



MIDEAST MONITOR: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

## Reshuffling the Cards

**A**N EXTRAORDINARY U.S. presidential visit to Cairo and crucially important elections, in Lebanon and Iran – each of these events could have a powerful impact on the overall contours of Middle East politics.

The Hollywood celebrity-like “buzz” around Obama was palpable throughout the Arab world, as families gathered around television sets in homes and cafés. One could almost feel the hunger of the average Arab citizen to partake in the global “Obamania” phenomenon. Obama’s message – a respectful acknowledgment of the greatness of Islamic and Arab culture, and an expressed desire to work together with Arab states and societies to advance common goals – made it all the more riveting, and his speech was received warmly, both among his 3,000 listeners in the auditorium of Cairo University and throughout much of the region.

To be sure, some Arab commentators were quick to note that Obama’s honeyed words were no substitute for proper policies, and expressed deep skepticism that the United States would alter its underlying support for Israel in favor of the Palestinians or change its “imperial ways” elsewhere in the region. But others, such as the editor-in-chief of the authoritative Al-Hayat, Ghassan Charbel, noted that Obama’s speech was not just an exercise in public relations, but the expression that Washington understands the need for new approaches to the myriad challenges in an evermore intertwined world. Obama’s “outstretched hand,” he said, required similar deep thinking from Arab and Muslim states and a willingness to establish a genuine partnership.

Meanwhile, the elections in Lebanon and Iran serve as barometers to measure the degree to which Iran’s growing power projection into the Arab heartland was being institutionalized. Lebanon was, in fact, a test case: Most polls had indicated that the Hizballah spearheaded, pro-Iranian and pro-Syrian opposition “March 8” Group would achieve gains, and thus further consolidate its increas-



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ingly hegemonic position at the expense of the governing pro-Western “March 14” Group. With the stakes high, both internally and regionally, Lebanese factions campaigned vigorously, fueled by massive funding from their external patrons – Iran and Saudi Arabia respectively. Vote-buying was reportedly even more widespread than usual.

To the surprise of most, the pro-Western bloc won the election and even slightly increased its strength in parliament. Of course, Lebanon remains deeply divided, Hizballah has no intention of disarming, and the existing electoral law unfairly discriminates against the country’s Shi’ite community. It may take months to arrive at what will be, at best, a fragile formula for governing the country.

But for the moment, the Egyptians, Saudis and Jordanians – the heart of the anti-Iranian pro-American Sunni bloc in the region – could breathe easier. For Israelis, this outcome is by no means a guarantee that the nearly three years of quiet on the Lebanese border will continue.

Meanwhile, prior to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s “landslide” victory in the

Iranian presidential campaign, a series of raucous televised debates between the candidates provided great political theater for the Iranian public. Overall, the elections, even within the rigid constraints imposed by the Islamic Republic framework, were deemed by the public to be significant, in sharp contrast to elections in most of the Arab world.

What about substance? Had Ahmadinejad gone too far in his anti-Western, Holocaust-denying rhetoric and thus damaged Iran, as his opponents charged? Would it make a difference if he won or lost in the unfolding crisis over Iran’s nuclear program and ease the fears of Sunni Arab states and Israel alike? Not necessarily. According to the International Crisis Group (Policy Briefing No. 28; <http://www.crisisgroup.org>), there was no straightforward reformist versus conservative split regarding the engagement with the United States. Indeed, Ahmadinejad may be among the most eager to reestablish a channel of discussion.

Regardless of who is elected, said the report, the U.S. handling of the nuclear file will be Tehran’s litmus test: Its red line is the right to enrich uranium on its soil, and anything less will be viewed as unacceptable. Iranian officials contemplate a dialogue with the U.S. covering bilateral and regional issues, and even cooperation on specific regional files (e.g. Afghanistan and perhaps even Iraq), but see it as underpinned by deep-seated political and ideological differences, particularly on Israel, and within the context of an overall strategic competition.

Sobering to be sure, as the authors of the report acknowledge, and difficult to even initiate, but better than any other alternative. The bottom line is that one rarely, if ever, plays with a completely new deck of cards in Middle East politics. Still, it is also apparent, that within the reshuffling of the existing cards, a new wild card has been added to the mix – Barack Obama. ●

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