it affects U.S. power, image, and influence.

Fuerth: Both assessments are quite similar when it comes to identifying the reasons for attributing such immense significance to the Middle East. Each side also agrees that Iraq and Iran represent "X factors": Iraq because it is coiled and looking for a way to escape the containment in which Iraqi president Saddam Husayn finds himself, and Iran because it is deeply unstable and can be involved with terrorist groups that operate in the rejectionist mode. These same groups may then spill blood in Lebanon in their effort to foil a peace accommodation, thereby interfering with an orderly Israeli withdrawal.

With respect to Saddam, both sides have come to the same understanding: As long as he is in power, he is a menace. To be fair, however, Saddam is a legacy bequeathed to the United States by the administration of former President George Bush, which had a sword at Saddam's throat at the end of the Gulf War but elected not to use it. Once there was peace, and once the United States moved into the post-Cold War period, there were many constraints upon America's freedom of action. One must understand these limitations in terms of the attitudes of the other members of the coalition and the attitudes of countries in the region, like Saudi Arabia, upon whose cooperation Washington depends. These things have tended to place some limits on the extent to which the United States might otherwise exercise power.

The United States looks forward to the time when the people of Iraq are free of Saddam, and Baghdad's relations with Washington begin to improve. The United States has continued to maintain the box in which it flies missions and attacks Iraq when Iraq attacks the United States. Washington struggles with some of its best friends to maintain the sanctions, and President Bill Clinton's administration has also begun to work more closely with the Iraqi opposition. Vice President Al Gore wrote to the opposition recently, saying that he looks forward to meeting with them, and his staff is currently working on such a meeting.

With Saddam, the issue will be settled in time with persistence and determination. The Iraqi leader is well hedged in, for his position and power acts as a protection. It would take an unusually cruel assault on Iraq as a whole to dislodge him by use of pure military force. The United States will have to bide its time and work toward circumstances in which Saddam ultimately conspires to bring about his own downfall. Peace is not safe while he is still in power.

As for Iran, this is a special moment in the history of that country in which one does not know from one day to the next whether the forces of repression are going to attempt to frustrate the will of the people -- which was so clearly expressed in the last election -- and whether the patience of the students will break, bringing them out into the streets and provoking a showdown with the spilling of blood. It is really a time for intense scrutiny. The United States has tried to "prime the pump" with actions it recently took, but the ball is now in Iran's court.

Satloff: Leon just noted that both the Bush and the Clinton administrations tried different strategies in dealing with

Saddam. Neither was successful; Saddam is still there, a reality that indicates the need for time, persistence, and determination to out-wait him until he makes a big enough mistake that will lead to his downfall. Alternatively, is there some new and better strategy out there for the United States to try?

Zoellick: After seven years in office, the Clinton administration should finally take responsibility for its own foreign policy instead of blaming it on the Republicans. The administration rarely refers to Republican successes like the demise of the Soviet Union, the opening of Eastern Europe, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), or the Uruguay Round -- a whole series of accomplishments that the Democrats inherited. The basic reality is that Clinton's policy toward Iraq has been a debacle. The coalition is almost gone, if it is not already. The inspectors have been out for eighteen months, the sanctions regime is barely existing, and even the Central Intelligence Agency director has admitted that Saddam has gotten stronger over time. If U.S. policy is to wait, the results will likely be negative, because Saddam keeps taking steps to strengthen himself.

Satloff: What is the alternative?

Zoellick: First, to understand the alternative, one has to understand what was done wrong; and there were a lot of flaws. In 1993, Saddam tried to assassinate former President Bush, and there were a few lousy cruise missiles sent in the middle of the night in response. In 1994, when Saddam moved forces to southern Iraq, those forces should have been met and taken out. Instead, the message the Clinton administration sent throughout the region was not only that Saddam could move his forces, but that he could move and come out stronger as a result.

Leon refers to a letter that Vice President Gore has sent to the Iraqi opposition. He sent letters to the Kurdish opposition as well -- until 1996, when they got wiped out. That had a major effect in terms of the image U.S. projected in the region. The inspection regime and the event in Columbus, Ohio, also were a major embarrassment for the United States in terms of its image regarding the willingness to use force. The secretary of defense once held up a bag of sugar to illustrate that the same amount of biological agent could destroy large numbers of people -- that the United States consequently had to take out Iraqi biological weapons-producing capability. The Pentagon actually had an aircraft on its way to deliver an attack, and although the vice president may have intended to follow through with the attack, the aircraft was, in the end, pulled back.

