

Advice to the Next President about the Middle East

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Ever since President Truman addressed a joint session of Congress on March 12, 1947, asking for \$400 million in economic and military assistance to block Soviet aggression into the Mediterranean region through Greece and Turkey, the U.S. has played a key role in the Middle East. Since then, more presidential doctrines have dealt with this region than any other in the world. American engagement has become deeper and broader. Our presence has crept steadily eastward. Washington has expanded its focus beyond the Mediterranean and Persian Gulf. Our interest in the region now extends to Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the southern regions of the former Soviet Union.

The region will neither patiently await the next president's preparedness, nor will it be any more hospitable. There will be no honeymoons. "Old" issues include: assuring moderate Arab state continuity; maintaining the security of Israel and Turkey; containing periodic ethnic and sectarian flare-ups; mitigating familial and tribal identities; and insuring access to fossil fuels at reasonable costs. Newer issues will include: managing a regionally aggressive Iran and its nuclear aspirations; responding to weakening Arab state structures; limiting or eradicating actions of al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and other nefarious non-state actors; curbing transnational terrorism; and managing the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).

The following thirteen axioms, based on six decades of experiences, may be useful in dealing with the region.

1. Political Culture Matters.

In the Middle East, political fragmentation is the norm. Cleavages exist between haves and have-nots, natives and foreigners, ethnic and sectarian groups, younger and older generations, Shi'as and Sunnis, and radical and moderate Islam, not to mention the resource-rich and the resource-poor. Middle East culture can also be impacted by demographics, economic and structural weaknesses, bloated bureaucracies, cronyism, patronage, and more than occasional corruption. Like it or not, the region is full of autocrats. Patron-client politics is normal. They range from benign to dictatorial. In Middle Eastern Arab states, leaders are institutions.

2. This Culture Changes Glacially.

Merely winning a domestic victory in November does not empower the next president or his advisors with the ability to change core characteristics of the Middle East's political culture. Indeed, a presidential victory does not translate into a mandate to make changes in the Middle East. This is a region of the world where foreign intrusion generates ill will. Within Arab, Muslim, and Israeli political DNA, there remains stiff resistance to being told what to do and when to do it.

3. Use Every Political Tool Available.

The next president must be prepared to recruit regional and international allies to manage problems. At the same time, the next president must be prepared to act unilaterally when national security demands it.

The next president must be prepared to use carrots and sticks. If one is used more than the other, states in the region will cast the next president as either overly aggressive or an emperor with no clothes.

Dallying in decision-making is appeasement; failing to make a decision can be as catastrophic as making the wrong one too early. It will be important to find a policy somewhere between always barking and always biting. Knowing when to employ either tactic is a skill that requires sensitivity.

4. Arab States Are Cracking.

Decades of inefficiently run governments have bred generations of frustrated populations. Arab populations are either on the move or want to be. Inflation rates and commodity prices are soaring, fomenting a palpable feeling of unrest in rural and urban areas alike.

The attacks of 9/11 put the region's leaders under a microscope. They are keenly aware of being watched and evaluated, and they do not like it. Indeed, Arab policymakers do not care for the spotlight, but they also know that hiding their inadequacies is no longer possible. Local satellite television channels and an emboldened public media increasingly point fingers.

5. Weakened Arab States Need Help.

While these Middle East regimes are ossified, their collapse is not in the interest of world stability. Virtually every president since Truman has embarked on a policy of maintaining political stability of Arab states. Examples include: Eisenhower in 1957 (Egypt's Gamal Abd al-Nasser); Nixon in 1970 (King Hussein of Jordan); Nixon again in 1973 (Egypt's Anwar al-Sadat's Third Army after the October war); Reagan in 1982 (saving the Palestinian Liberation Organization's Yasir Arafat after the Lebanon war); and George H.W. Bush in 1991 (saving Kuwait from Iraqi aggression). All have found ways to sustain tottering leaders and/or their states. The next president must be prepared to do the same until true political reform strengthens these regimes in an organic and sustainable manner.

6. Geography and Geology Matter.

The urge to leave Iraq is great. Leaving, however, does not change geo-strategic realities. Indeed, geological and geographic realities determine how long we stay, with whom we create alliances, as well as the conditions under which we leave.

