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Iraq and America's Foreign Policy Crisis in the Middle East

A decade ago, under a different President Bush, we emerged out of a major foreign policy crisis in the Middle East with the most advantageous position we had had since World War II. We had led a broad coalition to victory against Iraq. In the process, we demonstrated that we could be a strong and reliable friend of the Arab world, and we created many of the conditions that made a search for a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace process possible. We created the conditions for military containment of both Iran and Iraq, we had the firm support of our European allies, and we built bridges to Russia and China that allowed us to act together in dealing with peace and security issues in the Middle East.

We now face a foreign policy crisis in the Middle East under another President Bush that Secretary Powell's visit can only begin to deal with. Part of that crisis is not of our making. The Middle East is all too correctly described as a region where nations, "never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity." Its leaders also tend to repeat the mistakes of the Bourbon dynasty in France, of which it was said, "They forgot nothing and they learned nothing." We have, however, made many serious mistakes of our own, and much of our present foreign policy crisis in the region is the result of self-inflicted wounds.

Iraq and the Backlash from the Arab-Israeli Peace Process

Iraq is one key area where we made such mistakes, but Iraq cannot be discussed without touching upon the Arab-Israeli conflict and our policy towards Iran. In the case of the Arab-Israeli conflict, we face months and probably years of backlash from the failure to create a peace between Israel and Syria and between Israel and the Palestinians. It may not be fair, but all sides blame the US for the failure to reach a peace over the last two years. The Arabs feel that the US tilted far too much towards Israel, and was not an honest broker. Many Israelis feel that the US rushed them into concessions that simply led to more Syrian and Palestinian demands and which could have compromised Israel's security. Both sides give us much of the blame for the Second Intifada, and in many Arab eyes we are almost as much to blame for each Palestinian casualty as Israel.

Even in the eyes of some of our most sophisticated Arab allies, and the leaders of their countries, they feel we rushed a peace process forward as part of President Clinton's effort to redeem himself, we failed to consult, we did not listen to warnings that we played with fire in trying to force compromises across basic differences in goals and values, we created false expectations, and we had no exit strategy to deal with failure. There is a feeling that President Clinton acted as a political opportunist, and there is broad resentment of the tendency of senior officials like Secretary Albright to issue moralistic pronouncements and ignore the need to consult and listen.

The end result is that Saddam Hussein has a powerful new weapon to use against the US, as do Iran's hard-liners and every extremist in the Middle East. Nations outside the region can play the peace and Second Intifada cards against us, as nations like France, China, and Russia do. In

Saddam's case he attacks every moderate Arab regime as the ally of the US, and therefore the ally of Israel. He provides cash payments to every Palestinian casualty of the Intifada at a time no Arab moderate regime has kept its promises of aid to the Palestinian Authority, and he couples the hardships of the Palestinians to the hardships of his own people.

Is this fair? Of course not! All sides in the region are far more to blame for their problems than we are. Should we tilt towards the Palestinians at the expense of Israel? Never! We will score no lasting successes, and earn no enduring gratitude, by favoring one set of allies at the expense of another and those who truly oppose us and our values cannot be appeased.

What we can do, however, is to change the context of our policy towards the Arab-Israeli conflict in ways that Secretary Powell may already be attempting. First, we can get out of the middle and stop trying to force the pace. We can actually stop and seriously listen to our allies in Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia as well as Israel. We can pay serious attention to the views of Europe, and try to bring Russia actively back into the peace process.

Second, we can clearly define our policy towards Israel. We can make it clear that no amount of threats or outside pressure will block the flow of aid and our commitment to Israel's security. At the same time, we can make it equally clear that our commitment is to Israel and not to the government of the day. Hopefully a unity government will emerge in Israel that will continue to seek an end to violence and which will act prudently and pursue peace. If, however, the Sharon government moves towards extremes, does not sincerely support the search to end violence and a move back towards a peace process, and offers the Palestinians and Syria no way out, we should react accordingly. We should clearly and openly oppose it on these issues without reducing our strategic commitment to Israel in any way.

More broadly, the Bush Administration can provide added humanitarian aid to the Palestinians. It can also firmly oppose the kind of political opportunism that seeks to relocate the US embassy to Jerusalem before there is a peace, or which tries to legislate that the same Palestinian leaders we need in trying to end the violence should be treated as terrorists.

Iraq and US Policy Towards Iran

Iran is another key player in this strategic game. It is a counterweight to Iraq, and its moderates and the faction that supports President Khatami offer some hope that Iran will evolve to the point which it plays a constructive role in the region. This does not mean that the US should tilt towards Iran to counter Iraq. We should, however, realize that the same steps we should take to revise our policy towards the Arab-Israeli conflict will undercut the hard-liners and extremists in Iran. We should not soften our diplomatic opposition to Iran's opposition to the peace process and Israel's very existence, support of the Hizbollah and violent Palestinian extremists, to Iran's proliferation, and to Iran's build-up of its military capabilities to threaten the flow of shipping and oil through the Gulf.