Middle East states, and those with interests in the region -- including U.S. allies, are starting to make plans on their own. The Russians are going ahead with their own plans because they assume that, at the end of the day, Saddam will stick around. This is the risk of the policy Leon outlined. U.S. policymakers must instead reverse the negative momentum. This will not happen overnight, but it will have to be done with an administration that has some sense of upholding U.S. power, reliability, and credibility. And this is where everything fits together. The Iraqi opposition is part of the solution. Everybody knows that it's weak and divided, and it's going to have to get some substantial political support. Congress, over the objections of the Clinton administration, allocated about \$97 million in 1998 to the opposition; \$5 million of that has been drawn and only \$60,000 has been spent. That is not an overwhelming force. Beyond that, the reality is that at some point Saddam will move further. As opposed to letting him take an additional step, the United States should force him two steps back. Eventually, the United States has to undermine Saddam's position within his own country and within Russia and France. That means slowly taking away pieces of his territory, which the United States has started to do in northern Iraq. We can also do that in southern Iraq, but it involves air power and maybe even more force.

There was a report in the London Sunday Times about a defector who talked about a chemical weapons exercise. If we wait, and Saddam gets chemical weapons, he may marry them with missiles. Therein lies yet another danger of a wait-and-see strategy.

Fuerth: For the record, the cruise missiles sent in response to the attempted Iraqi assassination of former President

Bush demolished part of the Iraqi intelligence establishment, and the Clinton administration thought that was a clear enough message.

None of the countries upon which the U.S. military depends for regional access want the United States to undertake the kind of approach Bob just described. The reality is that the members of the coalition are not prepared, and have not been prepared, to support the levels of violence that are implied by Bob's suggestions. One must formulate foreign policy within certain practical limits. The United States, together with what its friends and allies have contributed, has applied maximum torque. There is a point at which one can sense that anything further will damage the position of the United States and enhance Saddam's maneuvering room. Once that point has been reached, we must stop applying pressure. That is not necessarily a satisfying solution, but it is the reality. There are certain moves that Saddam could have made that might well have set us up for much more severe consequences. He has been clever enough to avoid taking those steps, and the current administration has been intelligent enough to avoid letting him provoke us into a posture that leaves us isolated and as the focus of censure.

As for the Kurdish opposition, it seems that the Kurds are alive and well, in large part because of things that the United States has been doing consistently in the area as their close partners. Ultimately, Saddam is going to make a mistake that plays into U.S. hands. The United States must be poised to respond to that mistake when it occurs, because it will confer upon Washington the legitimate right to deal with him. Possibly, the Iraqi opposition will be in a position to help that process along, but at the moment it is far from being internally united in a way that would allow it to effectively use all of the money that Congress has made available. Its members are far more prone to attack each other than to concentrate on how to deal with their common enemy. The United States is working with them, trying to encourage them to unite and focus on what needs to be done. The administration has begun to use some of these funds; we need to see that the Iraqi opposition is ready to employ them with a degree of wisdom.

Satloff: Almost all simulations involving Iraq require a certain willingness to entertain the possibility of U.S. forces finishing the job. Is this something worth fighting over?

Zoellick: The United States needs to shape its own environment. Although there are limitations that even a country as powerful as the United States faces, if Washington points in a particular direction and shows that it is serious, success will ultimately come. That is one reason why we do not have support in the Gulf. The Saudis today, for example, are looking to Iran because they think Saddam is not going anywhere. Therefore, it is vital to reverse the momentum. As opposed to allowing Saddam to determine when military force gets used -- which is what we are doing right now -- the United States must strike first.

When Saddam makes a move, we have to use air power to seize control of parts of his territory. We did it in northern Iraq with a relatively small number of battalions at the end of the 1991 Gulf War -- a combination of air power and small battalions -- that provided serious support to the Kurds. The current situation is that the Kurds have gotten badly bloodied, and right now they too expect that their future will remain tied to Saddam. The situation can be turned around, although it may be difficult and much depends on U.S. relations with the Turks.

This also relates to the world of the Middle East peace process, because if people in the larger region see U.S. power waning, and see Saddam or the Iranians developing weapons of mass destruction, it will inevitably have an effect on the environment that the United States created with the end of both the Gulf War and Cold War -- an environment that helped relaunch the Middle East peace process. After the invasion of Kuwait, when Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney went to see the Saudis, one of the first questions posed to him when he asked for permission to bring in troops was, "How many are you going to bring in?" He said "A hundred thousand troops as a start." Prince Bandar bin Sultan's complexion turned completely white, but then he smiled and said, "Well, at least we know that you are serious." The Saudi ambassador then added, "If this were the United States of the Carter administration that sent F-15s at the time of the Iranian revolution and announced in flight that they were not armed, we would not be willing to

do this." In a bipartisan fashion he also said, "Nor, if this were the United States of Ronald Reagan that put troops in Lebanon and then decided to pull them out after one engagement, would we do this."

