

Can a Democrat change US Middle East policy?

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Contents

IRAQ	3
IRAN	4
ISRAEL-PALESTINE	5

Recently, when Vice-President Cheney was asked by ABC News correspondent Martha Raddatz about polls showing that an overwhelming majority of US citizens oppose the war in Iraq, he replied, "So?"

"So — you don't care what the American people think?" Raddatz asked.

"No," Cheney replied, and explained, "I think you cannot be blown off course by the fluctuations in public opinion polls."

Later, White House spokeswoman Dana Perino, explaining Cheney's comments, was asked whether the public should have "input."

Her reply: "You had your input. The American people have input every four years, and that's the way our system is set up."

That's correct. Every four years the American people can choose between candidates whose views they reject, and then they should shut up.

Evidently failing to understand democratic theory, the public strongly disagrees.

"Eighty-one per cent say when making 'an important decision' government leaders 'should pay attention to public opinion polls because this will help them get a sense of the public's views,'" reports the Program on International Policy Attitudes, in Washington.

And when asked "whether they think that 'elections are the only time when the views of the people should have influence, or that also between elections leaders should consider the views of the people as they make decisions,' an extraordinary 94 per cent say that government leaders should pay attention to the views of the public between elections."

The same polls reveal that the public has few illusions about how their wishes are heeded: 80 per cent "say that this country is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves," not "for the benefit of all the people."

With its unbounded disregard for public opinion, the Bush administration has been far to the radical nationalist and adventurist extreme of the policy spectrum, and was subjected to unprecedented mainstream criticism for that reason.

A Democratic candidate is likely to shift more towards the centrist norm. However, the spectrum is narrow. Looking at the records and statements of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, it is hard to see much reason to expect significant changes in policy in the Middle East.

IRAQ

It is important to bear in mind that neither Democratic candidate has expressed a principled objection to the invasion of Iraq. By that I mean the kind of objection that was universally expressed when the Russians invaded Afghanistan or when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait: condemnation on the grounds that aggression is a crime — in fact the "supreme international crime," as the Nuremberg Tribunal determined. No one criticised those invasions merely as a "strategic blunder" or as involvement in "another country's civil war, a war (they) can't win" (Obama, Clinton, respectively, on the Iraq invasion).

The criticism of the Iraq war is on grounds of cost and failure; what are called "pragmatic reasons," a stance that is considered hardheaded, serious, moderate — in the case of Western crimes.

The intentions of the Bush administration, and presumably McCain, were outlined in a Declaration of Principles released by the White House in November 2007, an agreement between Bush and the U.S.-backed Nuri al-Maliki government of Iraq.

The Declaration allows U.S. forces to remain indefinitely to “deter foreign aggression” (though the only threat of aggression in the region is posed by the United States and Israel, presumably not the intention) and for internal security, though not, of course, internal security for a government that would reject U.S. domination. The Declaration also commits Iraq to facilitate and encourage “the flow of foreign investments to Iraq, especially American investments” – an unusually brazen expression of imperial will.

In brief, Iraq is to remain a client state, agreeing to allow permanent US military installations (called “enduring” in the preferred Orwellism) and ensuring US investors priority in accessing its huge oil resources – a reasonably clear statement of goals of the invasion that were evident to anyone not blinded by official doctrine.

What are the alternatives of the Democrats? They were clarified in March 2007, when the House and Senate approved Democratic proposals setting deadlines for withdrawal. Gen. Kevin Ryan (retired), senior fellow at Harvard University’s Belfer Center of International Affairs, analysed the proposals for *The Boston Globe*.

The proposals permit the president to waive their restrictions in the interests of “national security,” which leaves the door wide open, Ryan writes. They permit troops to remain in Iraq “as long as they are performing one of three specific missions: protecting U.S. facilities, citizens or forces; combating Al Qaeda or international terrorists; and training Iraqi security forces.” The facilities include the huge U.S. military bases being built around the country and the U.S. Embassy – actually a self-contained city within a city, unlike any embassy in the world. None of these major construction projects are under way with the expectation that they will be abandoned.

The other conditions are also open-ended. “The proposals are more correctly understood as a re-missioning of our troops,” Ryan sums up: “Perhaps a good strategy – but not a withdrawal.”

It is difficult to see much difference between the March 7 Democratic proposals and those of Obama and Clinton.

IRAN

With regard to Iran, Obama is considered more moderate than Clinton, and his leading slogan is “change.” So let us keep to him.

Obama calls for more willingness to negotiate with Iran, but within the standard constraints. His reported position is that he “would offer economic inducements and a possible promise not to seek ‘regime change’ if Iran stopped meddling in Iraq and cooperated on terrorism and nuclear issues,” and stopped “acting irresponsibly” by supporting Shia militant groups in Iraq.

