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The Return of Realpolitik in Arabia

Bush's 'diplomacy of freedom' gives way to Obama's caution and reticence. The Middle East may test our fatigue.

By **FOUAD AJAMI**

President Bush assumed office promising a "humble foreign policy." But it was his luck, or fate, to have much of his presidency consumed by adventures in the Greater Middle East. It is clear from the passion of his valedictory tour that he has caught the bug of that region, that it has worked its way on him as he himself worked his will, and the power available to him, on its settled and ruinous ways.

President-elect Barack Obama has signaled that the foreign world will not be his primary concern, that the repair of the American economy will trump all other pursuits and temptations. On the lands and the peoples of the Middle East, Mr. Obama has been largely silent, if not detached. He was in the Illinois Senate when a huge storm blew over the Islamic world. He was lucky, as his secretary of state designate endlessly reminded us, to have given a solitary speech on Iraq when the challenge came calling.

There is a detached tone to Mr. Obama's utterances on the Islamic world, a kind of knowingness. In part, it is no doubt an intended contrast to the heat and fervor of George W. Bush. If Mr. Bush believed he could remake that old and broken and wily region, Mr. Obama signals a fatigue with it, an acceptance of its order of power. If Mr. Bush believed that he could insert himself into the internal affairs of distant Islamic lands, Mr. Obama and his foreign-policy advisers portend a return to realpolitik and to a resigned acceptance of the ways of foreign autocracies. We have erred, the Obama worldview preaches, and overreached. We have overread the verdict of 9/11, and it is time to make our peace with regimes we have offended in the Bush years. It is the Scowcroftian way -- other lands, other ways.

Then, too, the Obama reticence about those burning grounds of the Islamic world is, in part, a matter of biography. The Islamic faith was the faith of his father. A candidate with the middle name of Hussein could not afford soaring rhetoric about the ability of freedom to survive on Islamic soil.

In contrast, George W. Bush had been free and confident enough to take up the cause of reform and drastic change in the Islamic world. True, he did not know much about the ways of those lands, but neither did Woodrow Wilson. His doctrine of self-determination in the aftermath of the Great War, and the

dissolution of the Ottoman empire, endures as the most consequential and revolutionary American message taken to the lands of old empires.

Wilson himself, it should be recalled, had been chastened by the radical sweep and impact of his own doctrine; he had preached the gospel of self-determination, he said, "without the knowledge that nationalities existed, which are coming to us day after day." Detailed "knowledge" can be overrated in the choices that history opens up. The post-Ottoman world was never the same after that American president who had known so little about it. A circle was closed between that Wilsonian policy and the massive American push into Arab and Islamic lands by George W. Bush.

One thing is sure to go with Mr. Bush when he departs to Crawford, Texas: his "diplomacy of freedom." That diplomacy -- which propelled the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which drove the Syrians out of Lebanon after they had all but destroyed the sovereignty of that country, and had challenged pro-American allies in Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula -- is gone for good.

It was an odd spectacle, the time behind us: a conservative American president preaching the gospel of liberty for lands beyond, his liberal detractors at home giving voice to a deep skepticism about liberty's chances in inhospitable settings. No one was more revealing of the liberal temper -- and of things to come -- than Vice President-elect Joe Biden (then the point man for foreign policy among the Democrats) speaking in December 2006 about the hazards of believing in liberty's appeal to Muslim lands. Of President Bush, he said: "He has this wholesome but naive view that Westerners' notions of liberty are easily transported to that area of the world." Mr. Biden knew better: He warned the president, he said, that Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani's view of liberty differed from "our view of liberty . . . I think the president thinks there's a Thomas Jefferson or Madison behind every sand dune waiting to jump up. And there are none."

The course of history can shred the most detailed of briefing books. On the face of it, the new team tells us that there shall be no attachment to the gains we made in Iraq. This is not Mr. Obama's cause, or call. That country can fend for itself, it is implied. The new cause shall be a return to the struggle for Afghanistan. This is the liberal narrative: the bad, unilateral "war of choice" in Iraq, the good, multilateral "war of necessity" in Afghanistan. The doves on Iraq can thus be hawks on the Afghan-Pakistan frontier. The strategic gurus who preached that Iraq is a hopeless, artificial state put together by Gertrude Bell and Winston Churchill and T.E. Lawrence can try for victory and nation building in the unforgiving tribal lands of Afghanistan and Pakistan. If there is an artificial state in our world of nations, Afghanistan must be its closest approximation. If there is a false national boundary -- mocked by ethnicity and historical allegiance -- it is the Durand Line, drawn up by British power in the 1890s, between Afghanistan and Pakistan, through the lands of the Pashtuns. Afghanistan could yet thwart President Bush's successors, frustrate them in the way Iraq frustrated him.

Our country will be forgiving toward the new foreign-policy team, it is fair to

assume. The hubris and self-confidence needed for expeditions into foreign lands have been devastated by the economic meltdown in our midst.

Of the good manners and pliability of foreign regimes, we can be less certain. Nature abhors a vacuum, and challengers are sure to step forth. To its surprise, the new administration could yet discover that our adversaries do not wish to see our withdrawal from their midst. The Iranians thrive on the American presence in the Persian Gulf and feed off it. They are the quintessential oppositional force. They are not good at generating policies of their own. Their work consists of subversive attacks on Pax Americana in the region. The call by President Bush's critics for a dialogue with Iran will be exposed for the pathetic fraud it has been all along. The American drama swirling around the rise of Mr. Obama is of no interest to the theocrats in Tehran. For them, it is business as usual in the Persian Gulf.

We have witnessed the gains and the heartbreak of American activism and ambition on foreign shores. Around the corner lurk the risks of caution and reticence, of enemies who could see through, and test, our fatigue. The world is under no obligation to accommodate us.

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