

Danger and Opportunity: An American Ambassador's Journey Through the Middle East

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There's a joke in the Middle East wherein a fellow says, "You know I'm so old I can remember the Dead Sea when it was only sick." So, when people introduce me and say I've worked for eight U.S. presidents it just reminds me how the years have gone by. Also, you know how our children always have this wonderful gift for telling us the truth? I'll never forget our daughter, the brightest one in our family, graduated from Yale in 2005 and while we were having one of these rare father-daughter talks she said, "Dad, how long have you been this so-called great Middle East expert?" I said, "Oh, sweetheart, over thirty-odd years," and she looked at me and said, "You know, Dad, you haven't done a very good job."

So, with that disclaimer, I wrote a book on the Middle East and what I would like to do tonight is just give a very broad outline of some of the major themes in the book and then open it up, which I think is much more productive, to discussion and your comments and questions and whatever answers I can provide.

The reason I wrote this book is because I had been very troubled by my own experiences. We certainly had successes in U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, but we've had too many failures. I thought that it would be beneficial to the new administration to have the insight of an American diplomat who's served so many years in and out of the Middle East, in Washington, in Moscow and other capitals to try to give a sense of perspective of the challenges that our new president would face. Of course, I didn't know who the new president was going to be; I started writing this book over two years ago. The first part of the book is a letter to the incoming president and during the campaign it was "Dear Mr/Madam President" because we didn't know if Hillary Clinton or (Barack) Obama or John McCain was going to be president. But my publishers, of course, immediately took out the "Madam" when the primaries were over and Obama became the candidate.

In that letter to the incoming president I tried to outline, not only the challenges, but what an American president ought to be looking at as he or she assumes this great responsibility for our foreign policies, to say nothing about our critical domestic policy now with our economic issues. One of the major messages I have is that we have to start looking at the broader Middle East in a way where we connect the dots. I am not one of these people who say that, for example, every issue in the Middle East is inextricably linked to the other – like the Arab-Israeli conflict is linked to Iran or to Iraq or to Afghanistan or to extremism. No, they're not inextricably linked, but all of these issues are interconnected and each one impacts on the others. We have to have the wisdom to know and deal with each one of these critical issues on their own merits but at the same time to

realize that what we do in one part of the Middle East can affect what we're doing in another part of the Middle East and, therefore, how it affects our national security interests.

When I was assistant secretary of state for the Near East under Bush 41 it was 1991 – the collapse of the Soviet Union, and all of a sudden the historic paradigm that we'd been living under where virtually all of our foreign policy was defined by this incredibly dangerous conflict between the two super powers, these two nuclear powers – and remember MAD “mutual assured destruction?” This defined our foreign policy in almost 90% of what we did. It was the contest with communism and the Soviet Union in this bipolar world. All of a sudden the Soviet Union is no longer there. It collapsed. Not in a bang, but in a whimper, and I think that some credit has to be given to our foreign policy and to Bush 41 for managing the breakup of the Soviet Union in a way that didn't devolve into a conflict sort of situation. It devolved peacefully.

When I was in charge of the Middle East, and at that time also South Asian affairs, I began to note that in our country we began looking for a new enemy. We had lost our enemy; who's the new enemy? It's as though we have to define ourselves as a people and a nation by an enemy. And so, there are various schools of thought that were emerging and one of them was this clash of civilizations – the Sam Huntington thesis and other groups that said, “No, we're going to be facing other religions and cultures and Islam is one of the new enemies we're going to have.”

I thought this was a very dangerous line of thinking because I'm a victim, as we all are, of our education. I was educated by the Jesuits at Georgetown and they're tough educators and they pounded into my head the St. Thomas Aquinas philosophy that said if the truth is this long and someone just focuses on that aspect of the truth and makes a whole school of thought on that aspect of the truth, watch out. So anyone who says that Islam is the enemy by focusing on the Islamic radicals; or who says the Christians are the enemy by focusing on maybe extremist Christian groups; or Buddhists groups or Hindu groups or Jewish groups, this is faulty reasoning.

