



The Stakes Have Never Been Higher: U.S. Middle East Policy in the 2008 Elections

An address given to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council
on February 29, 2008 by

Dr. James Zogby
President, Arab American Institute

I was here four years ago and when I delivered an address that was called “The Mess We’re In: How Our Leaders Failed Us in the Middle East.” What I noted then was that despite our decades of engagement in the Middle East on so many levels—the amount of foreign aid that we send, weapons that we provide, the troops that we sent into the region going back into the ‘50s, even the wars that we’ve fought, the lives that we’ve lost, the interests that we have and the friends and relationships that developed—despite all of that, we as a country have no understanding of that region, of its history, of its evolution during the last century. Therefore, we have shaped our policies in that region, not on the convergence of our interests and the region’s requisites but rather on a distorted amalgam of our interests, domestic politics and a bunch of pretty strange ideologies.

As a result, we find ourselves and we found ourselves in 2004 in a very deep hole. We were grounded down in a war in Iraq that we did not understand and could not figure out what went wrong. Back in 2004 we were blaming it on deadenders or a whole bunch of other factors that accounted, we thought, for why this simply wasn’t panning out as we expected. I had debated in the Council on Foreign Relations and on television a number of the architects of that war and, like our president, had a chance to look in their eyes and see their souls and believed that they, in fact, did believe that it was going to take seven days, that it was a slam dunk, that it was something that was no problem at all and that in six months we’d be out. We were told it would cost between one and two billion only, that there would be flowers in the streets and democracy would bloom and democracy would spread throughout the entire region. It didn’t work; we continued to dumb down the definition of victory, but even that didn’t pan out and by 2004 it was very clear that we were in a hole and didn’t know how to get out.

At the same time we were neglecting but still not letting go of a failed Middle East peace process and there were tragic consequences there as well. We were increasingly disliked throughout the Middle East region. Our polling shows that but so too did the personal experiences of many Americans who traveled into that part of the world and we were placing our allies and our interests at great risk. That was then. The questions that I asked then were: Would we have a national debate and we would confront our failed policies? Would we change direction? Would we stop digging the hole deeper? Well, we did not. The last four years have served only to compound the tragedies that define the Middle East and our relationship with that region. We put the people of that region and ourselves in only greater risk. In 2005 and 2006 immediately following the election were really disastrous years, but the tragedy continues even till now.

Instead of focusing on defeating Al Qaeda, that attacked us, and reducing the appeal of extremism in the region, our policies resulted in a pretty dramatic turn around in Afghanistan. The Taliban is back and increasingly taking over new areas of that country. Al Qaeda is repositioning itself now from Pakistan, placing that country at risk and ourselves and whatever gains we have won in Afghanistan also in great peril.

The movement that we had once sought to defeat has now metastasized and has become instead virulent in its new forms that plague not only Iraq but across the Middle East, as we saw recently in Lebanon as the Lebanese army was forced to confront one of its spinoffs, North Africa, and even throughout Western Europe.

The Palestinian situation which many keep saying can never get worse, in fact, does get worse. Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza did not allow for a responsible transition and responsible leadership to assume control and the continued strangulation of Gaza, of that devastated strip that has known nothing but despair and horror for more than 30 years, has only grown worse. Hamas' victory in legislative elections that never should have occurred coupled with their irresponsible behavior, and our failure to provide real assistance and real support for the Palestinian presidency—beyond verbal statements of support and embraces that oftentimes hurt rather than helped have combined to produce where we are today, a near total division of the Palestinian people into two, not only geographical regions, but two ideologically divergent regions where, in fact, a people are at war with themselves. The particularly irresponsible behavior of Hamas has led to provocations that have resulted in more strangulation and more behavior on the part of Israel that has been brutal and has been, I believe, itself irresponsible, resulting in unbelievable hardships which many of us got to see when the wall broke down and, we saw the despair of the people of that devastated strip.

Meanwhile, expansion in the West Bank and Jerusalem is contributing to making peace virtually impossible in that part of the world. It is almost unbelievable for those of us who have gone to the region who know the West Bank and who know the situation, to see what the wall and the expansion settlements and the roads have done to daily life and to the hopes and aspirations of the people there.

