

IF BUSH WINS WHAT MEANING FOR U.S.-ARAB RELATIONS?

by

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An "Iffy" Question: What If Bush Were to Win?

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(November 18 - Riyadh) "If," in terms of its meaning, can be, and sometimes is, one of the longest words in English. Ask anyone: what word can cast a longer shadow than this one, especially in answer to the question, "What if?"

On the morning after the election for the next U.S. president, here in the capital of the world's most important Islamic country, a group of 25 Saudi Arabians and an equal number of Americans listened as I addressed an iffy question.

At the moment, next door, in Doha, Qatar, leaders from all over were in the process of putting the final touches to the agenda for the tri-annual heads of state summit of the 56-nation Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). In two days' time, the summiteers would consider issues of interest and importance to the world's 1.2 billion Muslims.

The iffy topic was this: "If Bush has won -- as the TV news networks say that he has, but only minutes ago they have changed to say that he may not have won after all, or at least not yet -- what difference, if any, might his victory make in terms of Saudi Arabian- U.S. relations?"

With official closure on the election's outcome still elusive as of this writing, who can say what difference, if any, a Bush Administration might make in terms of U.S. relations with Saudi Arabia and its neighbors in the GCC region?

Premature or not, the question is an interesting one to ponder. The reasons are obvious: America has innumerable interests and much at stake in Saudi Arabia and in other Arab countries, the Middle East, and the Islamic world.

Following is a recap, and in places an elaboration, of remarks made on that occasion. The remarks outline what would appear to be among the probabilities and/or the strong possibilities.

FRESH AND NEW OR DEJA VU?

By definition, the onset of a new Bush Administration would carry with it a potential for seemingly endless possibilities to launch new ventures. It would invite no end of temptation to revisit earlier or existing ventures from the vantage point of a different perspective.

Many who voted the Republican ticket would likely find the pursuit of such possibilities refreshing. At least, this would be the case for a while until more than a few of what seemed at first to be possibilities give way to what cynics - or perhaps, more fairly, realists - may cite as immovable impediments or inertia.

Others will claim that they as much as said so from the beginning. If only people had listened, they will say, soon enough, much of what one had hoped and thought would be new would begin to bear a disheartening resemblance to much of what went before.

In some ways, but not in all ways, it has always been thus.

This said, no one will deny that there is likely to be an abundance of fresh faces at the helm. And if conceptually "new and fresh" are the opposite of that which is "old and stale," there would also, certainly for a while, be more of the former and less of the latter.

One manifestation of this anticipated difference would likely be in the way that new leadership manifests itself. Another will be in management style. Yet another, inevitably, would be noted in terms of new attitudes, actions, and positions. And still another, over time, will be in the form of new policies.

This would be in the nature of things. After all, that's what much of the election was about. When, if ever, has an Administration transitioned from one party to its opposite number without there being major differences of one kind or another as a result?

As to style, or what would pass for the glitter-titter factor, the nature and orientation of Washington's Pennsylvania Avenue sleepovers would almost certainly differ. That is, far fewer Hollywood stars, starlets, and other heavy hitters of "independent means" would likely be invited by the First Host to spend the night in the White House's Lincoln bedroom.

For those who did stay over, the morning after would likely be different. To paraphrase one humorist, fewer overnight guests of high net worth would likely be inclined or feel obligated to leave behind on the pillow, as merely a material token of their appreciation, the equivalent of a monetary mint or a stash of comparable magnitude in an envelope.

But not everyone would agree that everything new, fresh, and different would be the same as better.

Some will miss the saxophone.

INITIATIVES

A close cousin of the inevitable "freshness" and "newness" that a Bush Administration would bring to the White House would be something else of interest to Saudi Arabians and a great many others: namely, initiatives.

One can expect new initiatives to be proposed by one or more representatives of what will be largely a new cast of opinion, concept, and options

formulators working in close sync with newly appointed policymakers and decision makers.

The palpable hubris derived from their party having won the election aside, these individuals will likely want to demonstrate their self-pronounced greater expertise and effectiveness in foreign policy matters earlier rather than later.

If so, this will probably entail the launching of new and possibly quite different kinds of initiatives pertaining to the Middle East.

The one regional challenge almost certain to demand an immediate effort by the new President and his team of advisers would be to demonstrate greater American statesmanship and effectiveness than one has seen to date in helping to bring closure to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

It is possible, of course, that anything can happen between now and the inauguration. For example, Israel could decide to withdraw from the Occupied Territories. It could decide to recognize an independent State of Palestine. It could acknowledge the right of the new state to establish its capital in East Jerusalem.

Few in the GCC region would disagree that these three interconnected acts of Israeli statesmanship, more than anything else, would constitute a powerful incentive for bringing the Intifada, and the Israeli occupation that has provoked and sustained it, to an end?