So, what does any bureaucrat do to try to fix something in Washington? He gives a speech. So, I gave a speech at Meridian House in 1992 and I'll never forget going up to the office of the then-Secretary of State James Baker, and said, “I'm going to give a speech on what our policy should be both in the Arab and Muslim world.” He looked at me and said, “What are you going to say?” and I said, “Well, I'm going to say this, this and this,” and he said, “You be careful, Ed.”

I walked out of that office realizing that my career was on the line depending on how that speech went that Friday. But a long story short, in that speech which really is one of the major themes of the book I outlined – and remember this is 1992 and think ahead to 9/11 – I said after the fall of communism, after we have helped defeat fascism and communism, the next “ism” that the United States is going to face is not any world great religion or civilization, it's going to be extremism and terrorism of either a religious or secular cloak. Therefore, we have to start building up our foreign policy goals in a way that we can marginalize the extremists and the terrorists – I'm talking about the Middle East now; that was my responsibility.

I could have talked about the world; I was Assistant Secretary of State for the Middle East. We have to marginalize the extremists, the radicals and the terrorists and strengthen the moderates in this society. We have to use what had now become a term – I didn't use that term at the time – “smart power.” What we meant by that is all the instruments we have of soft power and hard power, but the hard power should really be truly the last resort and only when America's security interests are imminently threatened

And so, I advocated that we start promoting political reforms – I didn’t say promote democracy. In fact, in the speech I said we cannot parachute a Jeffersonian model of democracy into the sands of Arabia. It won’t take, but what we can do is learn about these cultures, know the societies, the political, cultural, religious systems that we’re dealing with and see what the building blocks of democracy and political reform are in those societies and differentiate, region by region in the Middle East, from the Maghreb to the Levant to the Gulf, to South Asia – differentiate, because they’re different.

Promoting political reforms in Egypt will be different than promoting political reforms in South Asia, for example, or even in Lebanon. Each country is different, so we should differentiate that this part of the world is a mosaic. Islam is a mosaic, it is not a monolith. We had to become smart in the manner in which we start approaching these countries, but some of the greatest dangers that we faced was instability from within these countries. The Arabs came out with some incredibly significant reports about eight years ago. The UNDP reports, in which there were Arab authors said, “We in the Arab world have an education deficit; we have an economic deficit, we’re not creating enough jobs for our burgeoning demographic challenges. We have a technology deficit. We have a human rights political deficit, because political participation is very limited and therefore I advocated that the United States should start working towards political and economic reforms in this part of the world but in an intelligent way. Not to impose it as an American model, but to build from the ground up.

The other part is that the conflicts in the Middle East must be a priority for any American president to try to resolve, so let’s move from conflict management to conflict resolution. What do I mean by that? Instead of rushing in like fire engines every time something blows in the Middle East, put out the fire and then walk away, let’s stay the course and try to resolve some of the key issues in the Middle East.

The first one is the Arab-Israeli conflict. Do not be deceived by anyone who tells you that the Arab-Israeli conflict is not still the major political issue in the Arab; and even in the Muslim world. In the Bush 43 administration, the neocons stated, “It’s not the Arab-Israeli conflict that’s important, it’s Iraq; it’s Tehran. All we have to do is get rid of these dictators, bring democracy to the Middle East and then Israel can negotiate peace with democratic neighbors.” Wrong. A man I deeply admired when I was ambassador to Israel was Yitzhak Rabin. He told me, and I have this in the book, I quote him. He said, “Ed, if Israel has to wait for its Arab neighbors to become democratic to make peace, we would be waiting for a thousand years. We have to start to make peace now. We cannot wait.”

