

PolicyWatch #1184 : Special Forum Report

Annual Post–New Year’s Event: America and the Middle East, circa 2007

Featuring Joe Klein and Martin Walker
January 17, 2007

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On January 12, 2007, Joe Klein and Martin Walker addressed The Washington Institute’s Special Policy Forum. Joe Klein, the author of the bestseller Primary Colors, writes the “In the Arena” column about national and international affairs for Time magazine. Martin Walker is the editor emeritus of United Press International, and spent twenty-five years with the Guardian newspaper as a journalist and editor. The following is a rapporteur’s summary of their remarks.

JOE KLEIN

President George W. Bush’s plan of a troop surge coupled with counterinsurgency tactics comes too late for Iraq. Securing Baghdad is a precondition for establishing a secure Iraq. The success of U.S. counterinsurgency tactics is contingent upon a functional central government. The resources that will be devoted to securing Baghdad could be best employed in Afghanistan. Currently, the Iraqi government is a fig leaf for Shiite militias and it is doubtful that Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki’s government will wage war on Muqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army.

The appointment of Robert Gates as secretary of defense is the most significant move catapulting the new Iraq policy. Meanwhile, the selection of David Petraeus as the new commander in Iraq is another positive step for U.S. policy, as his predecessors were too beholden to the will of Donald Rumsfeld, whose priorities were force protection in Baghdad and the swift transfer of power to Iraqis. It is clear that an around-the-clock troop presence is necessary to secure Baghdad.

Bush’s January 10 speech signaled increased U.S. provocation of Iran. The subsequent U.S. raid on an Iranian facility in Irbil, the provision of Patriot missiles to Gulf states, and the naval buildup in the Persian Gulf are examples of these provocations. Iran’s asymmetrical response could include increased support for the Mahdi Army and the Badr Brigades and covert operations. Despite its trend toward controlled chaos, Iran could increase its destabilizing effects in Iraq.

In Congress, there is a bipartisan abandonment of Bush’s Iraq policy. The president’s troop increase plan will put Democrats in an untenable position. If the policy succeeds, the only ones who would benefit are those in the administration. Should it fail, the Democrat-led Congress will bear the burden.

A moderate alternative supported by the Democrats might entail the relocation of troops from Baghdad to the Kurdish north and Anbar, where they could pursue al-Qaeda and maintain Iraq’s territorial integrity. This policy is dangerous, as it would result in ethnic cleansing taking place in Baghdad. Given that Saudi Arabia has expressed its willingness to intervene should such a scenario materialize, the risks of such a policy are high.

It is important for the 2008 presidential elections to focus on candidates' qualitative abilities rather than their quantitative abilities. It is possible that, given the quagmire in Iraq, a populist isolationist or protectionist candidate may emerge from the Republican Party. With the party's predilection for hierarchy, Arizona senator John McCain could win the presidential nomination, despite the fact he is questionable to the religious right. Another possibility is Kansas senator Samuel Brownback, an internationalist, or former Arkansas governor Michael Huckabee, who is closer with Evangelicals. The key test for the next president will be whether he can educate the American people on foreign policy issues.

MARTIN WALKER

As a consequence of the September 11 attacks, Bush's foreign policy has accelerated a historical trajectory in which the United States is no longer a status quo power and the single arbiter in the Middle East. A situation akin to nineteenth-century Europe, in which multiple great powers competed for influence, could emerge. Currently, the Middle East is in a precarious position in which it must simultaneously go through periods of reformation, counterreformation, enlightenment, industrialization, and postindustrialization.

This new reality includes Russia and China, whose ambitious military and economic programs will make them more influential as anti-status-quo powers. Both countries seek to make economic gains while maintaining their authoritarianism, making them more hesitant to support international arrangements that erode national sovereignty. Meanwhile, Europe, made up of postmodern states, will continue to strengthen international institutions.

One positive consequence of this new reality is the emergence of other powers capable of asserting themselves in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia. Turkey could also emerge as a new party in determining the evolution of the Middle East, given the moderate Islamist posture of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). Because of the European Union's cold stance toward Turkey, it is possible that Ankara may more closely align itself with the East.

Bush's new Iraq policy may bring a battle to Baghdad. Although an initial pacification of Baghdad will emerge, the insurgents will relocate to where coalition forces are absent, making it more difficult to bring security to Iraq. This was the case when troops left Mosul in 2003. A battle for Kirkuk is also being played out where the Kurds are the backbone of security for the city. In Kirkuk, a Sunni-Kurdish civil war could emerge.

It will be important to watch which particular group of Shiites the United States supports, given the divergent views of Sadr's nationalist agenda and the Iranian-backed Badr Brigades. Indeed, it is possible that a diminution of violence may follow Sadr's visit to Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, although—because Bush's policy fails to address the insurgents and Iranians—violence will continue.

Recent U.S. rhetoric and action against Iran are viewed as provocations in Tehran. Iran's current posture will lead to a heightened nuclear threshold in the region and a broader Sunni-Shiite war. Meanwhile, the Israeli government, given its current divides, has kept a low profile on the matter. Israel's current position will also make it more amenable to European proposals for peace with its neighbors.

On the European front, politicians have learned the consequences of supporting Bush, as seen by the elections in Spain and Italy. British prime minister Tony Blair's likely successor, Gordon Brown, will highlight his discontent with Bush's policy upon taking office. Additionally, if the present Operation Sinbad is concluded in Basra by March, the British may reduce their troop presence in Iraq to 4,000. In France, socialist Segolene Royal and Gaullist Nicholas Sarkozy are the two main contestants in the upcoming presidential elections, but because of Royal's inexperience with international affairs, it is possible that the extreme right-wing Jean-Marie Le Pen could finish second in the first round of that election, as he did in 2001. Meanwhile, the U.S. presidential campaigns will be most heated in early 2008, by which time each candidate will have to take a more defined position on Iraq and Iran.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Daniel Fink.

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