The features of U.S. power and credibility are going to be fundamental to this exercise. A lot depends on whether Saddam can remain contained. It is important to realistically recognize the Iraqi position and its increasing strength; the inspectors are gone, and Saddam is going to develop weapons of mass destruction, if he has not already. That could create a dangerous dynamic, and the United States must take the course just outlined to prevent it.

Satloff: Some say there is very little that the United States can do to affect the ultimate outcome in the battle between reformers and hardliners in Iran -- that we can affect it on the margins, but that the ultimate outcome is up to the Iranians themselves. In the meantime, Iran is still trying to achieve a nuclear capability. What should the United States do if the Iranians succeed? How would an Iranian acquisition of the bomb affect U.S. interests in the Middle East, and what would Washington do about it?

Fuerth: Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapon would have a very serious impact on the U.S. position in the area. The United States is intensely trying to convince the Russians to take ownership of their policies and their behavior, and to close down the drift of ballistic missile and nuclear technology toward the Iranians. In this, the United States is not only motivated by the issue of Israeli security but by concern for its own position in the region. Profoundly, the Russians have bet their own safety and future security upon the mistaken premise that they could buy long-term Iranian friendship, and that Iran would not make trouble for Russia in the vulnerable parts of its former control, like Chechnya. They also had common concerns with the Iranians about the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

Russia's stated policy is flawless: It is opposed to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. But the execution of this policy is a problem. The United States has worked with the Russians persistently and has made a degree of progress in the area of ballistic missile technology, although some things remain to be worked out. But Washington has ongoing and serious concerns in the nuclear area. These are matters that National Security Advisor Sandy Berger was pursuing in Moscow and that the president himself will pursue when he sees Russian president Vladimir Putin.

In the meantime, there are two other options. First, the administration is working intensely with Israel on the Arrow anti-missile system that would give Israel the means to frustrate delivery systems. The second option is to introduce the idea of a national missile defense for the United States. For that purpose, the United States has been prepared to put on the table the entire question of whether or not it will be able to reach agreement with the Russians on reduction of strategic nuclear weapons.

It is interesting to speculate about whether there will be a sudden shift in the course of Iranian history as a result of the conflict that may now lie ahead. If the modernizers win, perhaps they will eventually work their way out of a frame of mind that insists on pursuing weapons of mass destruction and engaging in state terror; instead, these forces might fully rejoin the family of nations with more responsible behavior.

The administration has 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 the United States hopes to see from Russia, and to leverage U.S. assets against Russian behavior in this regard. Varying degrees of success have been achieved. The United States has worked to hedge this problem through the Arrow system and through the architecture of putting forward national missile defense as a possible response.

Satloff: Regarding the Iran track, is there a different strategy the United States should be pursuing? How does it fit into our overall sense of priorities vis-à-vis the Russians?

Zoellick: It is vital for the United States to see how these inner issues are interconnected. The U.S. position is made somewhat more difficult by the fact that it is helping the North Koreans to build the same kind of nuclear plant

concurrently being built in Iran. Leon says the right things regarding Russia. But President Clinton seems to be rushing to a final photo-op summit with President Putin. It seems as if both he and British prime minister Tony Blair are fundamentally misperceiving what kind of man Putin is. Looking at Putin's background, one can easily understand that he is a cold person who will focus on his own interests. And he will try to take those interests as far as he can unless he has clear lines drawn for him delineating the bases for conflict and cooperation. We do not have to be in a rush to embrace him, because he is the weaker party. An equally important issue is Russian support for weapons of mass destruction and missile proliferation. Putin is trying to acquire his own system, and the United States could get involved in this if it wanted to -- there are some areas of potential cooperation with the Russians. Yet, the worst danger would be the potential for a repeat of the past wherein the United States projects the image of a positive relationship, but when the crunch comes and we are backed into a corner, we suddenly plead ignorance.

Second, U.S. allies are somewhat uncertain about Iranian policy. They clearly want to engage Iran for their own economic and other reasons. If we put a real focus on a few key areas, like Iranian weapons of mass destruction acquisition and terrorism, we could get some support for our policy, and additional intelligence regarding Iranian developments could bring additional support from our allies.