So, the primary issue – the prime issue – remains the Palestinian issue for all its symbolism. It’s the issue that brings out mobs in Jakarta; in Algeria, and it has to be dealt with. I’m very gratified that President Obama has prioritized this and has appointed someone with the credentials of Senator George Mitchell to be his presidential envoy as one of the first things he’s done in this term. Another thing I have in the book is, “Mr. President do not wait. Engage on this early on. Do not make the same mistake that Bill Clinton did and George W. Bush did. They got engaged in the Arab-Israeli conflict in their *second* terms – until the end of their second terms – and they both ran out of time. So, engage early on and engage seriously and in a sustained manner, and have political courage because it’s very, very difficult.”

So, conflict resolution, be it Arab-Israeli; be it what we saw in Lebanon in recent years; be it what happened in Iraq – I think it was a mistake to go into Iraq militarily. I think we could have handled Iraq in a different way. But we have to look at things like Afghanistan and Kashmir and

have policies in place that we're working with the parties in the region to resolve these conflicts so that they do not become the flash points for new wars but also issues that the extremists exploit for their own ends.

Osama bin Laden exploits the Arab and Israeli issue to the hilt for his own extremist political ends. I'm not saying that if tomorrow we had peace between Israel and all of its Arab neighbors that there still would not be terrorism and extremism. I do not advocate that; that's unrealistic. But what it does do is it takes away one of the major rallying cries from the extremists and helps build up the moderates especially in the Arab world.

And, the way we go about promoting democracy is critical. I've explained how I suggest that we do it but not democracy promotion where we go and we promote democracy and we support elections and then when the election results occur we say, "Oh, my God, what happened?" Like in Palestine when Hamas won the election and then we don't recognize the results of the election. There's a hypocrisy there and the people in the region say, "You, the United States, the greatest democracy. You promote elections and then you don't abide by their results because you don't like the results. What kind of democrats are you?"

There's an anecdote in my book when I was having a meeting with the former President of Syria, Hafez al-Assad. He was one of the toughest customers on the block, but he was a brilliant negotiator. Henry Kissinger said he was one of the most brilliant people he had to negotiate with and you had to watch and listen to every word, every gesture, when you were negotiating or having a conversation with him. He had just been re-elected a few weeks before this meeting I had with him and he was re-elected with 99.44% of the vote.

So, I said, "Mr. President, congratulations on this tremendous election; this tremendous electoral victory." He said, "Thank you," and I said, "May I ask you a question... Do you know who the .44% are who didn't vote for you?" And, he looked at me and chuckled and said, "Oh, Ambassador Djerejian, I have all their names." The reason I included that anecdote is because elections alone do not make democracy. We Americans know that better than anyone. What makes democracy is the rule of law – checks and balances, civil society, pluralism and the principle the alternation of power. You win the election one time, if you lose the second time, you walk out peacefully; you don't clean guns.

In that Meridian House speech I made in 1992, there was a phrase I used that really became quite notorious because, if you remember 1992, there was the Algerian elections and it was a sure bet that in 1992 if the elections were free and fair the Islamic radical party had become the governance of Algeria. This sent us in Washington some heart palpitations because we didn't know what the ramification would be if, in this very important country, the Magrant, Algeria, one of the leading hydrocarbon-producing countries, a neighbor of allies of the United States, like Morocco and Tunis and not too far away, Egypt, if an Islamic radical party came to power in an Arab country of that importance, we were worried about that. So, in the speech I had this phrase, "while we Americans are for," and I used the words "one person, one vote" not "one man, one vote" because I wanted to be gender-correct. In the Arab it was translated "while we are for one person, one vote, we are not for one person, one vote, *one time*."

We are very suspect of those parties and groups that use the democratic process to come to power and once they're in power they destroy the democratic process and stay in power. That still remains a conundrum when you have groups that are truly not wedded to the principles of

democracy; they come to power through the electoral system – are they going to play the electoral game or are they going to monopolize power.

