



## Arab Issues Awaiting the Next President

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Amidst the maelstrom that is the presidential election, American foreign policy has regressed to the uncomfortable and neglected recesses reserved for untouchable topics in the United States. Never have America's relations with the world been ignored by presidential candidates to the degree they are today, to the detriment of American interests and America's standing in the world. Nowhere is this more apparent than in how the campaign of 2016 is ignoring the Middle East, which arguably has been a focal point in American politics and strategy since well before the attacks of September 2001. Importantly, and except for orphan mentions in the presidential debates, the candidates have shown scant attention to how the United States will deal with the Arab world after almost six years of upheaval following well-intentioned revolts aimed at meaningful political change.

Most assuredly, Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton or Republican candidate Donald Trump will find upon arriving in the White House much that can occupy the president of the United States in dealing with the Arab world. Among the issues to address are economic, political, military, and security challenges as well as governance conditions that demand attention and threaten long-term social peace. While no one expects the United States to solve all the region's problems, it is true that American involvement is expected, calls for retrenchment, withdrawal, and even isolationism in this election season notwithstanding.

### Political, Military and Security Challenges

In addition to the role the United States will continue to play in helping to rid the Middle East, and indeed the world, of the scourge of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS or ISIL), the new administration should expect to assist in quite a few problems in the Arab world, from Iraq to Libya. In the battle for restoring Mosul to Iraqi sovereignty, it will be important for the administration to stay apprised of the dangers of clashing ideologies, ethnic rivalries, and sectarian divisions. Iraq is obviously the first to feel the repercussions of discord and division once the hoped-for victory in its northern city is achieved. Similarly, and in addition to Iraq's neighborhood, the United States should not fool itself into thinking that it could just pack up and leave once the guns fall silent.

Baghdad needs help fixing the ship of equitable government that gives all citizens their dues, especially the disenfranchised Sunnis whom Shiite politicians sacrificed on the altar of appeasing hegemonic Iran. The Iraqi army needs to again develop its professional ethos. The Iraqi state needs to assert its inviolability by outside-funded militias. Finally, the Kurds need assurances of a piece of the country's pie lest they opt for secession. Can the United States really abandon this and risk a return to pre-2014 conditions?

As President Obama prepares himself for life outside the Oval Office, the new American president entering it must devise, indeed divine, a new strategy to correct an almost willful neglect of the Syrian dilemma outside of well-intentioned attempts at failed ceasefires with Russia. Opinions obviously differ on what best the United States can do in Syria; it being decided that *that* essential country in the Levant is not really a vital American interest, as if protecting human life and claiming the moral high ground is not in America's interest. As Aleppo burns but still tries to speak for a country forsaken by the world, the new president must understand that Syria is an attraction for centripetal forces of instability and a source of centrifugal influences on the entire region. Despite thinking to the contrary, the United States still has options in Syria, although what is possible will require some short or medium-term commitment to restore the hopes of the Syrian people.

Additionally, a new American administration may not have to steer too close to the Yemeni crisis since the Obama Administration has not waded directly into it, but it cannot completely ignore it either. In fact, not much is possible for Yemen except continued United Nations efforts to broker a political settlement agreeable to all Yemeni parties. United Nations Security Council Resolution 2216 spells out a way forward and UN Special Envoy Ismael Ould Cheikh Ahmed has proposed numerous solutions that seem to safeguard everyone's interests.

The primary objective of any solution to Yemen's problem is a restoration of legitimate government to Sanaa, the end of the Iran-supported Houthi-Saleh illegal challenge to it, and the restoration of state authority. Any US involvement should thus emphasize these general principles and the reactivation of the aborted 2011 Gulf Initiative charting Yemen's future. On the other hand, the United States should continue to be active in fighting both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State that have found haven in the country.