Some obvious questions come to mind. For example, how would we react if Iran’s President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said he would offer a possible promise not to seek “regime change” in Israel if it stopped its illegal activities in the occupied territories and cooperated on terrorism and nuclear issues?

Obama’s moderate approach is well to the militant side of public opinion – a fact that passes unnoticed, as is often the case. Like all other viable candidates, Obama has insisted throughout the electoral campaign that the United States must threaten Iran with attack (the standard phrase

is: “keep all options open”), a violation of the U.N. Charter, if anyone cares. But a large majority of Americans have disagreed: 75 per cent favour building better relations with Iran, as compared with 22 per cent who favour “implied threats,” according to PIPA. All the surviving candidates, then, are opposed by three-fourths of the public on this issue.

American and Iranian opinion on the core issue of nuclear policy has been carefully studied. In both countries, a large majority holds that Iran should have the rights of any signer of the Nonproliferation Treaty: to develop nuclear power but not nuclear weapons.

The same large majorities favour establishing a “nuclear-weapons-free zone in the Middle East that would include both Islamic countries and Israel.” More than 80 per cent of Americans favour eliminating nuclear weapons altogether — a legal obligation of the states with nuclear weapons, officially rejected by the Bush administration.

And surely Iranians agree with Americans that Washington should end its military threats and turn towards normal relations.

At a forum in Washington when the PIPA polls were released in January 2007, Joseph Cirincione, senior vice-president for National Security and International Policy at the Center for American Progress (and Obama adviser), said the polls showed “the common sense of both the American people and the Iranian people, (who) seem to be able to rise above the rhetoric of their own leaders to find common sense solutions to some of the most crucial questions” facing the two nations, favouring pragmatic diplomatic solutions to their differences.

Though we do not have internal records, there is good reason to believe that the Pentagon is opposed to an attack on Iran. The March 11 resignation of Admiral William Fallon as head of the Central Command, responsible for the Middle East, was widely interpreted to trace to his opposition to an attack, probably shared with the military command generally.

The December 2007 National Intelligence Estimate reporting that Iran had not pursued a nuclear weapons program since 2003, when it sought and failed to reach a comprehensive settlement with the United States, perhaps reflects opposition of the intelligence community to military action.

There are many uncertainties. But it is hard to see concrete signs that a Democratic presidency would improve the situation very much, let alone bring policy into line with American or world opinion.

ISRAEL-PALESTINE

On Israel-Palestine too, the candidates have provided no reason to expect any constructive change.

On his web site, Obama, the candidate of “change” and “hope,” states that he “strongly supports the US-Israel relationship, believes that our first and incontrovertible commitment in the Middle East must be to the security of Israel, America’s strongest ally in the Middle East.”

Transparently, it is the Palestinians who face by far the most severe security problem, in fact a problem of survival. But Palestinians are not a “strong ally.” At most, they might be a very weak one. Hence their plight merits little concern, in accord with the operative principle that human rights are largely determined by contributions to power, profit and ideological needs.

Obama's web site presents him as a superhawk on Israel. "He believes that Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state should never be challenged." He is not on record as demanding that the right of countries to exist as Muslim (Christian, White) states "should never be challenged."

Obama calls for increasing foreign aid "to ensure that (the) funding priorities (for military and economic assistance to Israel) are met." He also insists forcefully that the United States must not "recognise Hamas unless it renounced its fundamental mission to eliminate Israel." No state can recognise Hamas, a political party, so what he must be referring to is the government formed by Hamas after a free election that came out "the wrong way" and is therefore illegitimate, in accord with prevailing elite concepts of "democracy."

And it is considered irrelevant that Hamas has repeatedly called for a two-state settlement in accord with the international consensus, which the United States and Israel reject.

Obama does not ignore Palestinians: "Obama believes that a better life for Palestinian families is good for both Israelis and Palestinians." He also adds a reference to two states living side by side that is vague enough to be unproblematic to U.S. and Israeli hawks.

For Palestinians, there are now two options. One is that the United States and Israel will abandon their unilateral rejectionism of the past 30 years and accept the international consensus on a two-state settlement, in accord with international law and, incidentally, in accord with the wishes of a large majority of Americans. That is not impossible, though the two rejectionist states are working hard to render it so.

A second possibility is the one that the US-Israel are actually implementing. Palestinians will be consigned to their Gaza prison and to West Bank cantons, virtually separated from one another by Israeli settlements and huge infrastructure projects, the whole imprisoned as Israel takes over the Jordan Valley.

Nevertheless, circumstances may change, and perhaps the candidates along with them, to the benefit of the United States and the region. Public opinion may not remain marginalised and easily ignored. The concentrations of domestic economic power that largely shape policy may come to recognise that their interests are better served by joining the general public, and the rest of the world, than by accepting Washington's hard line.

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