Iran sits astride important regional oil reserves and transshipment routes. Who guarantees our allies protection? Turkey is a critical ally for several reasons, not least of which is its strategic location along southern Russia, and its access to oil pipelines. Regardless of

who follows Husni Mubarak, Egypt is the door to shipping via the Suez Canal. These Middle Eastern interests have remained vital, regardless of administration.

7. Defend Against Regional Aggression.

American troops may one day leave Iraq, but Iraq will remain a high American foreign policy priority. Iraq is a Shi'a dominated Arab state, which makes it particularly susceptible to Iranian interference and manipulation. Indeed, Iran covets Iraq's resources. Neighboring Arab Gulf states also fear Iranian adventurism. A nuclear-armed Iran, in particular, has dangerous implications for political stability, resource access, and global financial markets. The U.S. and its allies must defend the Middle East from regional aggression – from Iran or other potential enemies

8. Heed Lessons From Previous Arab-Israeli Negotiations.

No outside party can change Arab attitudes toward Israel, least of all the United States. Nor can Israel change Arab unwillingness to accept unequivocally a Jewish state in the region.

Making peace with Israel is not an Arab state priority. Without reasonable and reliable negotiating partners, Israel could continue to apply unilateralism to protect national interests. This includes defending against Iran, Hamas, or other foes. Israel will not entrust its security to anyone else. As such, the most important prerequisite for achieving success in future negotiations is overt Arab state support and alleviation of Israeli security concerns.

Two other truths are worth remembering in this arena: First, agreements emerge when desperation or national interests are too compelling to do otherwise. Second, both parties often negotiate to buy time, not to reach a conclusion.

9. When You Make A Deal, Make Transformations.

Past agreements and negotiations between Israel and Arab sides have focused too much on transactions. This includes: degree of withdrawal; numbers of forces in a demilitarized zone; dismantling of settlements; creating or removing checkpoints; prisoner release or exchange; creation of a self-governing, autonomous, or independent authority; location of borders; early-warning systems; Jerusalem; and water-sharing formulae. To date, Arab-Israel conflict resolution has not focused enough on wider transformations.***

Conceptual changes of how Arabs and Israelis see one another are critical. While Israelis have accepted the notion of a two state solution, the Palestinian consensus remains uncertain. To make a long-term Palestinian-Israeli agreement remotely possible, the next president must nurture transformational changes alongside the obligatory transactions.

10. Walk The Line

As the mediator in the Arab-Israeli conflict, one side will accuse the president of being too close to the other. This will always be a challenge to overcome. To that end, the president must be engaged and supportive of a negotiating process, with channels open to both sides. The next president must find that fine line between entwined and evasive. He

cannot allow one Arab leader say he can represent another. Nor can he allow one Israeli to speak on behalf of the entire nation.

11. Learn From Others' Experience.

Among the government's most able talent are those that recently left civil service. Assembling the best, brightest, and experienced can give you valuable "Cliff Notes" in a pragmatic and succinct fashion. Engage them; they will give you instant appreciation of prospects and pitfalls on Middle Eastern and other policy issues. Most critical, vital memoranda must be amassed forward to the next administration. Dropping strategic batons must be avoided.

12. Find Competent And Experienced Advisors, Not Loyalists.

Getting elected and governing are very different skills. The next president must have advisors who understand the issues intimately, who already have the confidence of regional actors, who have institutional memories, and who comprehend the region's political culture. An abundant array of would-be advisors abound. It will be critical to choose the ones who truly know the issues from memory or history. The next president cannot afford to let the first six months in office become a retreat seminar for advisors to receive intensive training.

13. Use Your First Days Wisely.

From election until inauguration, our next president should dispatch a potential member of the new foreign policy staff to the region. Additionally, during the first six months, it would be wise to send the new Secretary of State to the region to establish relationships and assess the current climate.

Following that, key Middle Eastern leaders should be invited to come to the White House in early 2009. These figures will attempt to determine where the next president's weak spots are—where they can press and where they cannot. These are defining visits for bilateral relations with Middle Eastern states. Every word you say or omit is noted in the region and considered policy.

And remember: after an Oval office visit, never let a Middle Eastern leader go alone to the microphones.

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***Stein, Kenneth W. "Annapolis: Precedents and Transactions, But No Transformations," *Tel Aviv Notes: An Update on Middle Eastern Developments by the Moshe Dayan Center*. December 27, 2007.
<http://www.ismi.emory.edu/Articles/AnnapolisPrecedentsAndTransactions.pdf>