



Transcript

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Middle East in a Changing Context

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Distinguished participants it is indeed my pleasure to join you this morning for a timely discussion on the Middle East.

Over the next two days you will hear from an impressive group of Middle East experts. I thought it would be most useful during my short presentation to look at the challenges and changes in the Middle East from the perspective of the next President of the United States.

In the United States, we talk about change every day. In the thick of a Presidential Campaign -- both parties are vying for who will deliver the most change.

In our case, this fixation on change is a pointed commentary on the level of widespread public dissatisfaction with the current state of our economy, and management of domestic and foreign affairs.

But the focus on change in the American presidential campaign also engenders great excitement. It is a time when we as a nation look beyond immediate realities and reflect on what could be -- what should be.

There is a consensus emerging, and I think Bill Clinton said it well, "The US should lead by the power of its example and not by the example of its power."

As a starting point, the next president must be mindful that the world will be listening very carefully to his first messages once in office.

His early words and actions will determine whether the United States will be able to repair the damage done to our relations in the region over the past several years.

So the new President's overarching goal is to restore credibility of American leadership. America must live its promise.

ARAB ISRAEL CONFLICT

As a first step to take in rebuilding American diplomacy I recommend to signal very early -- in the first term -- a commitment to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

A recent survey conducted in the Middle East by Telhami/Zogby confirmed that the single most important measure the US could undertake to improve relations in the Middle East would be to broker a fair and just solution to the Israeli Palestinian conflict.

Let us be clear, our close relationship with Israel will remain one factor of American diplomacy that will hold constant no matter who is elected. Nor will the basics of our support change with the imminent Israeli election and the departure of Olmert.

Any President will want to send an early and honest reaffirmation of America's continued support for Israel's security.

At the same time, the new President must also share his understanding that the plight of the Palestinian people lie at the center of most grievances in the Middle East.

Modern technology including the Internet and satellite TV has made the Palestinian suffering visible to millions on a daily basis. Morally no county, no leader, no person should remain idle.

The American people want to hear their new President speak from his heart -- from our collective heart -- on the moral imperative to end suffering, poverty, isolation, and hopelessness of the Palestinian people and all people throughout the globe.

The President should recognize the right for Palestinians to a homeland and reiterate support for President Bush's June 24, 2002 support for Palestinian statehood -- or a two state solution.

Turning an eye to tactics, the new President should acknowledge the efforts of many before him over the past decades. He should pledge to build on their achievements.

This leads the next President to declare early that he believes a comprehensive final status settlement is within reach and it is his goal to achieve.

The next President should recognize that people throughout the region welcome US leadership, but that only with the cooperation of other parties can progress be made. The US role will be to advocate, consult, and promote a settlement.

Many will be involved in the effort. Recently, the Quartet comprising of the UN, US, EU and Russia provided a working framework. Today the squad is larger and new, vigorous players have joined the team.

Most notably Turkey is exercising leadership in facilitating the Israel-Syria indirect talks. The message from the next president must be to welcome the work of the Government of Turkey and to offer to work together for peace.

There are other key players for the next President to touch. He should engage as close partners what former Jordanian Marwan Muasher called the Arab Center.

This will require deft diplomacy. Regrettably the Bush Administration shrugged off the Arab League Initiative in 2002 sponsored by Saudi Arabia with close collaboration of Jordan and Egypt.

In many respects, the Arab Peace Initiative was a watershed proposal.

In exchange for Israeli withdrawal from all Arab lands to the 1967 borders, the initiative delivered on Israel's core requirements. It promised collective Arab support for Israel's security and normalized relations.

Another critical element of the initiative adopted by all members of the Arab League is that it addressed the threat to Israel stemming from Hamas and Hezbollah. The collective Arab world undertook accountability for these terrorist non-state actors.

The Middle East peace process is no longer a game run from Washington.

The conclusion of a comprehensive, final status settlement will require the generous support of many nations in the international community.

The challenge to the next president is to reach out to states like Turkey, the EU, UN and Arab League -- to work with leaders in Turkey and Qatar who have moved into a vacuum created over the past years so that we can together work to refine and refocus a set of principles signed on to by Arab states and turn it into a lasting peace pact.

A lasting Peace Pact and viable Palestinian state will be an expensive but necessary investment in order to provide humanitarian aid, a resolution for all refugee cases, development assistance and trade.

GULF

The Gulf States with financial powers can play a role to support the Palestinian state.

Let no one underestimate the stunning growth of the Gulf States over the past several years.

The GCC States economies have tripled in size in just 5 years. Their combined GDP will be well above \$1 trillion in 2008, according to a recent Chatham House Report.

Oil revenues financed the remarkable growth to be sure, but today GCC states are focusing on diversifying their economies.

On a recent visit to the Gulf, a senior official in Bahrain explained that all Gulf States understand that oil is a depleting commodity. He said the current spike in prices has bought a little time, but that the challenge to the Gulf economies is to diversify quickly in order to be sustainable.

As he reviews where and how to change American policy, the next President should note the irony that Sultans Emirs and Kings are in the lead of the great Gulf evolution – not democratically elected Presidents and Prime Ministers.

The driver is not democracy, or liberty or freedom – it's the marketplace.

IRAQ

The program of this conference will focus on Iraq.