If so, perhaps the word "occupation," certainly at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, could also be freed - freed to revert to its more normal usage, meaning "a form of work," or "one's talent that is a gift."

But, as things stand at the moment, such a possibility seems, at best, remote. If so, it is difficult to imagine the new Intifada not ranking near the top of the list of a Bush Administration's major foreign policy challenges.

It is in the nature of the most pressing challenges at hand that those tasked with addressing and surmounting them will almost certainly advocate embarking upon new initiatives.

If Bush wins, once his administration has settled down and taken shape, and possibly even before then, it would be hard not to envision him launching a new initiative. But, for the sake of credibility, any new effort with presidential backing would need to carry with it a commensurate measure of conviction and commitment. What would also be necessary is courage - of the moral, political, and possibly even the physical kind, as those opposed to such an initiative may seek to pelt him with stones.

Among the voices of dismay and despair from one end of the region to the next are those that ask, "How else, in all candor and honesty, could one be expected to give realistic hope to the greatest possible number of Arabs and Israelis that the makings of a viable settlement that both can live with is not only in sight, but practically in hand?"

For a Bush Administration, or even a Gore Administration, for that matter, not to provide the realism of such a hope would be seen by many as tantamount to forfeiting the mantle of statesmanship and stewardship.

Viewed from within this region, nothing less than the opposite of forfeit, and nothing short of a refusal to capitulate pre-emptily to so-called U.S. domestic political realities, is needed to produce a satisfactory solution to one of humankind's longest unresolved international conflicts.

Here is one area where, regardless of whether one is talking about a Bush Administration or a Gore Administration, the notion of proceeding along the lines of "business as usual" is not an option.

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Among other Middle East issues that are candidates for a new administration's innovative initiatives are those related to Iran and Iraq.

Vice-Presidential Candidate Cheney is already on record in voicing his dissatisfaction with the Clinton Administration's unilateral economic embargo against Iran. The consequences of the embargo for American business, as opposed to its impact on other countries' commercial sectors, have been severe.

If there has been another self-inflicted wound to the United States proposed by a President and enacted by the Congress in the past quarter century that has been more materially costly to the American economy, one would be hard-pressed to name what it is. [On November 11, President Clinton, in a letter to Congress, extended the embargo for another twelve months].

Many corporate leaders who backed the Bush candidacy include those that have Iran very much on their radar screen.

These and others make no bones about their objective: they are anxious to be able to take advantage of opportunities to do business in Iran before, as one here informed me a few days ago, "companies from Asia and Europe will have won all of the most lucrative deals. As it is, they have elbowed us out of all but a few of the ones that remain."

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But, viewed from within the region, what may be possible in a Bush Administration vis-à-vis Iran is not likely to occur or bear much fruit unless there is convincing evidence that the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian conflicts are well along the way to an early and effective resolution.

At the moment, such evidence is nowhere in sight. Indeed, whether Israel will act to end its occupation of Palestinian and Syrian territory, and to welcome the establishment of an independent State of Palestine, with its capital in East Jerusalem - three demands that Iran shares with Palestinians, Syrians, and virtually the entire Islamic world -- is itself in question.

In the interim, many would appear to be on solid ground in predicting that an affirmative answer to the question of whether Israel will take such actions is likely to remain elusive for some time yet to come.

Absent such a decision by Israel, it is an open question as to what, if anything, a Bush Administration might be able to do vis-à-vis reaching an accommodation with Tehran that has not been tried before by the Clinton Administration.

That is, much of what is likely to remain possible in pursuit of a further warming in Iran-U.S. relations will continue to remain outside the normal confines of the bilateral relationship.

It will remain substantially linked to what happens, and just as importantly to what does not happen, in Palestine and/or among the leaders and rank and file of Hamas, Hizbollah, and Islamic Jihad and others who seek nothing more than an end to the occupation.

Each of the three first-named groups receives moral and material support from Iran. All three also look to Tehran for input, comment, and guidance on a range of international strategic issues of great importance to Israel and, by extension, the United States.

The region-wide consensus within the Arab and Islamic world is that American and Israeli actions and policies, and, in particular, the perceived inability of the United States to play the role of an honest broker between the parties, have resulted in raising significantly the acceptability and respectability of all three groups since the current Intifada began.

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In any case, what may or may not be possible vis-à-vis Tehran is, by nature, quite different from what may be possible vis-à-vis Baghdad. In contrast to a Bush Administration's likely interest in wanting to find a way to explore the prospects for enhancing commercial cooperation with Iran, it is difficult to envision a Bush team being equally eager to do the same with regard to Iraq.