It is admirable that Leon is supporting missile defense and the Israeli Arrow program. In fact, it is a shame that the Democrats are not more excited about supporting Republican initiatives. Still, it does not seem logical that the system that they are talking about in Alaska will be able to help the United States in the Mediterranean. That would fall under the jurisdiction of the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty that allows for both mobile and naval systems. Most Republicans believe that this might actually be a more effective system for the United States and its allies.

My last point, however, goes to Iranian society. There has been a spate of excitement about the transformation in Iran, but it seems as if the people who are trying to hold back the change are still very much in control of the tools of security influence. Things are not moving in a positive direction, in light of the hunt for Muhammad Khatami's own family and the recent action against the thirteen Iranian Jews. Turmoil may continue to build, and those who want to open up this society are not necessarily going to be on the top of that turmoil, as those currently in control have taken a different path. The United States, if its policy continues in this same direction, may promote actions that ultimately support turmoil. The Clinton administration apologized for things like this in the past. But this threat -- imagine the current regime with a nuclear weapon and missiles -- is very dangerous, and the United States needs the full range of possibilities to deal with it.

Fuerth: The Russians have asked the United States why it should not sell the very same kind of technology to Iran that the United States is preparing to provide to the North Koreans. Washington has answered that the North Korean reactor is part of a deal to stop their nuclear weapons program, while the reactor that the Russians are building in Iran is part of the Iranian effort to create a nuclear weapons program, which makes all the difference in the world. We are attempting to stop an extremely dangerous development, and the Russians are abetting it.

President Clinton is not interested in a "last hurrah" so much as he is interested in attempting to do something solid in the interest of the United States during the time that remains for his administration. Given the fact that the new president of Russia is vigorous and will, by every indication, be around for quite a while, it is clear that President Clinton should meet with him; he should try to establish the horizon line for future accomplishments.

It will be interesting to see where President Putin intends to lead Russia. It is not clear that his desire to restore respect for the Russian state and his interest in generating a genuine economic rebirth in Russia are compatible. Genuine economic growth goes hand-in-hand with political freedom. As his design for economic growth appears, it remains to be seen whether that design will be thorough or whether a resort to state methods will mar it.

While there is reason for concern because of his background, Putin appears to be a fast learner on a steep learning

curve, and he may well reach conclusions that are not typical of the experiences of his youth. The United States has to be willing to wait and then open a gate. Washington has to see what it can do that is both reasonable and prudent if the Russians are interested in U.S. assistance at this stage of the game. That is the reason for the upcoming meeting and the reason for the working-level discussions about simple but important things for the future of the Russian economy and its relationship to the West. That also explains why the United States is talking to the Russians about the details of that relationship, like their tax code, land laws, and legal treaties with the United States. There are a thousand details that remain unfinished after all this time because of the turmoil in Russia; Putin might resolve them if he decides on his priorities, and that would leave a better platform for designing U.S.-Russian relations, regardless of who wins the U.S. election this fall.

Republican and Democratic positions might differ on Russia regarding the question of aspirations. From the very first days of this administration, President Clinton and Vice President Gore thought they had a once-in-a-thousand-years opportunity. The Russians themselves were trying to do something without precedence in their own history: They were attempting to become a well-governed and market-oriented democratic state. But if that were to happen, then the course of all history would be changed, and the United States thought that such a probability was difficult to reckon.

Still, the question remained: Should the United States stay on the sidelines, play it safe, and see what happens, or should it get more involved and try to influence policy? We opted to get involved for the simple reason that, if we remained on the sidelines in deference to the warnings that the United States would never be able to influence Russia beyond the margins, we might have much to regret later on. Essentially, the United States has gone after accomplishments and has been quite successful; it is on the basis of its interaction with Russia that the United States now has the standing to ask Putin to take action against Russian enterprises engaged in proliferation. In this regard, Washington basically asks Russia to take observable, definitive steps to put an end to the problem.

Zoellick: Vice President Gore often makes comments presenting situations as either black or white: Someone is either an isolationist or an internationalist. Leon said that the choice was to send a cruise missile in the middle of night to one intelligence building in Iraq or to go to total war. In terms of force, there must be something in between. Leon also talks about the North Korean regime not developing nuclear weapons because of the plant we are helping them to build. There might be something in between the two extremes of giving them the plant and not doing anything to prevent them from developing nuclear weapons -- especially considering the fact that North Korea might already have some nuclear weapons. The administration has created this dynamic wherein every time North Korea threatens, the United States responds. At some point this dynamic could become more dangerous.

