

PolicyWatch #1327 : Special Forum Report

Presidential Politics: Republican and Democratic Views on Middle East Policy

Featuring Michael Barone and Peter Beinart
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On January 11, 2008, Michael Barone and Peter Beinart addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Mr. Barone, a political analyst and commentator, is a senior writer with U.S. News & World Report and author of numerous books on American politics. Mr. Beinart is a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and author of The Good Fight: Why Liberals -- And Only Liberals -- Can Win the War on Terror and Make America Great Again (2006). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

MICHAEL BARONE

Every four years in American politics, Democratic and Republican candidates make strong arguments about the Middle East. This election year is no different.

John McCain, Rudolph Giuliani, Fred Thompson, and Mitt Romney continue to trumpet their longstanding support for the "surge" strategy in Iraq, especially given its relative success. They maintain that victory is still possible in Iraq and that the United States should continue to aggressively seek it. Regarding Israeli-Palestinian issues, Republican candidates consider Hamas a terrorist organization and will thus refrain from pressuring Israel as long as it is under attack by those who refuse to recognize its right to exist.

Republicans also uphold the Bush administration's hardline stance toward Iran, unequivocally denying the regime access to nuclear weapons and refusing to rule out military options for enforcing that policy. Mike Huckabee, a wildcard candidate, has roundly attracted criticism for his description of the Bush administration's "arrogant bunker mentality," likening U.S.-Iranian tensions to a stubborn, childish squabble resolvable through direct diplomacy.

Although Iraq has taken center stage in the debates of both parties, the Democratic candidates have focused on each other's voting record since the Iraq War Resolution in October 2002, and on who is willing to apologize for his or her vote on the resolution itself. In recent months, the Democratic camp has quieted its rhetoric on the Iraq war as the surge has reduced the overall level of violence. When confronted with the issue, Democratic candidates point to the sustained failure of the Iraqi government to pass certain political benchmarks, and avoid mentioning the implications of the security successes on the ground.

It is difficult to tell how Democratic rhetoric on Iraq will change as the primaries progress, especially after a final candidate is chosen. In the general election, a Republican candidate such as John McCain could present a serious challenge to the Democratic contender if the sustained security and political gains in Iraq were highlighted, and if it were argued that Democratic recommendations (e.g., speedy military withdrawal) would have been disastrous to the situation there.

On the Israeli-Palestinian front, Hillary Clinton is expected to follow the same basic model and policies her husband did during his presidency. While Barack Obama's position on this issue and others remains somewhat

of a mystery, his statements reflect a greater willingness than most to employ diplomacy with Iran and Syria. Most likely, Obama would exert far more pressure on Israel than did previous administrations, though it is difficult to discern precisely what that would mean in practice.

Customarily, Democratic contenders have courted the Jewish vote in a number of key states. This year, the Jewish vote in American politics is less cohesive, definitive, and reliable than in past decades. This dynamic has changed the political courtship of the Jewish vote by both parties.

The way Middle Eastern issues play out in the November elections will greatly depend on a variety of indeterminate factors. The United States has entered a period of "open field politics" in which polls reveal a wide range of possibilities and outcomes, making presidential predictions more difficult than in previous years.

PETER BEINART

The Middle East is not as dominant an issue in the presidential election as many projected it would be six months or a year ago. Two reasons for this include the relative success of the surge in Iraq and the release of the National Intelligence Estimate on Iran's nuclear capabilities. These issues, however, are certainly not distant from the minds of voters, since both Republicans and Democrats rank Iraq among their top two concerns in the presidential campaign. The Middle East is also a more prominent issue for Republicans than it is for Democrats, as the latter seem more comfortable focusing on domestic issues. The scope of American foreign policy for Republicans is defined through the perspective of the war on terror. For Democrats, foreign policy also includes issues such as global warming and the effects of globalization.

Within each party, there is general agreement on Middle Eastern issues, as illustrated by their stances on Iraq. Republicans largely concur that the surge has produced significant quantifiable and qualitative results, standing as a testament to the pursuit of victory. Democrats generally agree that the Iraqi state is still virtually nonexistent and that a continued U.S. presence in Iraq will only continue to strengthen militias, exacerbate the violence, and facilitate political stagnation.

A Democratic president would face a substantial conundrum when faced with Iraq. Essentially, he or she would have to choose between troop withdrawal -- the equivalent of accepting defeat and betraying the effort thus far -- and sustaining higher troop levels in order to achieve some degree of success, thus alienating and angering the party base.

In some ways, President Bush finds himself in a much different place politically than in 2004. His policy on key Middle Eastern issues -- encouraging the formation of a Palestinian state, dealing with Iran, implementing a troop drawdown in Iraq -- puts him distinctly to the left of traditional Republican foreign policy. As a result, the current primary season has witnessed Republican candidates advertising the necessity of change with respect to these policies while highlighting the need to maintain core conservative values.

Both parties hold a much more realist worldview than what existed before the current administration. Both sides now understand that democratic efforts in the Middle East are not quick fixes for the long-term challenge of protecting U.S. interests in the region. Hamas's electoral gains proved that democracies cannot exist on ideals and elections alone, but require the presence of liberal institutions, which take time to establish.

Iran is also an important component of current electoral politics for both parties. The debate among Republicans focuses on whether diplomacy can actually work, or if it is simply a way to bide time until the inevitable use of military force. While Democrats insist that they will not take the military option off the table, their true debate focuses on the utility of coercive negotiation versus goodwill gestures.

Finally, there no longer seems to be a definitive Jewish vote in American politics. Following the same line as Protestants, Baptists, and Catholics, denomination has come to matter less than the extent of religiosity in

determining how a person or group is likely to vote. The key determinant has become a divide between the secular and religious.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Audrey Flake.

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