

How the US Election will Affect Saudi Arabia

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AS the world waits, it is interesting to analyse how the results of the US presidential election will affect Saudi Arabia.

Two primary issues concern the Kingdom most: Foreign policy toward the Arab and Muslim world, and matters of economics and oil production. Given the significance of the American presidency this year, a mock-debate took place in Riyadh on Oct. 13 to learn more about the effects of the election on the Middle East and Saudi Arabia. Organized by lawyer Amgad Husein, and moderated by Omar Bahlaiwa, secretary-general of the Committee of International Trade, a town-hall style meeting was held at the Four Seasons to discuss the issues. Over one hundred enthusiastic men and women attended, mostly Saudi, expressing their interest in the “candidates” cases.

The Republicans (represented by Fred McClure) and Democrats (represented by Mike McNamara) discussed foreign policy issues, the audience ready with questions. They felt that President Obama had done little to help Syria, and that Mitt Romney — despite the Mormon emphasis on peace and kindness — would be more aggressive in supporting an Israeli strike on Iran, surrounded as he was with Zionist advisers with a pro-Israeli agenda.

Concerned as to increased rhetoric from both parties against Iran, no one wanted an attack on their neighbor, and many wondered whether a war stance would be stepped up in lieu of sanctions. The most pressing concern was Syria. What, the audience asked repeatedly, would each candidate do to stop the atrocities? America should demonstrate leadership toward Damascus and initiate a no-fly zone, not lead from behind.

As to energy production, “We’ve been more than co-operative with the global community,” said Mr. Husein. “The audience felt that Saudi Arabia wasn’t getting the credit it deserved.” In closing, neither candidate wowed the audience with any demonstrable solution to events in the region or tangible differences in position.

Generally, Republicans have favored longstanding trade commitments with Saudi Arabia, initiated decades ago in an oil-for-security arrangement. Regardless of the party in the White House, agreements changed little over time barring the oil embargo of the seventies. In the past decade however, the Republicans have become so overtly Islamophobic that the cost to trade might be at risk if President Romney continues a path of alienation-by-religion.

Democrats have pushed the energy issue to the fore and proclamations on game changing recent American energy exports are used to illustrate progress. Both sides argue for a stronger renewable energy program, and – as claimed in every campaign of the past forty years — a need to wean away from dependence upon Middle Eastern sources of oil. In reality, neither party makes markedly tangible steps to change the status quo, the US is

nowhere near oil independence, and easily accessible minimally refined crude oil will keep Americans relying on Arabian imports for decades.

For the Kingdom this matters little in the long run. If the United States demands less oil from Saudi Arabia, there are plenty of other countries needing Arab sweet crude. More importantly, it is in Saudi Arabia's interest to see a gradual decline in oil demand, viewed as a gift from God that ought to remain in place as an insurance policy for future generations. After the Six Day War, relations between the Kingdom and the United States temporarily deteriorated, and weapons contracts merely went to France, Italy, Pakistan and Great Britain instead. Likewise, there is no shortage of global oil customers.

The Obama administration has increased threats against China, moved a military presence closer in the Pacific, and is likely to demand more from Sino-American negotiations that would push China closer to Saudi Arabia. And China makes no bones about a willingness to pay premium oil prices, is not interested in the internal policies of the Kingdom, has no argument on human rights records, and has no care as to how Saudis pray, dress or drive.

Should Barack Obama win re-election, his policies toward the Middle East will change little. Despite pledges of friendship during his speech in Cairo in 2009, US strikes in Iraq and Afghanistan extended to Yemen, Somalia, Libya and Pakistan. The latter has experienced thousands of innocent deaths from drone strikes, throwing the most anti-American country in the world into positions more extreme than during the Bush years. In a new BBC poll, Pakistan was the only nation to favor a Romney victory.

If Mitt Romney wins, he will continue the drone strikes and expand target areas. Admitting he knows little about foreign policy and that the security of Israel is his number one goal, Romney has surrounded himself with advisers straight from the neoconservative Bush-Cheney playbook — the same group that insisted Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction ready to launch within minutes, had imported uranium from Niger, had been in cahoots with Al-Qaeda in the 9/11 attacks — and who were convinced that the Iraqi and Afghan people would welcome America with open arms and flowers.

President Obama and Mitt Romney have been in competition to outdo each other on how each loves Israel more. US aid has remained constant, but with unsecured loans and military contracts that are never repaid the US provides Israel with an average of \$13 billion per year.

If Romney wins, assistance will increase while aid to Egypt and other Arab states will decline, in line with his goal to guarantee Israel's status as the only powerhouse in the region. According to Robert Fisk, Obama "behaved like a dog" after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu insisted no discussion on Israeli withdrawal to 1967 borders would take place. This is unlikely to change during a second-term; the relationship is radioactive and both Obama and Romney (who admitted he would 'kick the ball down the road' on the issue) will do nothing to upset the Israeli leader.

Although Romney is heavily laden with neoconservatives, he has ensured that a few realists are still within his circle. Similarly, President Obama has a few pro-Zionists. Ex-White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel worked with the Israeli Defense Forces in 1991 during the Gulf War; Vice President Joe Biden argues that Israel is "the single greatest strength America has in the Middle East," and if Iraq had been magically transported to Mars "does anyone think

there would not be terrorism visited upon the Israelis every day?...If I were a Jew I'd be a Zionist. I am a Zionist!"

Saudi Arabia has a keen interest in the US position toward Iran. President Romney would almost certainly increase hostilities and commit to supporting — if not outright enabling — an Israeli strike on the country. As he admitted, Romney would listen and take his cues from Netanyahu. If Israel attacked Iran's nuclear facilities, a second-term President Obama will also commit to supporting Netanyahu. Such a catastrophe would destabilize the entire region, so the Kingdom would clearly prefer a diplomatic resolution to tensions.

A second-term President Obama will continue an à la carte foreign policy as he navigates the turbulent waters of the Middle East. On Syria, the cessation of formal ties with the Syrian National Council this week — potentially millions poured into backing them against President Assad — confirms a confused understanding of Arab world complexities. (A new term coined recently in England describes such a political mess; an 'omnishambles'.) Romney as president would do no better on Syria, so uninformed on foreign policy as he and his vice presidential pick are.

President Obama would likely accommodate the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and elsewhere, and remain aloof on negotiations for peace between Israel and Palestine. Drone strikes will increase, and the US military will continue to leave a heavy footprint around the world.

If Mitt Romney wins, a cabal of neoconservatives and Christian Zionists will be a part of his administration in key security positions, thereby formulating foreign policy according to "what's best for Israel."

Anti-Muslim rhetoric will increase. Threat from Islamists will be a pretext for an increased military presence to prevent a "threat of attack" against democracy.

Nevertheless, "big oil" will play an important role in a Romney Cabinet, ensuring Saudi Arabia remains a continued regional ally.

President Obama initially praised the Arab world and promised much, but his disappointing performance and increased attacks on the Muslim world left a feeling of a personal betrayal of trust. In contrast, the region is acutely aware of Mitt Romney's hawkish stance, and in this sense forewarned is forearmed.

In short, a second Obama term might guarantee stagnation and reticence with a more aggressive position toward Asia; a Romney presidency might guarantee favorable energy policies but tied to neoconservative diktats on a severe foreign policy.

In the end, it is not necessarily how the next president reacts to Middle Eastern issues. Rather, it is the Middle East that has gained the power to react to — or with — the United States. By taking charge, the region poses a threat to American hegemony, and whoever is in the White House next, this is the new reality he faces.

As the Arab world struggles for dignity and freedom, it favors Arab terms now – not American.

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