Rather, a Bush Administration, at least initially, could be expected to proceed with much greater caution in the case of Iraq. Certainly, it is unlikely that a Bush Administration would move quickly to alter the most fundamental outlines of existing U.S. policy in favor of maintaining the military sanctions, if not also the economic sanctions.

If so, one can expect the reasoning to center first and foremost on the fact that Kuwait has long been, and remains, a proven ally. Kuwait's neighbors, Iran and Iraq, hold no such status.

One does not turn one's back on the existential needs of an ally without simultaneously inflicting a body blow to one's overall foreign policy credibility in the eyes of all of one's other allies and, also, its would-be allies.

There is also this: On the altar of what could either a Bush Administration or, for that matter, a Gore Administration, justify lifting the military sanctions in the absence of Iraqi compliance with the relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions enacted as a result of its invasion and occupation of its neighbor?

Especially in light of the fact that the OIC Summit Conference of 56 nations' leaders has called for Iraq to comply with the UN sanctions as a means of getting the sanctions lifted. And especially, too, in light of the fact that the position of Kuwait and its fellow member-states in the Gulf Cooperation Council - Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE - is the same.

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The kinds of foreign policy challenges that would likely be presented to a Bush Administration elsewhere in the region are also different. In Yemen, for example, the nature and extent of the differences stand in marked contrast to the challenges posed by Israel-Palestine, Israel-Syria, and Iran and Iraq.

At the moment, one could roll the dice either way as to whether one would have reason to envision an approach towards Yemen by a Bush Administration that would be discernibly different from that of a Gore Administration. The evidence favoring the likelihood of one proposition or the other is mixed.

For context, no one is likely to forget anytime soon that the previous Bush Administration came down strongly on Yemen for its 1990-91 role in the crisis between Kuwait and Iraq.

In particular, who has forgotten then-Secretary of State James Baker's dire warning to Yemen's President before the UN vote to authorize the use of force, if necessary, to liberate Kuwait?

Baker warned the Yemen Government that, "If your representative votes 'no' on this matter, I guarantee you it will be the most expensive vote you ever cast."

Baker said what he meant and meant what he said. On the aid front, the United States hammered Yemen hard. American official economic assistance to Yemen plummeted to zero.

But what was then was then, and now is now. Between the two is a world of difference.

On balance, a Bush Administration, in my mind, would likely be inclined to do more than the Clinton Administration has done, or a Gore Administration would do, to strengthen the Yemen-U.S. relationship.

The reasons are several. Prior to the "recent unpleasantness" occasioned by Yemen's non-support for the successful U.S. campaign to win UN authorization for the use of force to liberate Kuwait, the previous Bush Administration was committed to assist in Yemen's economic development.

It is no secret that the task of doing so was made politically easier by the fact that the principal generator of the Yemen government's revenue was then, as now, the Dallas-based Hunt Oil Company. The company's founders and owners have long been friends and supporters of the Bush family's political campaigns.

But, in this instance, there is the likelihood that several additional things will be afoot. The first stems from the settlement this past June of the previous long-disputed land and maritime borders between Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

The accord has innumerable implications for improved strategic, economic, political, commercial, defense, and other relations between the United States and both countries. Each is anxious to work in concert with the other two in support of mutually beneficial objectives. In particular, all three are keen to find ways to work in tandem to improve the prospects for regional peace and stability.

Second, regarding a point that the October 12 attack in Aden harbor on the USS Cole drove home in rather dramatic and tragic fashion, Yemen is in dire need of being able to obtain help in building a more credible navy and coast guard to protect what is one of the least well-defended shores of any country in the world.

Without substantial assistance from the United States and other friends, Yemen will remain an easy point of illicit entry into Arabia and not only for refugees fleeing from economic and myriad other miseries in East Africa.

Absent such aid, sustained over time, Yemen's porous maritime boundaries will also remain a tempting gateway into the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf for individuals whose agendas are radically different and whose intentions are hardly benign.

Among such individuals are those who would seek to endanger not just Yemen's national security and related interests, but those of neighboring Saudi Arabia and Oman, and Yemen's principal Great Power partners.

It is too soon to know with any degree of precision what a new administration might propose in the way of a new U.S. foreign policy approach towards Yemen. However, U.S. Republican Senator John Warner in recent days gave evidence of what, in a Bush Administration, may be an important first signal of what could lie ahead.

Warner successfully led an effort in the U.S. Congress to double the amount of U.S. economic assistance appropriated for Yemen in the coming year. In his remarks in support of the legislation, the Senator, a former Secretary of the Navy, indicated that he hoped that a portion of the assistance would be allocated to helping Yemen to build a credible coastal defense.

LEADERSHIP

It is a given that a Bush Administration would bring to the fore new leaders to address an array of opportunities and challenges of immense importance to Saudi Arabia and its GCC allies.

