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Why the Next U.S. President Will Be a Wartime Leader

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The next U.S. president will be a wartime president. Developments in the Middle East almost ensure that either John McCain or Barack Obama will have to manage one or more wars involving the United States or its allies in the region.

The challenges posed by the Middle East are legion: "fragile and reversible" security in Iraq; military fallout from a possible Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear program; the destabilizing consequences of a nuclear breakout by the Islamic Republic; a new round of violence between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority (PA) -- this time in the West Bank; an Israeli military intervention in Gaza to halt renewed rocket attacks, preempt a Hamas military buildup, or crush the nascent Hamas government there; and the possibility of a second Hizballah-Israeli war. Given these realities, the United States must engage the region to an unprecedented extent in order to avert or deter those wars that are avoidable, and prevail (or ensure the success of its allies) in those that prove inescapable.

Iraq: Still Unresolved

The next administration's key challenge in Iraq will be to preserve and expand the security gains of the 2007 U.S. military "surge," and to translate those gains into enduring political achievements through relatively free and fair elections in 2009. Accomplishing this and preserving U.S. influence, while gradually drawing down forces to deal with a resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan, pose major challenges.

For the next few years, the potential for renewed violence in Iraq is high due to a number of unsettled issues: resentment from Sons of Iraq militias due to their exclusion from Iraq's security forces; the eventual return of Mahdi Army special groups from abroad; the lifting of the Mahdi Army's freeze on military operations; and tensions between Kurds and Arabs in Mosul, Kirkuk, and Diyala provinces. Preventing resurgent violence will require continued U.S. engagement at the local, regional, and national levels, and the use of available U.S. leverage to forestall or contain outbreaks of violence.

This leverage will not depend entirely on the size of the U.S. military presence. In fact, the United States will gain leverage through: its ability to maintain working relations with all major political currents and parties in Iraq, including Sadrists; the credibility of threats to withhold critical military support at vital junctures in order to secure key U.S. objectives; its willingness and ability to publicize credible evidence of Iranian interference in Iraq and of collaboration between Iran and prominent Iraqi politicians; and its ability to assist emerging political forces, particularly those supportive of a continued U.S. role in Iraq, such as the Awakening Councils, to secure a formal role in the Iraqi political system in forthcoming elections.

The last point could provide the basis for a blocking coalition in Iraqi parliament involving the Awakening Councils, secular nationalists (such as Ayad Allawi), independents, and perhaps under certain circumstances even the major Kurdish parties. This coalition could check Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki's growing power, or provide al-Maliki with the foundation for a new governing coalition if he desires to free himself of his dependence on the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq.

Iran: Two Minutes to Midnight?

At the current reported rate of enrichment, Iran might have enough low enriched uranium by late 2009 necessary for its first bomb (although the uranium would require further enrichment and would have to go through several additional steps before it could be turned into a weapon). Given Israeli concerns about the Iranian threat and doubts about diplomacy, Israel might act before then to order a preventive strike on Iran's nuclear installations to set back Tehran's program. The next administration must consider the possibility that Israel might act contrary to Washington's apparent wishes by striking at Iran's nuclear infrastructure, just as it did when it bombed Syria's nuclear reactor at al-Kibar in September 2007. Accordingly, the next administration should prepare a public response that neither explicitly disavows nor identifies itself with the Israeli action. Washington should also be prepared to take measures to contain a violent Iranian response and to deter retaliatory strikes against U.S. interests.

Iran's progress toward acquiring nuclear weapon capabilities is already transforming the regional security environment in ways inimical to U.S. interests. Egypt, Jordan, Turkey, and the Gulf Cooperative Council states have all indicated that they are considering building up their civilian nuclear infrastructure, which is a possible first step toward developing a weapons capability. And Iran's acquisition of "the bomb," which could well occur during the tenure of the next president, could profoundly destabilize the region, enhancing the potential for miscalculation and conflict.

The next administration should therefore exploit the "presidential honeymoon" and the favorable conditions created by low oil prices (which are putting pressure on the Iranian economy) to place the highest priority on multilateral diplomatic efforts to resolve the standoff. Although time is of the essence, the United States should avoid public advances toward Iran prior to the country's June 2009 presidential elections because Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad might claim credit for any diplomatic progress, thus increasing his electoral prospects. As such, Washington should quietly approach intermediaries to sound out Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, prior to Iran's presidential elections to determine if there is any basis for serious, public contacts or negotiations in the immediate aftermath of the elections, and if Iran would be willing to suspend enrichment for the duration of these talks.