The new American president must also right what President Obama has dubbed his "worst mistake" in Libya; i.e., not planning for the post-Qadhafi period. Withdrawing from assisting the country's efforts to build its state institutions or ending military involvement that deprives ISIS of its Sirte base on the Mediterranean will most assuredly accentuate that mistake. For their part, Libyans must understand that the new president will not be at liberty to plunge into a nation-building exercise in Libya, and should subsequently broker their own compromises. No Libyan or outsider can be under any illusion that multiple power centers can rectify the errors committed since 2011, neither should any Libyan leader or faction assume that the world will wait indefinitely for an intra-Libyan agreement. Nonetheless, should Hillary Clinton win the White House, she might be anxious in the least to lead a renewed international effort for Libya to redress some past wrongs and grievances.

Finally, no American president should ignore the central cause of the Arab world, the Palestinian question, at the beginning of this centennial year of the infamous Balfour Declaration that robbed Palestine from its people. As the thirteenth American president since the dispossession of the Palestinians, she/he must act decisively to assist in the creation of a

full-fledged, sovereign, and independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. Everyone knows the contours of this state and acknowledges that it is the only solution that will address the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and Israel's legitimate security concerns. Since its inauguration in 2002, the Arab Peace Initiative has proven to contain the right formula, for which the United States has been looking to augment its efforts. A new president would do well to re-visit this initiative in a sincere but determined drive for finally setting this conflict to rest.

### **Governance Concerns**

Topmost among the Arab world's intractable problems are those related to governance; especially, institution building, rule of law, and accountability. While institutions abound in the Arab world, including elaborate constitutions, representative bodies, and bureaucratic procedures, they are more instruments of centralized government control than conduits for good government. Indeed, what lacks is a basic respect for institutional life and regularized and formalized mechanisms that can assure basic freedoms and rights outside of the wishes of the sitting oligarchy at any one time.

Arab governments spout declarations about equality before the law but practice a skewed form of justice that serves political elites and the connected. Like institutions, and except for a limited number of Arab countries, the court systems are not fully independent and lack transparency. Human rights, civil rights, the rights of women and the indigent, and protections thereof, get interpreted in light of the political interests of the powers that be. Governments use laws designed to fight terrorism, for instance, as instruments to limit free speech and even peaceful political activity, in the process widening repression in the name of national security.

Finally, public accountability loses in the game to assure the political supremacy of governing elites. Conflicts of interest abound between public positions and involvement in private business. Officials flaunt their relations with the wealthy and are at ease receiving gifts from people and interests they are supposed to regulate and supervise. Patron-client relations perpetuate kinship and tribal connections, thus depriving societies of the cross-cutting linkages that help cohesion and national identity. Lebanon, for example, has become the model par excellence for high level intercession (*wasta*) on behalf of job seekers in the public sector and, lately, the private sector.

No American president will, or should, devote the entirety of his or her energies and time to addressing these dire conditions. As the American political mantra over the last two decades has emphasized, it is folly for the United States to be involved in nation-building. But can the United States avoid the negative consequences of allowing bad governance in the Arab world to further jeopardize the region's national security and, thus, its own, since it is a central player in the area? Furthermore, addressing these questions does not have to be complicated or costly; Washington can quickly provide the technical assistance and teams necessary to help Arab

governments establish some needed institutional reforms that can go a long way in ameliorating these conditions.

## **Conclusion**

In addition to such economic concerns (as arrested and dependent development, unemployment and poverty, the dominance of the public sector, deficits and debt, to name a few), political, security, and governance concerns make the Arab world a potential workshop for dedicated American action.

If the United States wishes to remain an essential player in the Arab world and defend its age-old relationships with its different countries, it can present itself again in its functional capacities as the do-good country that can make a difference. Given the understandable reticence by American policy-makers to commit soldiers and treasure overseas after the debacles of Iraq and Afghanistan, a new orientation toward alleviating hardship in that part of the world through limited military involvement, expert opinion, and technical assistance will be very much welcomed.

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