But beyond the fresh faces and new names, what would likely be significantly different, either in terms of style or substance or both, from a Clinton Administration, or, for that matter, in a would-be Gore Administration, with regard to leadership?

At first glance, what comes to mind is something of no small moment. It would be the range of experience, knowledge, and tools that the strategic and foreign policy leaders of a Bush team would likely be able to bring to bear on matters pertaining to the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf.

Think about it for a moment. Within the GCC region as a whole, national elites, almost without exception, look back on the previous Bush Administration's foreign policy and defense leaders with unabashed respect and admiration.

Even so, one should perhaps exercise a degree of care and caution in envisioning whether it is likely that one will see a profound difference on this front. The reason: the leaders who made such a defining difference in the previous Bush Administration have been out of government for eight years. In the interim, a great deal has transpired.

In any event, there is a broad-based regional consensus that no one needs to tutor or mentor the likes of Dick Cheney, Colin Powell, Richard Armitage, and others on Bush's foreign policy team about the vital importance of the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf for America's national interests.

Neither do leaders of their stature need to be reminded of the importance of maintaining strong personal ties over time. Such ties are synonymous with the kind of trust and confidence that these and other leaders in the previous Bush Administration were able to inspire and sustain among America's principal Arab allies.

If nothing else, there would appear to be reason to expect to see fairly early on a difference in leadership style, if not also a difference in content and nuance, in the way a Bush Administration would likely deal with the kinds of Gulf-wide challenges and opportunities posed by Iran and Iraq.

The context for envisioning such differences would not be confined to dealing with these two countries either separately or as a pair. Just as importantly, it would include focusing on the way that each of them affects questions of importance to the Gulf as a whole.

Many of Bush's business supporters, his key foreign policy advisers, and his interlocutors within the region can be expected to see to that.

GCC REGION

Closely related to a likely different approach to the Gulf as a whole by a Bush Administration, in comparison to a Gore Administration, would be the likelihood of a Bush team's differently packaged approach to relations with the Gulf's six GCC countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

In this regard, it is helpful to recall that the Clinton-Gore Administration, prior to the election of Israeli Premier Binyamin Netanyahu in 1996, spent a great deal of time and effort in support of Israel's economic and political agendas vis-à-vis the GCC and other Arab countries.

In so doing, the Clinton-Gore team sought to persuade these countries that it would be worth their while to view with favor the prospects for regional economic and commercial cooperation with Israel as then led by Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres.

The GCC countries met President Clinton's challenge to meet the then-Israeli government half way more than half way.

But to what mutually beneficial end, the Arab participants in the venture have asked, since the ascendancy of, first, Netanyahu and, more recently, his successor, Ehud Barak, and, now, in light of the new Intifada?

From a regional perspective, short of a profound turnabout in Israeli and American policy towards the Palestinians, it is hard to see a Bush Administration trying to resurrect the Clinton Administration's previous effort.

That effort, which was enshrined in policy, entailed efforts by emissaries of Clinton and Gore to persuade as many Arab countries as possible to pursue a policy of normalization of relations with Israel, regardless of whether the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had been settled.

That policy has come under heavy attack and been rejected out of hand by numerous Arab countries since quite some time before the outbreak of the current Intifada. Despite this, observers here note that, "it was not for nothing" that Vice-President Gore and his colleagues invested heavily in the policy before they acquiesced to the impact of events on the ground grinding it to a halt. For this reason, they opine that it would be comparatively easy to envision a Gore Administration trying to revive the policy at the first opportunity.

In further contrast to the Clinton Administration, and to what a Gore Administration might bring to the table in terms of attention to this or that sub-region of the Middle East, a Bush team would be almost certain to project an image of greater overall credibility within and among the GCC countries.

For example, one can envision a Bush Administration arguing much more persuasively than a Gore Administration that the GCC countries are not only vital but central to American and allied national interests in comparison to any and all other sub-regions of the Middle East.

The reason would appear to be obvious. None need to be reminded that it was on the previous Bush Administration's watch that the United States, twice within the span of less than half a decade, mobilized and deployed more of its troops to the GCC region than to any other place on earth.

This is not to suggest that the shores of the eastern Mediterranean would probably receive any less attention from a Bush Administration than it has

under the Clinton Administration, or what it would likely receive in the event of a Gore Administration.

What it does suggest is that, in a Bush Administration, the President and his closest foreign policy advisers are likely to be more straightforward and convincing in the eyes of the American people on the matter of where certain American national interests in the region as a whole are greater than in others.

Here, other things being equal, such factors as ideology, domestic political realities, and ethnic and religious emotions would have a difficult swim against U.S.-related economic, energy, and other resource-related numbers. That is, on a level playing field, the latter, not the former, would likely be determinative in the formulation of any strategic calculus and net assessment as to where America's and its allies' greatest interests in the region truly lie.

Certainly any spokesperson for either a Bush or a Gore Administration who would deny that American strategic, economic, commercial, and defense interests in the GCC region dwarf all other U.S. Mideast interests risks early on being exposed for being more political than factual.

For this reason alone, U.S. attention to the GCC region would seem likely to loom substantially higher on a Bush Administration's agenda than it would on the agenda of a Gore Administration.

If one seeks an early indication of what may be in store along these lines, there are Candidate-Bush's and his advisers' statements during the campaign.

Barely a month ago, Bush called upon NATO's European members to assume a greater share of the responsibilities for defense in their own theater of operations, thereby allowing the United States to focus more on the Gulf.

If such a foreign policy change were to materialize, there would not only be a greater rationalization of resource use and concentration of logistical and operational assets by the one power that all acknowledge is more key than others to Gulf defense: namely, the United States.

A reconfiguration of focus and forces along these lines would probably also be beneficial in two other ways. One is that it would likely send a clearer and more credible message of deterrence to any would-be adversaries hoping to be able to challenge by intimidation or use of armed force the region's governmental status quo.

The other is that, in the event deterrence were to fail, as it has failed twice in the past twenty years, the new, read different and better, regional framework and distribution of power would likely send a more convincing message on the front of assured defense as well.

THE WORLD TRADE ORGANIZATION AND SAUDI ARABIA

As matters stand, among the GCC countries, only Saudi Arabia remains outside membership in the World Trade Organization.

From the perspective of many Saudi Arabians, it would be difficult to imagine how the process of their country's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) would or could proceed more slowly than it has under the Clinton Administration.

From the same perspective, it would be equally hard to envision that the barriers to the Kingdom's accession would be significantly lessened or become surmountable any sooner under a Gore Administration.

A Bush Administration, given the would-be President and Vice-President's extensive experience in matters pertaining to energy, would need no persuasion to recognize the extraordinary position and role that Saudi Arabia occupies in terms of global economic growth and the material wellbeing of practically all of humankind.

Nor would a Bush team likely be reluctant to underscore how the United States is by far the world's richest country for reasons directly linked to its utilization of massive amounts of energy from this region.

A Bush Administration would need even less nudging to acknowledge publicly that natural and necessary implications for U.S. interests and key foreign policy objectives stem from the fact that the United States outranks all countries as the world's leading purchaser and consumer of the Kingdom's main product.

It is largely in this context that the acceleration of American official assistance in enabling Saudi Arabia's entrance into the WTO would be seen by a great many Americans and Saudi Arabians as not only an appropriate line of action to pursue. As a policy matter, it would also be seen as the means to a major, much-needed breakthrough in the bilateral relationship between the Kingdom and the United States.

Of no less importance, Saudi Arabia's membership in the WTO would likely be hailed as a quantum leap forward by all of its other trading partners, among whom a great many occupy the status of America's allies. Among these, not least would be the member states of the European Union that conduct by far the lion's share of the world's foreign trade with the Kingdom.

Many Saudi Arabians familiar with the issues find it hard to perceive a Gore Administration, any more than the Clinton Administration, viewing the strategic calculus of what's at issue, or the policy imperatives of what is at stake for American commercial and economic interests, in quite the same way as a Bush team would.

In addition, many of Saudi Arabia's leaders are convinced that, notwithstanding all the stated economic and commercial reasons given to date for America's refusal to shift into overdrive its efforts to facilitate the Kingdom's entry into the world's most important trade organization, there is something else at play.

That is, there are important additional explanations for the delay. These are just as real as the stated ones, but U.S. officials are not willing to acknowledge them because they are rooted in reasons that, at their core, are political.

In the eyes of Saudi Arabians involved in the process, these include matters pertaining to the production and pricing of oil, a commodity not covered by the WTO.

Whether they admit it or not, U.S. trade policy officials, in the eyes of many of their Arab counterparts, are keen to ensure that Saudi Arabia be "incentivized" to cross yet one more hurdle as a price for American support in its bid to enter the WTO.

The unspoken price: to help guarantee that America's needs regarding the international price of oil, the level of oil supplies, and assured access to the Kingdom's prodigious hydrocarbon energy reserves, are accommodated for as far into the foreseeable future as possible.

LEGISLATIVE AND POLICYMAKING TOOLS

It remains to be seen what may come, in a Bush Administration, as a result of the same political party controlling the White House and both Houses of Congress.

Until it is tested over time, who can say that this dimension of the election's outcome is likely to constitute anything more than information of interest? How credible is the case that some are making already that, in practice, it could translate into a more unified and effective approach to conducting America's public business than at any point in recent history since the Eisenhower years, nearly a generation ago?

