

MIDDLE EAST INSIGHT

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"Memorandum to the Next President: Staying Engaged"

By Kenneth W. Stein

From the recently complete presidential campaign, it was confirmed that the American people are not interested in, and do not focus on, foreign affairs, except as they relate to domestic matters. Less than six percent of the American people believe that foreign policy issues should top the national agenda. Those foreign affairs issues that relate directly to domestic matters include immigration, trade, foreign currency valuations, drug interdiction, the health of foreign economies, and accessible oil at a reasonable price. When you take office in January 2001, you, like your predecessors since the end of the Cold War, will make international commitments only where the national interest is clearly at stake; where the mission or purposes are readily defined; where you can find regional allies to share the manpower and financial burden; and where we commit forces our engagement will be for a definite period of time.

For the Middle East alone, however, there are six hangovers from the 1990s that will need your attention: our role in the Middle East is physically wider, politically deeper, and culturally more profound than at any time in history: shepharding Arab-Israeli negotiations; managing the region's potential instability; sustaining close bilateral (military and strategic) relations with Middle East oil-producing states; possible reassessment of policies toward rogue states such as Iraq, Iran and Libya; and concerted deterrence against the spread and/or use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). These issues are complex to solve, but they will require close attention and daily management to advert damage to national interest.

When Iraq invaded Kuwait a decade ago, no one could have predicted that from that invasion, Arab state would seek out aid to ensure their security and territorial integrity, or that and Arab-Israeli negotiating process would flow from it. Today American cultural presence is everywhere; societies and governments still grapple with finding the moveable intersection points of modernization, westernization and adherence to traditional values. In a uni-polar world, Washington will continue to be asked to solve problems or change policies it cannot or should not. Our bilateral relations with states in the region require appointment of the best personnel to manage our interests, those that understand the varieties of Middle Eastern political cultures and can

blend them with our interests of political stability, promotion of human rights, defense of allies, and access to oil at a reasonable price.

As every president has been asked since the 1970s, you will be implored by domestic and foreign interests to find ways to make Israelis and Arabs reach durable understandings. Your engagement in Arab-Israeli negotiations will be more complex than that of your predecessors. You will have to sustain existing arrangements as well as make new ones, and find the funds for both. As we learned last October during the Palestinian-Israeli violence, even the Oval Office's commitment to reach agreements is not capable of keeping on the ground emotions intact. That violence was a preface to the coming reality: peacekeeping is as difficult as -- or more difficult than -- the process of peacemaking.

Syrian-Israeli negotiations will likely resume, and Lebanese-Israeli negotiations should follow. However, you cannot force it. If Syria is interested in an agreement the ready signal will come from Damascus. However, if the Palestinian-Israeli agreement is to stick, the newly minted Palestinian state will require more than \$1 billion a year for the next decade. You will have to not only persuade Congress to keep up foreign assistance levels as incentives for binding the Egyptian-Israeli relationship, and find new funds for Jordan, but also persuade Arab states, the European Union, and others to make substantial and annual commitments to deliver at least a modest peace dividend. Failure to do so will mean that a post-Arafat Palestinian state will repeatedly quake with unrest as the territories did last October. A laissez-faire policy toward resolving and managing Arab-Israel differences is counterproductive to the national interest.

Except for Israel, less apparent but potentially explosive are the underlying social and economic issues faced by all Middle Eastern states. They are passing through uncertain political periods. Political successions already at hand, and according to the World Bank, the region had the slowest per capita economic growth of any region in the 1990s except for Latin America. Middle Eastern populations are soaring in number -- close to half the region's population is below the age of 30, and rates of unemployment range between 20 percent to 25 percent. Recent success in promoting mass education has for many left a generation of young, educated but unemployed job-seekers that could be a potential powder keg for each regime in the region. Neither the Internet nor globalization of economies is a magic solution to the region's problems.

Since we use more than a third of all the world oil produced daily, and because there are no foreseeable alternatives, you will have to pay close attention to the region's political fault lines or find an energy alternative.

Conservation will not do it alone.

There is slow change in Libya, Iraq and Iran. What happens inside these countries and how their leaders behave, will determine if and how fast you decide to encourage these regimes to engage in constructive dialogue, trade, and perhaps diplomatic relations.

There is no guarantee that a post-Hussein Iraq will be any more hospitable to surrounding neighbors. You will have to pay close attention to the activities of all three countries, because they not only sit on large reserves of oil, but also have produced, stockpiled, and could deliver biological, chemical, or nuclear weapons. Here, proactive or preemptive policies are essential; this means disposing of their stockpiles, severely punishing countries that sell technology or provide know-how to shady-intentioned addresses, and deterrence through shared intelligence.

Whether you or the American people want them or not, Middle Eastern foreign policy issues will be thrust upon you. My policy recommendation is that before your inauguration, put your foreign policy teams in place, set up task forces on these issues, and be appropriately active immediately in these matters. Don't wait for the traditional pilgrimage of Middle Eastern leaders who will meet you this spring in Washington.

Dr. Kenneth W. Stein is contributing editor to Middle East Insight and William E. Schatten Professor of contemporary Middle Eastern History and Israeli Studies at Emory University. He is author of Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, begin and the Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace.