

UNITED STATES MIDDLE EAST POLICY: New Directions Urgently Needed

Iowa Democrats know that the Bush Administration's irresponsible foreign policies have caused our nation's image in the world to plunge to record lows. According to a recent poll, on average, only 35% of the people surveyed in 18 countries rate America's influence as mostly positive. Those are dangerous statistics, when we as a nation depend on international cooperation to face challenges ranging from the global war on terrorism to the credit crisis, the food crisis and global warming.¹

Iowa Democrats know that to restore our good name and standing in the world, we need competent leadership in the White House that is willing to work cooperatively with other nations, instead of arrogantly insisting on its own way. The right wing neo-cons who favor "regime change", "pre-emptive strikes", and unilateralism have to get booted out. And we cannot settle for some Democratic version of the same thing: some kind of "neo-con lite".

Iowa Democrats know that we have got to get our troops out of Iraq. The American people will never stand for the 100 year occupation dreamt of by some Washington politicians.

But what we also have to face, as Democrats and as Americans, is our urgent need for a change of policy with regard to Israel and Palestine.

There too the Bush policy has been to seek a solution by force and coercion as a first resort, to pursue crude "regime change", with catastrophically counterproductive results, to refuse to talk to important players and to attach pre-conditions to meaningful negotiations. It's a policy that might make sense to the neo-cons in Cheney's office; the John Bolton-Eliot Abrams brand of militant unilateralist. But thoughtful students of foreign policy disagree.

American policy on Israel and Palestine isolates us on the world stage. We are hated in the Arab and Muslim world because of this policy, as everyone knows. But solid majorities in our allies France (67%) and Germany (57%) also see our policy there as unbalanced and unfair. In many UN resolutions on the Middle East, the US and Israel have stood virtually alone against the entire international community.²

1. HOW WE GOT HERE

When George W. Bush came to office in January 2001, the Middle East peace process had collapsed and the two sides descended into horrifying bloodshed. The Bush Administration, while paying lip-service to the need for a negotiated settlement, did little to advance a ceasefire. It gave Ariel Sharon a green light to lay waste the West Bank in "Operation Defensive Shield" (April 2002). It demonized and isolated Yasser Arafat, against the advice of Colin Powell and foreign policy

professionals. It did nothing to oppose the continued expansion of Israeli settlements, which are whittling away at the territorial base required for a workable two-state solution.

Sharon's pullout from Gaza in August 2005, widely hailed in the American media, in fact left behind a big prison under total Israeli control. It was intended to consolidate the much more ambitious settlement enterprise in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. It wasn't supposed to be the first step towards a two state solution, but was meant to shelve the Palestinian state indefinitely, as Dov Weisglas, Sharon's former chief of staff, famously admitted.³

Sharon suffered a disabling stroke in January 2006. The Fatah government proved unable to deliver on its promises to the Palestinian people and was thrown out of office later in the month. Hamas came to power.

The Bush Administration led an international boycott against the whole Palestinian Authority, which crippled the already weak Palestinian economy, caused widespread suffering and did nothing to dislodge Hamas.

Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian President and leader of Fatah, tried to work out a unity government formula with Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh in 2006-2007. Under this, Hamas would agree to abide by all existing Palestinian agreements with Israel; including the 1993 Declaration of Principles recognizing Israel's "right to exist". But this wasn't good enough for the Bush Administration.

The Bush Administration instead tried to arm Abbas so that he could overthrow the elected Hamas government and rule by decree. But Hamas saw it coming and rose in revolt. Thus they took over all of Gaza in June 2007. Today, Abbas rules over a shadow Palestinian government in the West Bank. And Israel and the US have cut off Gaza from the outside world, leading to a humanitarian disaster.

The whole story of the Bush policy of "regime change" has now been revealed. Like the Iraq policy, it is foolish and cynical in the extreme and catastrophic in its consequences for millions of innocent human beings.⁴

2. DEVASTATION IN GAZA

Make no mistake about it: the situation in Gaza is horrifying. The Bush Administration and the right wing Olmert government in Israel are deliberately cultivating a humanitarian emergency in the hope of inspiring a revolt that brings about "regime change" in this impoverished territory. Never mind that the majority of the residents there are children under the age of 14.⁵

According to the World Food Programme, "there is a severe food crisis" in Gaza resulting from the economic blockade. 70% of Gazans live on \$1.20 US or less a day, which means they must choose daily between food, shelter and medical expenses. 75% of

the population relies on UN food assistance, which can cover at most 61-65% of their needs. At times, the Israeli authorities cut off this aid, which means that supplies run out and people are driven to desperation.⁶

Israel also periodically cuts off supplies of fuel needed to run Gaza's only power station, which leads to blackouts, water shortages and sewage backups. It routinely denies or delays for medical patients permission to cross borders to seek urgent care. According to UNICEF, over \$1 million in supplies, including water pumps and school photocopiers and computers, have been barred from Gaza for months. In February there were no stocks at all of 85 out of 415 essential drugs. The economy has been ruined. The people have no hope.⁷

The government of Israel claims that the siege of Gaza is necessary to stop Qassam rocket fire, which has traumatized the people of the border town of Sderot. But the Qassams are primitive homemade rockets which rarely injure anyone. Though enormous numbers have been fired, since 2001 only about 13 Israeli civilians have been killed. In contrast, Israel's reprisal raids have killed hundreds of Palestinians, many or most of them non-combatants.⁸

We are not seeking to trivialize the suffering of Israeli civilians, 20,000 of whom are terrorized almost constantly by the Qassams. We are merely indicating the vast disproportion between the violence directed against them and the violence which the government of Israel claims is a legitimate reprisal.