Until the proposition that the results are likely to favor Bush more than Gore is hammered out on the anvil of experience, there's the potential for the numbers to go either way. For example, the answer as to how this variable would likely impact one way or another on the making of public policy could turn on whether one views the "razor thin" numerical edge favoring the Republicans versus the Democrats as either a glass half full and leaking or one that is half empty and filling.

In the interim, would-be Gore Administration spin-doctors can be expected to continue to emphasize how close this presidential election race has been. Who would blame them? A recurring theme for them to focus on will be to emphasize ad nauseam how almost evenly divided the popular vote was.

Even before one knows who won, among the recurring sound bites already being articulated are those that highlight how the margin of Republicans over Democrats in the Congress is tinier than minuscule, how people in both parties will from time to time cross over the line and vote with the opposite party, and so forth.

Here again, though, what's telling are the numbers. That is, while one awaits the final electoral tally, the legislative arithmetic going forward from here clearly favors a Bush Administration more than a Gore Administration.

This is not new math. For those in doubt, let them name the member of Gore's staff who would not be willing to switch the Congressional numbers that the

Democratic ticket has garnered to date for those that appear thus far to be solidly in the Republican camp.

Like facts, numbers are stubborn things. In the event of a Bush victory, they would appear to have overall implications for public policy that, on the face of it, would favor Bush slightly more than Gore.

POLITICAL INDEBTEDNESS

The following point is admittedly controversial in the eyes of some. However, from an analytical perspective, it is possible to address it factually and objectively.

The point is this: different kinds of ethnic Americans, voting in blocs, favored one candidate over another in this election. For example, innumerable pre-election surveys indicated that African Americans and Jewish Americans, to name but two of the blocs that were among those most frequently polled, would vote for Gore in large numbers and percentages.

Put another way, regarding both groups, it is practically certain that nine out of ten, or the overwhelming majority, by their own advance admission, voted against Bush.

As for Israelis, the Israeli political establishment throughout the campaign made no bones about its preference being solidly for Gore. Stated another way, its antipathy for Bush could not have been more transparent.

Many will point out that this should not come as a surprise. After all, specialists will note that it was the previous Bush Administration that was the last to go head-to-head with the Israeli government on an issue in which the stated interests of the two countries were in conflict.

Who can forget that it was a Bush Administration that pressured then-Israeli Premier Yitzhak Shamir heavily to get him to attend the inaugural "current peace process" meetings in Madrid in September 1991. That Shamir showed up was against his and the then-Israeli government's wishes.

Specialists are acutely aware that then-U.S. Secretary of State Baker, in effect, shamed Shamir into going. To put it mildly, this angered Shamir and his supporters. They had wagered and hoped that Syria would not do what in fact it did: upstage Shamir and attend.

In short, when it comes to Republicans and the Middle East, many Israelis and their more ardent supporters in the United States have neither forgotten nor forgiven the previous Bush Administration's successful pressuring of Israel to do what its leaders preferred to avoid.

But, as if that was not enough, neither will many Israelis and Americans soon forget the tenor and tone of Baker's address to an annual American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) Convention in 1991.

The Secretary of State implored the convention's delegates, for what he said was for the sake of Israeli national security and regional peace and stability in the Middle East as a whole, to foreswear the quest for

territorial expansion -- in effect, to "give up" the dream of a Greater Israel.

These were fighting words. They were of a kind that no high American official since President Eisenhower, in the aftermath of the Israeli-French-British invasion and occupation of Egypt in 1956, had dared utter in public before.

And then the same Republican Administration, many will recall, locked horns with pro-Israeli groups on a different issue in September 1991. That was when the Bush Administration opposed Congress' and an impressive assemblage of pro-Israel groups' proposed second multi-hundred million dollars in U.S. loan guarantees for Israel.

The proposed aid was supposed to be used in conjunction with Israel's efforts to absorb the swelling influx of immigrants from the former Soviet Union and, to a lesser extent, from Ethiopia.

President Bush and Secretary of State Baker had approved an earlier proposal along similar lines but were reluctant to endorse the second loan guarantee, especially as the proposal to do so was coming so soon after the first one. They gave as their reason that it would not only not be in American national interests to do so but that the issue in dispute involved an important matter of principle.

Bush and Baker, in explaining their position, claimed that, after receiving the first U.S. loan guarantee the previous spring, and despite having provided ironclad official assurances that it would not do so, the Israeli leadership embarked almost immediately upon an expansion of settlements in the Occupied Territories.

The Bush Administration strongly opposed what Israel had done. As a consequence, its spokesmen said, in effect, that the Administration refused to risk being hoodwinked again. They added that, were they to proceed otherwise, the results would likely be prejudicial to the then-nascent post-Madrid peace process.