Lebanon, no stranger to tragedy, has only witnessed more. The assassination of Prime Minister Hariri exposed deep divisions in Lebanon. The forced departure of Syria provided an opportunity for us to work to bring this country together. We ignored it. Instead, we pushed for a victor-vanquished scenario; this was compounded by the foolish and costly war that began with a provocative and adventurous act by Hezbollah and their miscalculations, but ended with devastating consequences for the country and the people of Lebanon. For Israel as well, but especially for Lebanon and it deepened Lebanon's divide. Lebanon, still in need of reconciliation and reform, remains today largely ignored and a tinderbox ready to ignite.

2005-2006 witnessed the acceleration of Iraq's dismemberment through sectarian conflict and ethnic cleansing. Sect and ethnic & ideologically based groups went against each other and picked over the bones of an already-destroyed country. What was especially tragic about what was happening in Iraq, especially at this time, was that despite the loss of lives and despite the loss of hope for people in the country and the ethnic cleansing—which I think none of us have really paid enough attention to, four million people were either refugees or internally displaced, not unlike what happened in Sarajero—Iraq was a country that despite the brutality of its regime, had largely been a place of coexistence. Now neighborhood pitted against neighborhood and divisions and walls even within the city of Baghdad separated people in a country where people

had never been separated before, where Shiite and Sunni intermarried and Kurd and Arab intermarried. Now those divisions are so real that they have created a new factor that Iraq must deal with and may not be able to deal with any time soon. But what was particularly tragic about Iraq was that while no real initiative were being taken here on Lebanon and no real serious initiatives were being taken here in dealing with the Palestinian issue, there was an effort underway to make a difference and have a national debate around Iraq. Between the two irresponsible polls that exist in the domestic debate were characterized by the stay-the-course or surge, versus the leave and jumping-over-each-other to see who's going to leave the fastest, Bill Richardson won that contest and lost the race for the presidency, but it was irresponsible. Both sides did not pay attention to the needs of Iraq and the Iraqi people and America's interests as well. There was a responsible discussion that took the form of the Iraq Study Group report. Issued in December 2006, it presented a viable and alternative course. It was much anticipated. I will never forget the 2006 election. Democrats won, and the question from all of the press was "What are you going to do about Iraq?" and those who were in leadership said, "We're waiting the results of the Iraq Study Group. It's going to make a difference." Even the Republicans dodged the question of what they were going to do about Iraq by saying much the same thing – "Well, we have to wait and see what the Iraq Study Group says." It was much anticipated, but when it came out everyone ignored it, including the President and including the leadership of the new Democratic leadership in Congress.

What was important about it was not just that its authors were two of the most esteemed people in foreign policy circles in America—former Secretary of State Jim Baker and former Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee Lee Hamilton—was bipartisan and it presented a responsible way out. It made an effort to stabilize and transition, it made an effort to internationalize and regionalize by bringing in surrounding countries into a contact group and creating a regional security pact, and it also provided a series of guideposts for what responsible U.S. leadership in the broader region would do to rehabilitate the American image and recreate the coalition necessary for us to confront extremism. It was comprehensive and it was ignored. Political calculations dominated on both sides. Democrats played politics and President Bush cherry picked. Instead of adhering to the program set out as a whole he took a piece here and said, "OK. We'll talk to Iran. You say we should do this? OK we'll do that." But what he didn't do was follow the prescription in a way that made sense, and what Democrats didn't do was understand that they had to drop their get-out and get-out-without-any-conditions and replace it with how do we leave and leave responsibly.

Current calm in Iraq is not new to the surge and I think we need to understand that but it's rather due to a series of rather worrisome internal factors. First, there are objectives being served by all the factions who are doing quite well with the current situation. The Kurds are in control and sitting pretty but they may in fact, as we've seen all too often in the past, overplayed their hand. They're still pushing for a referendum that will sever themselves literally from the country by creating a new provocation in Kirkuk which they want to annex to their territory. They've already overplayed their hand on oil revenues and the PKK and its presence in the Kurdish area of Iraq has now brought both Turkey into the country and created conditions for Iran to be bombing the north of the country. This provocation will not end.

Similarly, Sunni groups who are now armed and working with the United States but are still opposed to the U.S. presence, are seeking simply to regain their place in the country. They are finding it increasingly difficult because these armed groups are not being accepted into the Shia dominated military or government, and tensions still remain. They're becoming increasingly frustrated with their relationship with the United States. Baghdad is divided, a checker board of

neighborhoods that are set against themselves and a stability there is deceiving. Similarly, in the south there was a contest between factions, both armed, and both with dramatically different visions of what the future of the country should be, but currently they are at peace because their domestic and international sponsors of the two competing groups don't want the conflict to exacerbate while they're still working for an American departure but it will not last long. And Iran, now emboldened in Iraq, and in fact calling the shots for many of the groups in Iraq is also emboldened in the Gulf, and with its ties to Hezbollah and other groups in the region, is now one might call the victor of the entire war. It is the beneficiary of our failed policy.