Meanwhile, the United States should once again try to marshal a broader coalition, and wield bigger carrots and sticks, in support of a new diplomatic initiative or, if diplomacy fails, to further ratchet up the pressure on Iran. Finally, if diplomacy fails, Washington needs to revisit its own military options and review plans for containing the political and military fallout from an Israeli preventive strike. The United States should also roll out plans for a regional security framework to contain and deter a nuclear Iran, which will make the point that acquiring nuclear weapons will harm, rather than help, Iran's security.

Palestinian Civil War: Round Two?

Upon taking office, the next administration may well find itself in the midst of a Palestinian political crisis, and perhaps even a new round of Palestinian civil violence. The term of PA president Mahmoud Abbas expires on January 9, 2009, and he has indicated that he plans to stay on for another year, basing his position on an amendment to the Palestinian elections law that requires presidential and parliamentary elections to occur at the same time (the latter are not scheduled until January 2010). Hamas, however, claims that according to the PA's basic law, the speaker of parliament should succeed Abbas when his term runs out. Although Hamas and the PA may find a way to resolve this matter peacefully by January 9, it is also possible that if Abbas does not step down, Hamas might engage in assassinations, kidnappings, or violent demonstrations to loosen the PA's grip in the West Bank.

Accordingly, the new administration must be prepared to support PA and Israeli efforts to quash Hamas-inspired violence in the West Bank. Providing political support to the PA and Israel, and bolstering U.S. efforts to build a professional and effective Palestinian security force, will be vital to keep Hamas at bay in the West Bank in the short-run, and to bolster PA influence in the long-run. In addition, ongoing efforts to

define the general parameters of an Israeli-Palestinian final status agreement are still important, even if implementation of such an agreement has to be deferred to some indefinite future date.

Back to Gaza?

Another Arab-Israeli war is a near certainty in the next four years. The current Israeli-Hamas ceasefire is unlikely to last indefinitely, and Israel eventually will reenter Gaza to remove the rocket threat or dismantle Hamas's terror and governmental infrastructure. The priority now is to continue to enhance the capacity of the PA's military and civilian institutions in order prevent a Hamas takeover of the West Bank. This will also be important if Israel does reenter Gaza to crush Hamas, since it would be desirable if Israel could then hand over security responsibilities to the PA prior to its withdrawal.

The reform of Fatah (Abbas's party) and the PA will be a protracted process, and there is no guarantee of success. But if there is to be peace, it will be the result of bottom-up efforts to rebuild Fatah and the PA and to restore some degree of trust between Israelis and Palestinians, as well as top-down efforts to tackle the major stumbling blocks to a final status agreement. Disengagement from the conflict, however, is not an option, because if the United States is not actively laying the groundwork for peaceful coexistence between the two sides, Hamas and Iran will work to preclude such an outcome.

Hizballah and Israel: Round Two?

In Lebanon, Hizballah, with the help of Syria and Iran, has rebuilt its rocket forces -- it had 13,000 on the eve of the 2006 war and has more than 30,000 now -- in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701. Hizballah also blames Israel for the February 2008 assassination of terror chief Imad Mughniyah in Damascus, and has promised revenge, perhaps by kidnapping or killing senior Israeli security officials or politicians at home or overseas. In addition, Hizballah has indicated that it might challenge Israeli reconnaissance flights over Lebanon, and once again abduct Israeli soldiers along the border.

These developments suggest that another -- even more destructive -- war is possible. Senior Israeli military officials have threatened, in accordance with what they call the "Dahiyah Doctrine" -- after the suburbs of southern Beirut that were flattened by Israeli air power during the 2006 war -- to wage a scorched earth campaign next time around. In the event of another war, the United States needs to coordinate with Israel better than it did during the last war, so that the next war is much shorter, and succeeds in significantly weakening Hizballah, and undermining the interests of its Syrian and Iranian patrons.

Conclusion

The next U.S. president will face unprecedented challenges and dangers in the Middle East, with few good options and precious little time to waste. He will have to hit the ground running, since the United States cannot afford a protracted transition between administrations. If the next president is to succeed in advancing American interests, he will need to engage the Middle East to an unprecedented degree, avert or deter the wars that can be avoided, and skillfully manage the one or more wars that are almost certain to occur on his watch.

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