At the same time, we recognize that President Khatami and his supporters do represent a major political shift, and take every valid opportunity to create correct diplomatic relations and a government-to-government dialog. We should support the Saudis, other Southern Gulf states, and Europe in trying to create relationships that encourage moderate Iranian behavior.

We should allow the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act to sunset and revoke the executive orders that block trade and energy investment in Iran. These sanctions have not affected Iran's behavior in any way. They have cut us off from Iran's moderates and business class, they have strengthened hard-liners in demonizing us, they have encouraged Iran to proliferate, and Iran has steadily increased its real arms imports and military expenditures since they were passed. Strategically, they have limited Iran's ability to maintain and expand its energy exports at a time when an increase in world oil production capacity is critical to limiting the rise in energy costs.

Iraq and the Need for New US Policy Options

This brings us to Iraq, and we need to recognize that there are no easy and quick solutions. To begin, we need to understand that no other nation in the world believes that Saddam Hussein's tyranny is fragile, or will support us in military adventures to overthrow his regime, even if we are willing to attempt them. No regime in the region trusts Saddam or is free from fear of him, but key allies like Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey regard the Iraqi opposition outside Iraq as weak, divided, and venal. They record the support that the Congress and Clinton Administration gave to movements like the Iraqi National Congress as a political farce that has little real support beyond Washington's Beltway and the lobby of the Dorchester Hotel. They fear these games could drag them into dangerous and unpopular military adventures, divide Iraq in ways that would favor Iran's hard-liners, and end in a "Bay of Kurdistan" similar to the Bay of Pigs. Many other Iraqis who do oppose Saddam also regard the Iraq Liberation Act and its selective aid to part of the opposition as the kind of overt US support that labels all outside opposition as traitors.

There is a good case for mounting a systematic covert operation to try to overthrow Saddam's regime. There is an equal case for working with our allies - particularly Kuwait and Saudi Arabia - to say that we would waive reparations and debt repayments if a new regime overthrew Saddam. We should also work with our regional allies to find some common approach to Iraqi Kurdish autonomy that we can advocate to protect the Kurds. The plain truth of the matter, however, is that Saddam's regime is not fragile or unpopular with Iraq's military, security forces, and elite. Saddam also now has enough revenue from smuggle oil exports and his manipulation of oil for food to buy all of the support he needs. His supporters now live in relative luxury and economic sanctions hurt only the Iraqi people.

This says a great deal about the future of sanctions. We have absolutely no chance of unifying the UN Security Council around revitalizing economic sanctions or creating support for controls on energy investment in Iraq. France, China, and Russia will oppose us and so will every Arab state and developing nation. Regardless of what Iran, Jordan, the Kurds, Syria, and Turkey say, they also will not crack down on Iraqi petroleum smuggling. Here, the Clinton Administration has also left the Bush Administration with a devastating legacy.

The Clinton Administration never took an effective lead in trying to really make oil for food work and to ensure that the plight of the ordinary Iraqi was eased. It made few efforts to counter Saddam's endless propaganda effort to exploit the hardship of his own people, and the efforts it did make were so sporadic and lacking in depth as to be totally unconvincing. Few in the Arab world know that nearly half of the flow of goods under oil for food have been held up or manipulated by Saddam's regime.

It is simply too late to win this aspect of the battle for the minds of the Arab world, although the Bush Administration has every incentive to carry out a systematic effort to refute Saddam's charges, make it clear that he is the principal problem in oil for food, and that he systematically lies about the causes and scale of Iraq's health problems, infant mortality, and other social problems.

The US can still, however, work with its allies to make sanctions what Secretary Powell has called "smart," or "narrow but deep." Many nations will join us in opposing any lifting of the sanctions on Saddam's arms imports, and imports of dual-use items to make conventional weapons, missiles, and weapons of mass destruction. Other supplier and exporting nations will join in if they receive the ability to make energy investments, can carry out wide ranging civil trade, and can exploit other business opportunities. Arab leaders can justify such efforts to their people both on the selfish grounds they aid their national security and on the broader grounds they prevent Saddam from diverting funds away from Iraq's true economic needs.