A content analysis of key segments of the American media and professional polling groups from that date forward until the next election in November 1992 reveals that President Bush paid a political price domestically for his principled decision in this dispute.

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Since statistics on the subject of Jewish American bloc voting date mainly from the presidential election of 1960, it is interesting to note the following.

Until 1992, when the Clinton Administration began, three quarters of America's Jewish voters reportedly voted for whomever was the Democratic Party candidate for President in every election but one. The one exception most often cited was in 1972. In that year, more Jewish American voters voted for Nixon, the Republican, than voted for McGovern, the Democrat.

More recently, the number of Jewish Americans who voted for Clinton - and although the polls are not all in yet, no report thus far has indicated that one should expect any difference with respect to Gore -- has been 90%.

The potential implications of the enormous disparity between the percent of the Jewish American electorate that backed Gore, versus that which backed Bush, would appear to need no explanation.

A Gore victory could rightly be claimed as having been made possible, certainly in part, as a result of the overwhelming support he received from American voters, "anxious for the success of political Zionism."

The phrase is former President Truman's. He used it when he spoke to an assembled group of American ambassadors to Arab countries in the run-up to the 1948 election.

The context was Truman's effort to explain why he would not honor the late President Roosevelt's promise on February 14, 1945 to then-Saudi Arabian King Abdalaziz.

Roosevelt, it will be recalled, had promised King Abdalaziz to consult with him before taking any further major decision that might affect Arabs in the events unfolding in the then-British Mandate for Palestine.

In nearly the same breath in his talk with the U.S. ambassadors, whom he had called home from the region to explain the reasons for his decision not to abide by Roosevelt's policy, Truman added, "I have no Arabs among my constituents."

With this as backdrop, a Bush Presidential victory in 2000, when and if it is declared and officially validated, will not have been determined by any remotely comparable reality.

As such, on the surface at least, a Bush win would appear to carry with it far less political or policy indebtedness to pro-Israeli voters.

Put another way, Bush's supporters, on balance, are likely to have been far more comfortable with Bush's would-be positions and policies towards America's Arab friends and partners than they were likely to have been with Gore's would-be positions and would-be policies towards these friends and partners.

Were the situation reversed, one can imagine a potentially major difference in what is yet to be discerned regarding the likely attitudes, positions, and policies of the candidates, once in office, towards Saudi Arabia, other Arab countries, the Middle East, and the Islamic world.

Certainly, were the Democratic Presidential ticket to win, it would be hard not to imagine Jewish American voters' leaders pressing Gore to acknowledge his political indebtedness to the fact that they made a "crucial" difference in getting him elected. The language would, of course, not be so blunt as, "But for us, you would have lost," but the impact of the message, however coated, would likely be much the same.

It would be harder to imagine the same leaders successfully pressing home the identical point to Bush. And, even were the attempt to be made, it would be difficult to envision the effect and the end result being the same as it would be upon Gore.

Again: numbers. In this case, in terms of bloc votes, the numbers that voted for Gore and the numbers that voted for Bush.

Here, then, is certainly one of the greatest differences between the two.

But who can say whether such differences will be translated into any discernible differences in the future Mideast policies of the one candidate versus what would be the policies of the other?

After all, many, with reason, will say, "So what?" In so doing, they will be right to point to additional, non-electoral factors in play -- for example, pro-Israel interest groups, the media, and hard ball lobbying tactics vis-à-vis the Congress. The impact of the latter phenomena continues to determine a substantial component of American Mideast policies regardless of how Jewish Americans in significant numbers may or may not have voted in the election.

At the end of the day, what may happen is that the ongoing influence of these groups and tactics will be able to trump any serious effort by a new and different Executive Branch to "reassess," "review," "reexamine," "reevaluate," or "reconsider" the nature and orientation of U.S. Mideast policies.

Among the Arab and Islamic issues competing for the attention of U.S. policymakers, in addition to the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian conflict, are those pertaining to Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Chechnya, Kashmir, Kosovo, Pakistan, Somalia, and Sudan. Each of these, in turn, was deliberated at the recently adjourned OIC heads of state summit.

Other regional and Islamic world topics that are certain to be of ongoing focus, regardless of whether Bush or Gore move into the White House, are weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery, UN Security Council Resolutions pertaining to Israel, Iran, Iraq, and Libya, the Eisenstat Initiative towards Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, and Egypt-Israel and Jordan-Israel relations.

In short, election tallies are but one among many other indices of real and potential power in terms of how America's Mideast policies have been and are likely to continue to be formulated and decided.

It therefore remains to be seen what will be the impact of any and all of the above on what, at first glance, would appear to favor a more independent approach to the pursuit of American interests in the Middle East by a Bush Administration than by a Gore Administration.