Let me briefly mention a couple of other issues – Afghanistan and Pakistan. We are now sending more American troops into Afghanistan. Afghanistan has never been governed or controlled by any outside power with any effectiveness at all. This truly can be the next flash point in our foreign policy after Iraq and Iraq is not done yet. In Afghanistan we have to use both soft power and hard power in a very intelligent way. I quote General Eickenberry in the book. He said, “Where the roads end, the Taliban begins.” It’s a brilliant short phrase that says everything – where the roads end, the Taliban begins. What that means is that where government services stop – where the roads end, where there are no schools, there are no clinics, there are no hospitals, there are no social services, no jobs – that’s where the Taliban begins. It’s one of the greatest causes of extremism and terrorism in the world.

So our policies towards Afghanistan have to be yes, security, securing the ground so that the roads can be built and the services can be there but at the end of the day it’s going to be the Afghan security forces, the Afghan police, the Afghan government that are going to win that battle or not. I have a quote in my book from T.E. Lawrence, the famous Lawrence of Arabia, where he says way back after World War I, he’s advising his government, he says, “Do not forget. We cannot win this war for them. It is their war to win or lose. We can help them, but we cannot win it for them.” We have to be very careful that we do not become the primary agent in play when we’re dealing with these various countries.

Let’s not make the same mistake we made – and that’s another message in the book – Mr. President do not neglect South Asia. Keep it sustained, focus on South Asia. In 1979 when the Soviets went into Afghanistan we supported the mujahideen; we helped create the mujahideen; we gave them money, we gave them arms to destroy the Soviet forces in Afghanistan. We succeeded only too well and then we walked away and we subcontracted our policy to Islamic extremist groups and others and al Qaeda was born – and then we had 9/11 and then we had to go back into Afghanistan and overthrow the Taliban regime.

Then, after we overthrew the Taliban regime, we left Afghanistan again and went into Iraq, in my eyes a war of choice and not necessity. Then while our blood and treasure were preoccupied with Iraq, the Taliban came back to Afghanistan and now a new American president has to send more troops into Afghanistan. What’s wrong with this picture? What’s wrong with this picture is that somebody, and people be they Democrats or Republicans, are not connecting the dots.

I will end there but there’s much more that we can discuss. There are a lot of anecdotes in this book that give life to what it is to conduct American diplomacy in the Middle East. There’s a story of when we were going to sign the Oslo accords in Washington – you’ll remember the famous photo op with Prime Minister Rabin and Shimon Peres and Yasser Arafat and King Hussein of Jordan on the White House lawn, to sign the accords – I got a call from President Clinton’s White House, I was an assistant secretary at the time, saying that the President wanted me to go to Andrews Air Force Base and officially greet Yasser Arafat.

Of course, I said, “Yes, sir.” Then I put down the phone and said, “Oh, my God. This man has been listed for years as a number one terrorist, the PLO headed by Yasser Arafat. I would have to sign letters of waiver to allow him to come to New York to attend UN meetings because he was classified as a terrorist and having known Yasser Arafat I knew that when I greeted him the first thing he was going to do was hug me and I realized that the first photo could not be a hug – it had

to be a handshake. I called in my trusted deputy assistant, Dan Kurtzer who later became Ambassador to Egypt and Israel. I said, “Dan, close the door. I want you to come and try to hug me.” He looked at me and he thought I had lost my mind. I said, “No, no. I’m OK, but I have to greet Arafat at Andrews tomorrow and it’s got to be handshake. So, let’s work out a routine that when he starts coming like this I’ll be able to and I said “even Rudolf Nureyev would have been proud of our ballet. What we did was basically my left hand came out while he was lurching forward to hug me and my right hand came out and I held him like that and that’s exactly what happened. There were hundreds of photographers at Andrews and it was handshake, it was not a hug. But those of you who know Washington where there are no secrets that photo appears the next time in the *Washington Post* and the headline was “Avoiding a Hug For History.”

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