This is the stage we are on. This is the stage that was set not only by failed policies leading up to 2004, but this is where we are in 2008. The question is what role will we play? How will we accept and understand the situation we're in? And will we now finally have the national debate that is required to determine what our role should be as we move forward?

I've been a student of this region all of my adult life and for the last 35 years I have been studying and speaking out. My first appearance here was 25 years ago and I addressed some of these very issues back then but I've noticed as I look backwards, that this period you see even more clearly when you look backwards, the conflicts in the region come in bunches. They're tied, connected to each other, one leads consequentially to another. The departure of Israel from Lebanon led to an internal transformation in Lebanon, but it also led to an exacerbation of tensions inside so that the first intifada was the result of the fact that the conflict of the Palestinians from being an outside conflict began an inside conflict, etc. There are these connective tissues. In the 35 years that I've been looking at this region and trying to analyze and talk about what we should do, I have never understood it to be as bad as it is today. The connective tissues are so deep that the problems are so great and the dangers are overwhelming.

We are at risk; our interests are at risk and our allies are at risk and if we stay the course, if we continue on this path, I believe that we will reach very soon a tipping point. Digging in deeper, ignoring failed policy and its consequences cannot be the answer that we come up with.

There are, I believe, real consequences. The conflict in the region once localized into different pockets has now become regionalized. It is felt everywhere and has consequences on all of the economies and all of the psychologies of the people in that area. Despair and anger is, in fact, a lethal brew. An entire generation or two have grown up in parts of Lebanon, in Palestine, and now Iraq and beyond, that know no hope and as a result extremism and supporters for extremism are on the rise. Anti-American sentiment has become internalized and deepened and hardened.

I had lunch with Karen Hughes shortly before she left her post and it was interesting because the day of our lunch she wrote an Op-Ed in *Washington Post* and it was *Al Qaeda is Losing*, which was the headline because their favorite favorability rating in Turkey was down to 19. And I had lunch with her and I said, "You were half right. It's down from 27 to 19, but our favorability rating in Turkey is seven and you didn't talk about that. They're losing, but we're not winning and, in fact, we're losing even more." In Turkey, our numbers are seven; in Pakistan, our numbers are seven; in Jordan, we're in a single digit and the same in countries across the region that is our closest allies on the governmental level and we've confused that.

We have support from the leaders of the region and yet we undercut that support by pursuing policies that pit them against their own people. And so the very leadership that we count on, the people, who have been our friends, get undercut. We pit their people against them, making them have to at times become repressive because they feel that their own security and the stability of

the regimes are at risk. I was in Jordan at the World Economic Forum and Condoleezza Rice got up and began her address in a rather dramatic way by confessing, she said that for the last 60 years our policy in this region has been wrong, we'd betrayed our values. There was a gasp in the audience, people thought she was going to acknowledge that it had been unbalanced, that we hadn't been fair in dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict, instead she took a shot at governments in the region and said we've supported dictators and we've not supported democracy. The very people, the very leadership, that had supported us she, and President Bush, undercut by an approach to democracy that made no sense. When you roil a region and get it angry and turn it against you and then turn against the people who are defending you, what do you get out of an election? Who's going to win that election? Hamas is going to win the election; Hezbollah is going to do very well in the election; the brotherhood that hates you is going to do even better in the election. The point is that you cannot want democracy and at the same time create conditions that mean that the results of that democracy are going to be more threatening and more destabilizing than we currently have. And, so, frankly, we've made a mess and we've only made it worse.

We need more thoughtful solutions and we cannot settle for failed policies and failed formulas. Efforts like the Iraq Study Group need to get dusted off. They need to be brought light. People like Baker and Hamilton need to be reengaged. Efforts like that by the U.S. Institute of Peace, that just issued a remarkable study which they consulted over one hundred leaders in Israel and the Arab side here in the U.S., a bipartisan effort headed by former ambassador to Egypt and Israel, Dan Kurtzer, on the Arab-Israeli peace process. It needs to be elevated into the national discussion, a remarkable effort like that should not be simply, like the Iraq Study Group, left to collect dust and ignored. It presents us with a critique of the past and a way forward that is accepted by some of the great foreign policy minds in our country.

