

Arabs and the 2008 American Election Hopes and Predictions

ARAB INSIGHT STAFF

THERE IS NO UNIFIED ARAB OPINION regarding the impact of the upcoming U.S. presidential election on American foreign policy toward the Middle East and the Arab world. Rather, there are two main points of view: the first argues that the election will not significantly change U.S. foreign policy toward the Arab and Islamic world, whether a Democrat or a Republican wins, whereas the second point of view posits that a Democratic takeover of the White House would bring about real change. Among a key sector of scholars, writers and the Arab public, there is a discernible sympathy for Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., whether compared to Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., or Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Arabs are clearly aware that there are real obstacles that could keep Obama from winning. Most Arab analyses have blamed these difficulties on deep-rooted prejudices within American society against the proverbial “other,” whether that other is defined by religion or ethnicity, despite America’s reputation for multiculturalism.

In this framework, Arab views of the election’s significance range from those who give it no more importance than any other election; to others who argue that 2008 is crucial for putting a decisive end to the “Bushian” era. The George W. Bush regime has changed the face of the world over the last eight years in a way unlike any other presidency, even those of such leaders as Harry Truman, who authorized the first wartime use of nuclear weapons, or George H.W. Bush Sr., who presided over the end of the Cold War and the rise of what was called the New World Order.

This article offers an analysis of the leading viewpoints on the U.S. election found in the Arab press, and the election's expected influence on American foreign policy, by focusing on opinion articles, setting aside news coverage or academic analyses without a definite political orientation.

The elections will not bring about change

A distinct Arab trend sees the election results as not having a real impact on American policy toward Arab issues and this camp considers it a mistake to distinguish between the candidates' positions toward the Arab world. According to the writer of an article entitled "The US Elections and the Arabs' Future!" in the Qatari newspaper *Al-Sharq*:

Arabs are aware of the truth, which is that whoever is in the White House will not change U.S. foreign policy. He or she will have no significant impact on Arabs' rights in Palestine, the Golan, Lebanon, Iraq and Sudan, and on the nature of the ongoing struggle in the Arab East.¹

The justification for this attitude is that:

The United States, as a modern state, has a global strategy, set interests, and a vision that no one working in the White House's Oval Office can abandon, whether they be Republican or Democrat, man or woman, black or white, and whatever their personal leanings, political tastes, or ideological affiliation may be.²

In addition, the argument continues, the final goal of any candidate is to achieve fixed, stable American objectives embodied in "supporting Israeli superiority, humiliating the Arabs, and seizing their legitimate rights."³

In another article entitled, "Our Arab Causes in Light of the American Elections," published on the "Arab Voice" website, the writer rejects the idea of distinguishing between the candidates, citing the existence of what he calls "historical constants" in U.S. foreign policy, specifically "American geostrategic hegemony" and "Zionist-American hegemony."⁴ The first moves American policy on the broad international level, while the second shapes policy in the Middle East, in particular, where the United States guarantees the security of Israel and its people regardless of the orientations and po-

1 Buthaina Shaaban, "The US Elections and the Arabs' Future!" *Al-Sharq* (Qatar), Feb. 24, 2008.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Mohammed bin Said al-Fatissi, "Our Arab Causes in the Light of the American Elections," www.arabvoice.com

litical affiliations of the American elite or ruling administration. Moreover, the author says, “Historical events have proven that the United States has clung to this prodigal son – Israel – even though the Israel has caused many domestic and foreign problems for it.”⁵ The article concludes by affirming that these constants:

... [W]ill remain as they have been throughout the course of U.S. history in its relationship with Israel, and consequently will remain the principal determinant of the future of the relationship between the Arabs on the one hand, and Israel and America on the other. Thus the victory of any of the current candidates for the American presidency – Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, or John McCain – will do little to alter the future of these Arab or Middle Eastern issues, especially the issues that touch directly upon the security and future of the Greater Israeli colony. In the end they [the candidates] will all aspire to court and pacify Israel.⁶

The writer goes on to cite many quotes by the various presidential candidates as evidence for his view.