The Israeli state does not have the right to starve, deny medical care to, terrorize and occasionally use indiscriminate massive violence against 1.5 million Palestinians, the majority of whom are children, merely because of the Qassams. Collective punishment of innocent people for the crimes of a few is a violation of international law.⁹ It is also counterproductive. It does not solve the problem of the Qassams or violence against Israeli civilians in any enduring way. The non-lethal method of a ceasefire is far more promising.

3. ON THE WEST BANK STANDS A "FENCE"

Also in the name of "security", the government of Israel is building a wall in the West Bank. It is supposed to protect Israeli civilians from suicide bombers. But most of it is not on the Green Line, the technical border separating Israel from the West Bank. 80% of it is being built inside the West Bank, where it snakes around illegal Israeli settlements and isolates Palestinian communities.¹⁰

A wall intended for security should be built on your own territory, not your neighbor's. Thus the World Court in July 2004 issued a ruling that overwhelmingly condemned Israel's wall as a violation of international law.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and other human rights monitors, the wall is already having a devastating

impact, which can be expected to grow worse over time. The people are being caught in a winding trap:

Where the Barrier has been constructed, Palestinians face economic hardship from being restricted from or not being able to reach their land to harvest crops, graze animals or earn a living. West Bank residents have also been cut off from schools, universities and specialized medical care by the constructed Barrier. ... The Barrier fragments communities and isolates residents from social support networks... If the Barrier is completed based on the current route, 60,500 West Bank Palestinians living in 42 villages and towns will reside in areas between the Barrier and the Green Line or in closed areas. In the constructed parts of the Barrier, people living in these areas must obtain a permit to pass through a gate in order to access health and education services, jobs and markets in the West Bank. Of these, 12 villages and about 31,400 Palestinians are particularly affected as they will be both completely encircled by the Barrier and on the west side of the Barrier...¹¹

Beginning in October 2003, the IDF issued orders declaring certain areas in the Jenin, Qalqilya and Tulkarem governorates to be "closed" areas:

Those orders require approximately 5,000 Palestinian residents of the 'Closed Areas' to obtain 'green permits' to be able to remain living in their homes. The permits are valid for up to a year.¹²

Israeli settlers are exempt. Just imagine: you need a permit from an occupying army to remain living in your own home—and it's valid for only a year!

It's no wonder that many people suspect that the real purpose of the Wall is to make life so intolerable for the Palestinians that they have to move out. But even if we grant that it is meant for security, it does not follow that it is justified.

Can one society rightly destroy another society, as a precautionary measure, merely in order to improve its future security, its future risk profile? No. Not if we believe in human equality. Not if we believe that all human life is precious.

We cannot rightly treat Israeli security as an absolute value and the Palestinians as utterly expendable. For to do that is to say that, in this conflict, only the Israelis qualify as full human beings. The idea that anything in the world can be done in order to protect Israelis, from both immediate and remote dangers, regardless of its effect on the Palestinians, is not morally sound.

4. PEACE PROCESS? WHAT PEACE PROCESS?

In November 2007, Bush, Abbas and Olmert held a summit at Annapolis, Maryland, at which they pledged to resolve the conflict and establish a Palestinian state alongside Israel by the end of the Bush Presidency in January 2009.

You would think there would have been progress by now. After all, the break with Hamas in June 2007 had freed up Abbas to negotiate on his own. He no longer had to operate within the framework of a unity government which America and Israel denounced as an unacceptable compromise with a terrorist organization. Though they had always insisted on ostracizing Hamas, the US and Israeli governments proclaimed Abbas a legitimate negotiating partner. They had every incentive to deal seriously with him, undercut the extremists and strengthen the moderates.

You would think there would have been progress. In fact there has been no progress at all. Abbas and Olmert meet periodically; Condoleezza Rice drops in from time to time, but nothing happens other than a photo opportunity. Negotiations are at an impasse. The Israeli government has done nothing to rein in settlement activity. On the contrary, on 5 Dec 2007, less than a week after the Annapolis conference, plans were announced to expand settlements in East Jerusalem. On March 9 and March 31 settlement expansion plans were announced for Givat Ze'ev and Pisgat Ze'ev.¹³

According to Peace Now, the Israeli monitoring group, since Annapolis the Israeli government has actually intensified settlement activity in East Jerusalem:

Looking at the numbers, the trend is stark and clear...in the two and a half months since Annapolis, the scope and intensity of Israeli construction in East Jerusalem has increased exponentially in comparison with the last 5 years.¹⁴

Abbas protests that settlement expansion undermines his moderate position and strengthens the extremists in Hamas. But Washington and Israel do not listen.

