

US Elections and the Middle East: to Hell in a Handcart!

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President Bush's re-election is certainly not going to set hearts bounding with joy in the Middle East! The Arab world had been hoping against hope that he would lose to John Kerry, although there had not been much hope of any substantial change in the American approach to the region if he did. Arab hopes had been mirrored in large parts of Europe, not least in France, but now all have been disappointed. For politicians and governments, the dilemma remains: should they reject or cooperate with the Bush doctrine of the future? Many will fall into line, but their populations will not agree, responding in the Middle East in particular with impotent anger.

Change in Washington?

So, what can we expect from a Bush victory? Of course, the dust from the electoral campaign is going to have to settle first, although continuity will certainly help in restoring coherent government in Washington long before the customary six month transitional period has elapsed. Will there be changes in the personnel making policy? Yes, indeed there will. Mr Rumsfeld, the abrasive secretary-of-defense, has made it clear that he wishes to retire and is expected to do so at the transition. His departure will enable a complete make-over of the defence team to take place and it is here that the most interesting developments will occur.

Rumour in Washington is that Mr Rumsfeld's departure will signal a wholesale decapitation of the neo-conservative core of the Pentagon. Many conservatives have quarrels to settle with Mr Wolfowitz, the deputy secretary-of-state for defence and with his sidekick, Douglas Feith who was responsible for the Office of Special Plans which so badly misled the White House over evidence for weapons-of-mass-destruction in Iraq. Mr Feith is also suspected of having been involved in the recent scandal of Pentagon secrets being leaked to Israel and there are many in the defence establishment itching to avenge the Pollard incident, in which defence secrets leaked to Israel were passed on to China.

The defence triumvirate will also go for another reason: Colin Powell, the Secretary-of-State has made it clear that he will not stay if they do – and he is now very important to the Bush administration's plans to rebuild its position with its Western allies in Europe. Karl Rove, the president's electoral adviser, made very clear to Mr Bush the potential cost of the neo-conservative militants in damaging America's image abroad and the re-elected president has learned something from the fiasco of Iraq.

The Middle East itself

Hopeful although all this may seem, however, it is far removed from a reversal of policy towards the Middle East. America's parlous situation in Iraq remains an immediate priority in which there is very little room for manoeuvre. A successful election in January, followed by a successful constituent assembly later on in 2005 and elections for a proper government before the end of the year remain the only way forward. For this, stability is needed and this is what the insurgents are determined to deny. It is not the "foreign fighters" who matter but the residual Ba'athists and autonomous groups who have taken against the Occupation. They

are becoming formidably effective and now are estimated to number up to 20,000 fighters with a 100,000 logistical trail. Smashing them in Falluja and Remadi – operations there will start in the next few days – will do nothing to improve the security situation. Only the approach that led to Moqtadar as-Sadr to adopt the political path offers hopes of success but there is no Sunni Ayatollah Sistani ready to intervene. Furthermore, both the Iraqi president and the Sunni leadership are implacably opposed to such action, so that the interim government faces a major split.

Yet President Bush has no good alternative – any more than Senator Kerry would have done, had he won the election. So the administration will have to grit its teeth and hope that the electoral process in January will not be too damaged by what may happen. It does know that there is a rough-and-ready alliance in the making between Kurds and moderate Shi'a and that there will probably be a unified Shi'a list ready to win in January – even if that was the outcome that it promised a year ago would never happen! Whatever happens, by the end of next year, troop levels must start to decline, whether that means a renewed dictatorship in Baghdad or a Shi'a-dominated government.

Unfortunately, outside the context of Iraq, things look even bleaker. The “war on terror” is not going well, despite claims that one-third of the senior leadership of al-Qa'ida has been killed and the group itself rendered impotent, at least as far as spectacular incidents such as September 11, 2001 are concerned. Usama bin Ladin is still all-too-real, as his thoughtful intervention just before the election made clear. He also made clear that American security was in America's own hands and had to do with not interfering in the Middle East – a point judiciously overlooked by both candidates in the last days of the campaign.

In reality, the terrorist movement has changed its nature, having fragmented and multiplied into the hydra that was always feared by those specialising in terrorism. There is now a much more amorphous threat, backed up by an intellectual movement that, operating through the internet and by word-of-mouth, is disaffecting angry youth through the Middle East, North Africa and in the migrant communities in Europe itself. Only a minute proportion of them turn to violence but they will be enough to keep the global campaign going and to justify the securitisation of justice in Europe and America, not to speak of those repressive regimes in the region that bear a large part of the blame for fostering the movement – by commission and omission – in the first place!

Terrorism, in short, will be alive and well, ready to cooperate with the United States in further terrifying Western populations and demonising the Islamic world. Popular violence and hatred will also feed on the great wend of the Middle Eastern dilemma, the Arab-Israeli and Palestinian-Israeli disputes. Mr Sharon, who is perhaps the greatest victor of the presidential election in the Middle East, in the short-term at least, will now be able to push ahead with his unilateral withdrawal from Gaza and his consequent annexation of large parts of the West Bank in compensation with American support and even reluctant European backing, as political cowardice in the European Union prevents the articulation of a more independent response based either on the Roadmap or the Geneva Accords of last year.

Mr Bush may push for an Israeli commitment to further territorial concessions and Mr Sharon may offer rhetorical acquiescence. In reality, however, he knows that the deal is done and Mr Bush cannot easily escape from it, not least because he is predisposed by religious belief and prejudice to support it. In any case, there is always the distraction of Syrian and Iranian weapons-of-mass-destruction or

nuclear programmes and here the United States is likely to become more demanding over effective action than it was before the election – and with the continued Republican ascendancy in Congress (especially if the worst of the neo-conservatives have gone), he will have plenty of domestic support.

Likely outcomes

In other words, apart from cosmetic changes designed to ensure European support, however reluctant, there is going to be a terrifying continuity of policy. Some of the madder illusions of the neo-conservatives, such as the enforced democratisation of the Middle East and its embrace of the Israeli project, will have gone and a more pragmatic spirit should replace it. The underlying rationale of the moral dominance of the American ideal and its projection worldwide will remain. Soft power alternatives, such as the Greater Middle East Initiative or the US-Middle East Partnership Initiative, may buttress or even displace pre-emptive intervention, but the underlying rationale of enforced change to save the Islamic world from itself will remain.

Inherently, the project will continue to be as irrational as it ever was, replacing objective analysis and understanding by wilful determination to reconstruct the region in the belief that this alone will eliminate terrorism and violence. Europe could offer wise counsel and even alternatives but the Bush administration is unlikely to wish to listen, especially as European states will increasingly wish to distance themselves from the American project. Instead Washington will complain of European complacency and cowardice, albeit in less shrill tones than in the past, and European statesmen will strain to find some common ground, in order to preserve the illusion of a common trans-Atlantic project. Intellectually, they will increasingly endorse the underlying rationale, just as Britain has already done. "Once," as somebody said recently in London, "Politicians used to sell us dreams. Now they sell us nightmares!"