And candidates have to be challenged; they have to be asked what they will do. We're having an election again where we pick a third of the Senate, and the entire Congress and a President of the United States is going to be chosen, we can't give them a pass on this issue and yet they have been given a pass to date; if you listen to the policy debates that we've had—20 debates on the Democratic side, I don't know how many on the Republican side—but the questions that have been asked are questions that are the fetish of the "gotcha" press. Iraq, in or out? How soon are you going to pull them? Before the end of the year or are you going to wait until next year? What does that mean? Iran, are you going to talk to them or aren't you going to talk to them? Or Farrakhan—are you going to denounce, reject or both? If that becomes the total sum of our foreign policy discourse, we are doing ourselves a disservice and the press is not doing us a service, precisely because the issues are too big. Denouncing Farrakhan is not going to make a difference in whether or not we get out of this hole and, whether or not you set the date to get out this month or 2009 or 2013 is not going to resolve the issue in Iraq. The question is what are you going to do about Iraq?

We cannot once again choose a president not knowing where that president will take us in the next four years. What we need is a real debate and we need an American leadership to be chosen in this election that will listen to, that will engage the Middle East, that will understand its history, that will understand the evolution of that history over the last century and that focuses on building regional alliances, not unilateral imposition or preemptive action but actually trusts; partners with whom we work and depend, [a leadership] that will not base our foreign policy on ideology or on a victor-vanquished mindset that only leads to more devastation. We need a peace process that combines the best of the last three administrations—the pressure the first Bush administration, the personal engagement of the second and the vision of the third. The problem is that we only have

one of the three ends up going nowhere. You have a vision but nothing to realize it which is what we've had in the last seven years from George Bush, a vision that becomes almost a taunt. You say I want two states but do nothing to get there. Or you have the pressure of Jim Baker and George Bush in the first administration that was brilliantly used and brought the parties to Madrid but once in Madrid abandoned the process and didn't use the pressure to deliver because it had no end goal in mind. Or you had the personal engagement of Bill Clinton that didn't have a vision until too late, at the very end, and didn't use pressure effectively enough to move the situation forward. Personal engagement is not enough. Sending Warren Christopher 20-something times to the Middle East without pressure and without a vision of why he was going back and forth for didn't amount to anything

But there is a way forward. We need a Lebanon policy that respects that country's sovereignty and promotes reconciliation and reform and, in fact, moves the Lebanese people away from the precipice and provides a respected American leadership role to bring the country together.

We need an Iraq policy that instead of seeking a nonexistent military victory, seeks engagement, as the Iraq Study Group called for with regional powers; the creation of a contact group; and allows for a withdrawal but a responsible withdrawal; that creates stability in the country in the context of the regional framework and secures the interest of all of the neighboring countries. I remember proposing that three years ago and people said, "You mean you want Iran involved in Iraq?" Guess what? They are involved in Iraq, and Turkey is in Iraq, and Saudi Arabia is in Iraq. Everyone in the neighborhood is in Iraq. The question is, do we bring their involvement above the table? Do we bring them around the table? Do we create a permanent framework for discussion and cooperation under the auspices—not of us who's now become a discredited partner tragically but relieved—but under the auspices of the United Nations? Not unlike the OSPE that created stability in Europe for more than a generation. We need a framework that can create stability in that region, with a different Lebanon policy and a different peace process and different policy towards Iraq. We need a restoration of U.S. standing and a projection of U.S. values and the rebuilding of relationships, that have been frayed in the region, as the best way to create a coalition that will help us to combat extremism much of which we have fueled by our behavior in the last several years and which will help move the region towards progress and reform.

We can get all this but the first thing we have to know is that we need it. The second thing is that we have to demand it and I would advise and suggest to you humbly that a forum like this should not be ignored as valuable. You have a presidential candidate coming and hopefully you'll have more before we're done. The opportunity to ask serious questions and to hold their feet to the fire and ask them where are you taking us? And where do you lead us in the next four years? And push them. Don't ask one and let it go, but keep pushing them because we need those answers. I believe the stakes have never been higher and I believe unless we pull ourselves away from the precipice we may in fact reach that tipping point within a very short period of time.

I thank you for your attention.

www.lawac.org

Speeches are edited for readability and grammar, not content. The views expressed herein are not endorsed by the Council. The Los Angeles World Affairs Council is a non-profit, non-partisan organization that pays neither honoraria nor expenses to its speakers.