The current American administration has argued that the road to peace in the Middle East runs through Baghdad. We can disagree on this point. And certainly we can also dispute whether there was sufficient justification for the US to have launched a war of choice in Iraq in the first place. But there is a clear consensus that there are no easy answers for extracting American forces.

It is self evident that the next US president will need to pay early and intense attention to resolving America's dilemma in Iraq – when and how to withdraw.

US Iraq policy will depend heavily on who wins the election. Senators Obama and McCain have differ strikingly over Iraq.

Senator Obama opposed the Iraq war from the outset. He promises voters he would end the war now. He advocates immediately beginning to withdraw American combat brigades steadily, in a responsible way, and in consultation with the Iraq government. He acknowledges that some US troops should remain to provide security, train Iraqi forces, and hit al Qaeda remnants.

Senator McCain supports a policy of staying the course. US combat troops should remain until the government is capable of governing itself and safeguarding its people.

His supporters fear withdrawal of US combat forces would end in civil chaos and allow al-Qaeda to strengthen.

The evolution of the situation in Iraq may, in fact, be reducing the distance between these two positions. Senator McCain recently softened his position saying troops could withdraw within 5 years. President Maliki has moved closer to the Obama position by asking all combat troops depart by 2010.

No matter who is elected, the next President should remain active in securing Iraq's political, economic stability.

Much has been said - but more needs to be done - to address the humanitarian plight of Iraq's population. Even as reports that the security situation is improving, millions of refugees and displaced Iraqi citizens continue to feel too threatened to return to their homes.

Basic services like electricity, running water, and community security have yet to be restored fully.

Security is paramount, but a fair and just political accommodation must accompany improvements in security.

The next President must press and break the political stalemate. There must be progress on the political issue of oil revenue sharing, elections, and disputed territories.

Iraq's neighbor and the international community will have responsibilities for assuring Iraq's stability and sovereignty.

IRAN

Iran, Iraq's aggressive neighbor, looms large as the Middle East nation most disruptive to prospects for a stable Middle East.

It continues to defy international community negotiations and UN inspections of its nuclear program. Iran supports violent groups like Hezbollah and Hamas with funds and arms. And it continues to meddle inside Iraq.

Neighboring Gulf States are uneasy. New and uncertain forces were unleashed partly as a result of the US led invasion of Iraq.

Gulf states fear that a nuclear armed and aggressive Persia could agitate Shia minorities within the largely Sunni Arab Gulf populations is deeply disturbing.

The Gulf States feel aggrieved that the US invaded Iraq without a workable post war stabilization plan and that we did so against their advice.

At the same time they do not want us to pull out too quickly if it results in even more regional insecurity.

They truly oppose a US attack on Iran's nuclear sites even though they do not want to see a nuclear-armed Iran. Gulf states support international efforts to negotiate with Iran from a position of strength

The next President must manage US policy carefully.

Iran's threat to block the narrow Strait of Hormuz if attacked would send escalating petrol prices through the sky.

No matter when US combat troops withdraw from Iraq, or what diplomatic tack we will take, an emboldened Iran should take note that U.S. military power in the Gulf will not decline.

The US is by far the most powerful sea power in the region and is well positioned in Bahrain and in the blue waters beyond the Strait of Hormuz.

We still have pre-positioned military supplies associated with Oman and Kuwait. US CENTCOM is well positioned in Qatar to call on the joint military power of the US to protect threats to our allies and trading partners.

PAKISTAN

The election held last February was historical for several reasons:

- It was the first time in Pakistan's history that a military dictatorship turned over power peacefully to a civilian government as a result of an election.

- It surprised all observers who were convinced that the rigged election would erupt in street violence. The election results met the expectations of the public.
- It was the first time in Pakistan's history that the two major opposition parties formed the government.

Still the civilian government under newly elected President Zardari, widower of assassinated Benazir Bhutto is very fragile.

Advice to the next President is to support the democratic development and civil institutions in Pakistan. The US must be firm and transparent that we support an independent judiciary and free press.

The economy is in very bad shape. The 170 million people in Pakistan need jobs, food and electricity. They need to feel safe in their communities.

The US should contribute to job creation programs and developing community police capacity. The Army needs to be convinced that their primary threat is extremism, not India. Extremists are our common enemy. The many groups are diverse but interconnected. We must target the near enemy, not the far enemy.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the American election is a period of hope, for reassessment and renewal.

As a close observer of our political process, thoughts I can fairly confidently leave you with today are that the future of American diplomacy will show a greater inclination toward dialogue over unilateralism. American will be listening more.

Both candidates understand our success comes from our capacity to draw on the strengths of our allies.

Our leadership will be measured by our willingness to listen to friends like Turkey who have deeper understandings of the region.

Our policies will only be sound if built around the wide counsel of our allies.

The United States and Turkey have more that unites us than divides us. Both seek a stable, prosperous, democratic Middle East in which government meet the aspiration so their people.

We are committed to work together to assure secure borders—to the east and south. And to counter extremism and its violent consequences.

America has much to learn from Turkey as your state navigates modernity and tradition in a changing region.

I have come to Ankara to listen and learn from an impressive assembly. My advice to the next American president is to do the same – listen and learn.

Assertions and opinions in this Transcript are solely those of the above-mentioned author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Middle East Institute, which expressly does not take positions on Middle East policy.

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