Everyone had aspirations for Russia, but where did the Democrats' policy lead? Russia today is frustrated, resentful, humiliated, and distrustful. One could debate how that happened and whether there might have been different courses, but the administration does not necessarily approach its goals in the most constructive way. Regarding the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission, everyone would like to see Russia move further in the direction of democracy, but if one tries to attack corruption without having the rule of law built into the system, the crackdowns could easily slip into attacks on enemies of Putin or "enemies of the state." This very narrow approach to foreign policy is not very practical.

In terms of the Russia and Iran, Leon made a very strong case about how the relationship Washington developed with Moscow's leaders gave us the ability to accomplish things. So, we should then accomplish a stoppage of the flow of missiles and nuclear technology from Russia to Iran. The United States cannot have it both ways -- if sacrifices were made to develop this good relationship, then they should be used. But information, resources, and dangerous aspects of a proliferation program are still routed to Iran.

Fuerth: The defining characteristic of Bob's approach is an assertion that it is based on greater realism. It is really based, however, on greater pessimism, and on the assertion that his pessimism is based on the facts. But this mentality tends to shape his fundamental attitudes toward the facts and toward the range of options that are appropriate for the U.S. government to consider. The Democrats have felt that they were in a period during which fundamental changes might be accomplished in the world. Peace in Ireland has nearly become a reality as a result of that attitude, and but for an assassin's bullet, we might be much closer to seeing peace in the Middle East. In fact, the possibility of peace in the region is growing stronger again because of that positive outlook.

The painful choices with which Israel is confronted are evident. But the record of this administration in the region is matchless in terms of support for the state of Israel -- not just under Ehud Barak, Binyamin Netanyahu, or Shimon Peres, but also under Yitzhak Rabin. We have clearly acted to protect the security of Israel, and we will continue to do so.

If the Democrats do not accomplish peace between Palestinians and Israelis, then it falls to the next administration to pick up the process. If peace is made, the next administration must have the imagination to build on it, and to find ways to concretize it beyond the signed pieces of paper. That will require high aspirations, which always make one vulnerable to criticism.

Satloff: Looking back on eight years of Clinton stewardship over the peace process, what did this administration get right and what did it get wrong?

Zoellick: The peace process has never been a Republican or Democratic issue at its core. Presidents since Truman have supported Israel's security and have, at least since Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, worked with Israel to try to achieve both its security and its peace. There are some core priorities, for the Clinton administration and for those following, of which Israel's security must remain first and foremost.

Second, the world needs to know that the United States sees Israel as a strategic partner and will work with Israel on the questions that it faces. At this time, as Leon mentioned, Israel faces some particularly difficult choices. It will be better able to make these choices if the United States is associated with those choices and works closely with Israel as it makes them. Ultimately, these decisions have to be made by Israel, because they deal with that state's own security. The Clinton administration has been criticized about the extent to which it plays that role, just as other administrations have been criticized. In terms of the peace process itself, people may make mistakes, but their intentions are good and their efforts are related to Israel's peace and security.

The residents of Middle East are a tough crowd, and if a U.S. administration does not maintain a strong sense of U.S. power and its proper use, it will get into trouble there. Former Secretary of State Warren Christopher's many trips to Syria were part of a devoted process. But were twenty-some trips to Damascus the right way to send a message to Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad? It was also very troubling to see President Clinton go to Geneva and get stiffed by Asad. At times, the United States gets stiffed, but that is a role for the secretary of state, not the president. It was surprising that he went to that meeting without knowing what he was going to get. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright should have been there instead, but her power and influence have been discounted in the region.

Ultimately, both Republicans and Democrats will likely share a common idea of where the Israeli-Palestinian peace process should go. But that dynamic cannot be understood without first analyzing the Gulf, events in Iran, or even Russia. Even more important is maintaining a sense of how U.S. power is perceived in the world, because for all the aspirations, if one is not understood as a powerful player, achieving real results is rather difficult.

Fuerth: As for the meeting in Geneva, why would one assume that the president did not know what was going to happen? Perhaps Asad, for his own reasons, flipped signals at the last moment once they had passed the point of no return. If one is told that a thing is going to happen and then proceeds because the signal is clear, there is very little

he can do once these signals are purposefully confused.

Satloff: This is just the first of a whole set of conversations that will take place as this year's election approaches. As stated at the outset, the Middle East is at least near the core -- if not at the core -- of the challenges that the next president will face. It therefore deserves a lot of attention over the next six months. ❖

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