To what extent, if any, the variable of the electoral outcome itself will constitute a defining difference in U.S. Mideast policies likely to be proposed and pursued by one Administration in comparison to the other will bear close watching.

In any event, among specialists, it is certain to be one of the more closely scrutinized of any U.S. foreign policy challenges in the weeks and months ahead.

In the interim a basic truism may remain in tact: that broad bipartisan support for unflinching political, monetary, military, and media support for Israel has been, and continues to be, an American domestic reality that, at the end of the day, brooks no illusions.

There is also the role of the administrative bureaucracy. Their protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, not all of those in this category are apolitical in such matters.

Nor will those who work Mideast issues within the Executive Branch universally be asked or expected to tender their resignations should a Republican replace a Democrat in the Oval Office.

In this regard, it is helpful to recall what former Reagan Administration Secretary of State George Shultz pledged to the delegates in attendance at an annual meeting of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee in the late 1980s.

Shultz vowed to use what influence he had in his remaining years in office to ensure that, within the Department of State's core group of permanent civilian personnel assigned to administer the day-to-day dynamics of America's Mideast policies, U.S. and Israeli interests would become inseparable.

As of yet, no one has claimed that he failed to do so.

BUSINESS INTERESTS

Finally, it hardly needs mentioning, many might say, that, traditionally, the Republican Party has long been identified with the needs, concerns, and interests of business.

And one hardly needs to belabor the converse: that, traditionally, the Democratic Party has long been identified with the needs, concerns, and interests of organized labor.

What is potentially significant with regard to Saudi Arabia's interests in this instance is that the opponents of various aspects of commercial and economic globalization, certainly as represented by the policies and objectives of the World Trade Organization, are opposed most vociferously in the United States by, among others, the leaders of America's trade unions.

Were Gore to win the Presidency, no one doubts that he would have to take organized labor's concerns into serious and, where possible, favorable consideration. America's trade union members, who have long been an important component of Gore's political base, can be counted on to see that he does.

In some states, labor leaders were crucial in contributing funds and in getting out the vote in support of Gore's candidacy. By contrast, few, if

any among the country's larger and more traditional labor unions either voted, raised money, or otherwise worked for Bush.

This last point needs elaboration. It is well known that the great majority of American absentee voters in Saudi Arabia and indeed throughout the GCC region tend to vote Republican.

This has been the case for as long as I have been following the situation. Certainly no one thus far has reported the likelihood that, in the present election, the circumstances have changed.

What this may mean is that the interests of American business, including U.S. businesses and their representatives abroad in countries such as Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the GCC region, stand a better chance of receiving a higher priority of attention to their agendas in a Bush Administration than in a Gore Administration.

If this proves to be the case, the results for the overall Saudi Arabian-U.S. relationship, and for the private sectors in both countries in particular, should be positive. This would be welcomed.

That is to say, the economic and defense components of the Saudi Arabian-U.S. relationship, at their core, are sound. Where work needs to be done is in the people-to-people area, and, more specifically, in the leader-to-leader area of improved understanding and relations.

This is definitely one area where the business leaders of both countries can truly make a difference, especially in the promotion of better understanding.

From the U.S. side, the reasons are all too obvious. For example, far too many Americans continue to view the Kingdom as though it were an oil well, not a country.

Far too many still perceive Saudi Arabia as an object, something to be influenced and dominated. Too few see it as an actor with its own legitimate needs, goals, and objectives that in some cases are quite different, in other cases complementary, and in still other cases practically identical with America's.

Far too many also still see the Kingdom's citizens collectively as sitting upon a mountain of money. Nowhere near as many Americans view the Kingdom's citizens as people with many of the same hopes and dreams and aspirations as most Americans.

And fewer still are able and willing to view the people of this region as the proud heirs and descendants of an extraordinarily rich culture and heritage that has contributed enormously to civilization and to the enrichment of American society, culture, and, not least, to the material well-being of millions.

* * *

Lastly, in the final analysis, it may prove to be the case that none or only a few of the probabilities and possibilities perceived here will materialize in the event that there is a Bush Administration and not a Gore Administration, or vice versa.

But if some of these scenarios do transpire, one can say with a fairly high degree of certainty that no harm and much good could come as a result.

In any case, the potential implications, when and if realized, would appear to bode reasonably well for the Saudi Arabian-U.S. and broader GCC-U.S. relationship.

Regardless of who wins, let us resolve to work hard to make it so.

[Dr. John Duke Anthony](#), publisher of GulfWire, is President and CEO of the Washington, D.C.-based National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, and Secretary, U.S.-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee. Both are non-governmental organizations dedicated to educating Americans about U.S. interests and involvement in the Arab and Islamic world.

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