There are several key components to a new US approach to dealing with the US foreign policy crisis in the Middle East. First, US must redefine its military position in containing Saddam. The US must make it clear that its military presence in the region is tailored only to deterring military adventures against the Kurds and other states, is the minimal force required, and works in consultation with Turkey and our Arab allies. It must repeatedly explain the size and role of our

forces in depth, and it must explain every military action in equal depth. The day we could simply announce air strikes as part of enforcement of the No Fly Zones is over. So is the day we could trivialize our military action or describe them as business as usual. Even the best Pentagon briefings - and they have generally been horribly vague and inadequate - are not a substitute for leadership from the President and Secretary of State on this issue, or for detailed consultation with our allies. Moreover, when we act, it should be for a clear purpose and so decisively that it truly deters Saddam, and not be at a level where any military damage we do is offset by Saddam's ability to use it for propaganda purposes.

Second, we should not give up totally on resuming UN inspections and bring UNMOVIC back into Iraq. However, we must not have any illusions and continue to treat Iraqi proliferation with the Clinton Administration's "benign neglect." In the real world, it has been three years since UNSCOM could really carry out effective inspections and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) never really challenge Iraq as effectively as it should. UNMOVIC may be a useful deterrent to open, large-scale Iraqi action but it does not have the leadership or international support to really carry out effective inspections and find the kind of covert cells and new Iraqi efforts developed over the last three years. If anything, UNMOVIC could simply become the political cover for a UN effort that said it could find no evidence of Iraqi efforts. We need to decouple the containment of Iraq's proliferation from the issue of UN inspection. We need to provide a comprehensive picture of what Iraq is doing and the risks involved, and make it clear that inspection is not going to be an answer to sustained military containment. If we do not, we will send mixed and ineffective signals, and we may well see the UN turned into a tool that will give Saddam a false blessing and a license to proliferate.

Finally, we should recognize that key Gulf allies like Saudi Arabia feel irritated and neglected. They cannot openly express their contempt for the Clinton Administration, but they feel it deeply. They see the last few years of President Clinton's efforts to rush forwards towards a final Arab-Israeli peace settlement as the act of an opportunist who pressures them for his own political advantage. They feel they came under intense pressure from his Secretary of Energy to increase production and cut oil prices, reacted by making quiet concessions, and were then embarrassed in public while he tried to run for Vice President. They feel the US ignored Saudi efforts to create an institutionalized dialogue between importers and exporters that could help create fair and stable prices. They feel Clinton's Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense lectured them, rather than consulted, and never really listened. The Saudis also feel Clinton's trade representative deliberately ignored their efforts to join the WTO. We do not need to sacrifice a single US interest to consult with our Gulf allies, listen to them, and engage in a balanced diplomacy that gives them the priority they deserve. Secretary Powell has already advocated such a balanced diplomacy and he is all too correct in doing so.

The Specific Steps We Should Take in Improving Our Policy Towards Iraq

Secretary Powell's call for "smart sanctions" against Iraq is long overdue, and can help to correct a critical weakness in our foreign policy. It was clear by the mid-1990s that broad economic sanctions were not going to bring down Saddam Hussein, halt Iraqi efforts to proliferate, or cripple the ability of Iraq's military and security forces to repress the Kurds, put down Iraq's Shi'ite opposition, and threaten Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. It was equally clear that they continued to impoverish the ordinary Iraqi, and block Iraq's economic development.

Nearly half a decade later, sanctions have eroded to the point where Iraq has over one billion dollars of uncontrolled income from smuggled petroleum exports. Its "legal" oil revenues in 2000 are estimated at \$21.6 billion, which is 89% higher than in 1999, and more than 170% higher than in 1988. Saddam can now use a combination of this income and the holes in the controls on the UN oil for food program, to buy the loyalty of his power elite, the security forces, and Republican Guards.

It makes good, and long overdue, sense to refocus the sanctions effort to ensuring Saddam cannot import conventional arms and the technology and equipment to produce weapons of mass

destruction. At the same time, it is equally clear that "smart sanctions" are not enough and that the Bush Administration could easily repeat some of the most chronic failures of the Clinton Administration. The US needs more of a strategy than can fit on a bumper sticker, and more thought than can fit in a fortune cookie. To be specific, "smart sanctions" can only work if they are part of the following seven major changes in US policy towards Iraq:

- *First, the US must be prepared to confront potential and actual suppliers.* It is uncertain that the US can get even pro forma Security Council agreement to refocusing sanctions in ways that give them real teeth. The waters and borders of Iran, Jordan, Syria, and Turkey are not going to be sealed, and dual-use items and military spare parts are notoriously hard to police. It will take a massive intelligence effort and confrontational diplomacy with suppliers, and the nations on Iraq's borders, to make "smart sanctions" work. Talk and good intentions are cheap; effective action is difficult and costly.
- *Second, the US must come to grips with the failure of the UN inspection effort and the fact UNMOVIC might do more harm if it did return to Iraq than good.* Effective UN inspection really halted in late 1997, and Desert Fox did virtually nothing to really inhibit Iraq's effort to proliferate. Iraq has had years to create an effective network of cells and dual use efforts to develop a break out capability in chemical and biological weapons, improve its nuclear weapons designs, and develop a missile program. UNMOVIC is still banned from Iraq, but if it did return, it might well operate under so many political constraints that it would end up certifying Iraqi compliance, rather than act as an effective deterrent to Iraqi action. The Clinton Administration dodged this issue for its last two years in office, but "smart sanctions" require a clear and detailed plan of action.
- *Third, the US must face the reality of the ineffectiveness of the Iraqi opposition, shift to a long-term covert operations effort, and focus on the continuing need for military containment.* The Bush Administration threatens to repeat the mistakes of the Clinton Administration and Congress, and go on backing weak and unpopular elements of the Iraqi opposition like the Iraqi National Congress. These movements have no meaningful support from any friendly government in the region, and they have no military potential beyond dragging the US into a "Bay of Kuwait" or "Bay of Kurdistan" disaster. The Turks fear them as a way of dividing Iraq and creating a Kurdistan, and the Arabs fear them as a way of bringing Iraq under Shi'ite control and/or Iranian influence. Worse, they are no substitute for a major covert effort to overthrow Saddam from within, and overt US funding of such movement tends to label the Iraqi opposition as US sponsored traitors. We need to understand that containing Iraq is far more important than legislating the funding of a forlorn hope.
- *Fourth, the US must launch an active truth campaign to confront Saddam on oil for food and all of the other issues where he relies on lies and exploitation of tensions in the region.* The Clinton Administration committed a massive foreign policy mistake by failing to engage Saddam over his lies and propaganda. Aside from some sporadic and truly inept press efforts, it allowed him to capture Arab and world opinion in lying about the problems in oil for food and the true causes of the suffering of the Iraq people. It did not engage him actively on human rights inside Iraq, his attacks on Iraq's Shi'ites, his continuing claims to Kuwait, or his threats to Iraq's Kurds. It postured about palaces to the American media, and allowed Saddam to turn UN reporting into a propaganda defeat. "Smart sanctions" will not work without a massive and continued truth campaign to fully explain the true character of the Iraqi regime that is tailored to Gulf, Arab, and world audiences.
- *Fifth, the US must think now about the ultimate future of Iraq's Kurds.* The erosion of sanctions poses immediate threats to Iraq's Kurds. While the Clinton Administration chose to ignore it, Iraq has been "cleansing" oil-rich areas in Northern Iraq of Kurds and forcing them into other areas or the Kurdish security zone. It is not clear we can prevent

this, but getting support for "smart sanctions" and protecting the Kurds means we need a clear US policy on the future of the Kurdish security zone and a definition of Kurdish autonomy that will set policy goals to protect the Kurds while defusing fears Iraq will divide or break up.

- *Sixth, the US must have a clear energy policy towards Iraq.* Iraq is a nation that has some 11% of all the world's oil reserves and that has not had any coherent energy development efforts since the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980. US government projections call for Iraqi oil production capacity to more than double from around 2.8 million barrels a day to 6.2 million barrels in 2020. These increases in Iraq's oil exports are also critical to any hope of its economic development. Massive energy investments are required, and they years to a decade to pay off. They also can provide the Iraqi regime with major new resources. "Smart sanctions" must be coupled to a clear energy development policy.
- *Finally, the US must revitalize the other aspects of military containment.* The true subtext of a "smart sanctions" policy is that we will need a major forward military presence, rapid deployment capability, and war fighting ability to check an Iraqi attack on Kuwait or threat to use weapons of mass destruction indefinitely into the future. The Clinton Administration spoke stickily and carried a big soft. It "nickel and dimed" its use of force to contain Iraq, issued a series of abortive threats over UN inspections, launched Desert Fox, and then halted it before it could be effective. Two years of pin-prick strikes over the "No Fly Zones" have done as much to give Saddam a propaganda victory as they have to hurt his air defenses.

We need a formal Bush Doctrine that states our redlines, that says quite clearly that Gulf security and the continued flow of oil is a vital US national security interest, and that we will remain committed to military containment and close cooperation with our Gulf allies as long as there is a threat from either Iraq or Iran. We need to define the kind of Iraqi action that will lead us to launch military action, and if Iraq takes such action, we need to strike so hard and so decisively that the military and personal cost to Saddam is so unaffordable that any political propaganda gains he makes are minor in comparison. The one round of half-successful strikes the Bush Administration launched on February 16th is Clintonesque at best. "Smart Sanctions" require a clear Bush Doctrine and a clearly defined commitment to decisive force.

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