At the same time the cycle of violence continues. In December 2007, the Olmert government rejected a ceasefire offer by the Hamas government in Gaza. In March 2008, as the Egyptian government conducted ceasefire talks with Hamas aimed at stopping the Qassam rocket fire against Israelis, the Israeli army, in raids in the West Bank, assassinated five Palestinian militants, in retaliation for attacks that had taken place seven years earlier:

[A]sked whether the killings were necessary in light of Egyptian truce efforts [an Israeli

government official] said, 'that in itself is a policy we must uphold, to settle scores.'¹⁵

Contrary to popular belief, Hamas has in the past agreed to truces, leading to a dramatic reduction in violence against Israeli civilians. According to famed journalist Seymour Hersh, intelligence intercepts reveal that they turned back to violence when they saw that their peace moves led nowhere:

One intercept was of a meeting in late May (2005) of the Hamas political and military leadership, with (Khalid) Meshal participating by telephone...For almost a year before its victory in the Palestinian elections in January (2006) Hamas had curtailed its terrorist activities. In the late May intercepted conversation...the Hamas leadership said that they got no benefit from it and were losing standing among the Palestinian population....¹⁶

The time for "settling scores" is over. There has been too much bloodshed on all sides. All must work for a ceasefire now.

5. THE WAY FORWARD

It is clear by now that the Bush Administration's policy has completely failed. At every step along the way, it has made the problem worse, not better.

It isolated Arafat in the name of "reform"; the result was the rise of Hamas. It tried to overthrow Hamas; the result was Hamas's takeover of the entire Gaza Strip in June 2007.

It brushes aside the fact that Hamas won a democratic election in January 2006. It insists that Hamas recognize Israel's "right to exist" before any negotiations can start. Many analysts think that this demand is completely unreasonable.

We negotiate with people not because we like them and want to reward them. We negotiate with them because it is in our interest to do so and because the alternative, a conflict in which they are completely eliminated, is either impractical or has an unacceptable cost.

The factions in Northern Ireland were no less at odds than Israelis and Palestinians, but they managed to work out an agreement. No one demanded that the IRA accept Northern Ireland's "right to exist" (i.e. as part of the United Kingdom) and completely disarm before negotiations could even start. Both sides observed a ceasefire, however imperfectly. No one expected the IRA to stop all attacks while the Protestant Unionist government conducted unlimited "arrest operations" in Catholic areas. No one in the conflict was more "extreme" than Unionist leader Ian Paisley and IRA leader Martin McGuinness. Both had supported terrorism against civilians on the other side.

But they were the ones who ultimately signed the agreement.

Scholar Henry Siegman of the Council on Foreign Relations, former Executive Director of the American Jewish Congress (1978-94), decries the US policy of trying to “isolate” Hamas:

I don't see talks between Israelis and Palestinians leading anywhere without finding a way of bringing Hamas...into that process. You can't make peace with half the population and remain at war with the other half.¹⁷

Siegman might be dismissed as a “leftist”. But his views on this subject are echoed by none other than Ephraim Halevy, former Director of the Mossad Intelligence Agency, a definite “hawk”:

[T]he Bush Administration is flexing its muscles against the Palestinians and is demanding that Hamas recognize Israel as a precondition for legitimacy...The American ideological approach is politically unwise and ineffective in practice...[a] pointless campaign aimed at receiving a kosher certificate signed by Hamas's Khaled Meshal....¹⁸

The pro-Israel Jewish-American peace group, Americans for Peace Now, takes the same position:

[T]he Bush Administration's approach-based on a dogmatic policy of boycotting Hamas and blockading Gaza--jeopardizes the viability of [peace] talks and gives Hamas every incentive to play the spoiler...Any realistic, sustainable resolution to the crisis requires Israel and Hamas to engage, directly or indirectly, to achieve a ceasefire.¹⁹

The way forward, then, is clear. The new President must insist on a ceasefire binding on all sides, not just on the Palestinians, and applying to all the Occupied Territories, not just to Gaza. There must be an end to the siege of Gaza and the boycott of the Hamas government. There must be no preconditions on peace talks. An attempt must be made to restore the Palestinian unity government destroyed as a result of US pressure last year. Israel must then halt all settlement activity, remove outposts, and work to repair the fractured Palestinian economy. The two sides must return to serious final status negotiations based on the principle of two states living side by side in peace. The settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem must be dismantled and any change in the 1967 borders should be recognized only through mutual agreement. The refugee problem must be addressed in a way that both sides can live with.

NOTES

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