Some sources, however, such as an article printed on the Iraqi Organization for Follow-up and Monitoring’s blog,⁷ acknowledge the existence of some theoretical differences among the candidates, especially regarding their positions on Iraq. Despite these distinctions, however, the article does not go so far as to say that there will be a clear practical difference in American policy in Iraq. The article argues that no matter the candidates’ stances, practical and objective considerations shape this policy. It concedes that the Democrats are calling for the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, but claims that both Clinton and Obama have adopted positions that are vague, distorted, and to a certain extent self-contradictory. While Obama has declared his determination to end the American occupation of Iraq, and has rejected holding permanent military bases there, he also voted to give unconditional funding for the war in Iraq in 2005 and 2006. He also voted in favor of Condoleezza Rice’s appointment as secretary of

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⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The Iraqi Organization for Follow-up and Monitoring, “American Presidential Elections and the Iraqi Cause... Contradictory Platforms and an Unclear Future,” March 2, 2008, <http://alressd.maktoobblog.com/>

state, despite her misleading testimony before Congress and poor handling of Iraq policy before, during and after the invasion of Iraq, during her tenure as national security advisor. The same applies for Hillary Clinton – despite her vow to bring back as many of the troops as possible, and as soon as possible, the article highlights that Clinton was one of the war’s initial supporters in the Senate.

Based on the Democrats’ voting record, the article argues that despite the apparent differences in the rhetoric of the Democrats and the Republicans, practically speaking, there will not be major changes made in American policy in Iraq. It then lists a number of other objective considerations that will negate the superficial differences between the two sides, especially regarding the American military presence in Iraq. For example, the article considers the huge oil reserves in Iraq to be significant, since “America is a country run by institutions, and when the American institutions are being controlled by individuals from the Zionist Right, the chances of American troops leaving Iraq are extremely low.”⁸ The author also declares that the Democratic candidates’ statements on Iraq “are only for domestic consumption to win over the American voters and push them to back one candidate over the other. Reality asserts that a long-term military presence will remain in Iraq.”⁹ He concludes that U.S. troops will not depart Iraq except at the hands of the Iraqi resistance.

In an article entitled “Firing on Obama” in the Omani newspaper *Al-Watan*, readers can sense the author’s sympathy for Obama as he criticizes the smear campaign against Obama led by Clinton’s team. The writer deplores the tactic of spreading pictures of Obama wearing traditional Somali garb while in Kenya, a barely veiled reference to the candidate’s African and Islamic roots. Nonetheless, the writer bluntly notes that such a campaign could force Obama to “overcompensate for his history by pacifying Israel more and taking more hard-line stances toward the American situation in Iraq, namely by working to keep the American army there.”¹⁰

Support for Israel is often cited in the Arab media as a constant principle of American foreign policy, affirming that there would be no significant difference between the Democratic and Republican candidates. In an article on the “Green Corner” website entitled “The American Electoral Rally,” Ahmad Ibrahim Abdullah al-Hajj al-Hulahula points out that “all the candidates differ in their electoral platforms over all of the issues, whether domestic or foreign,”¹¹ but that:

8 Ibid

9 Ibid

10 Zohair Majed, “Firing on Obama,” *Al-Watan* (Oman), February 27, 2008.

11 Ahmad Ibrahim Abdullah al-Hajj al-Hulahula, “The American Electoral Rally,” Green Corner, February 14, 2008, http://www.grenc.com/show_article_main.cfm?id=11234.

There is one issue in which all the candidates agree, and speak about in a clear, harmonious voice ... Each of the candidates speaks of the extent of his [or her] commitment to this objective, which represents the greatest common denominator for them: namely the US's strict, ironclad commitment to Israel's security and the necessity of preserving Israel's strength and giving it unlimited support by all means available.¹²

Al-Hulahula asserts that the candidates:

... [C]ompete to make the sincerest statements most loyal to this role, as if it is a religious duty which cannot be belittled, distorted, or doubted ... None of them dare call for a neutral, unbiased policy in handling the crisis between the Arabs and Israel, so how can we imagine or expect that any candidate will criticize Israel's policy towards peace in the region?¹³

The article then supports its claim by listing some of the pro-Israeli statements and actions made by each of the candidates, including Obama, before or during the primaries. Al-Hulahula explains that the headline, "The American Electoral Rally," refers to "the competitive race among the candidates, wherein they follow a single marathon course covering the ground of the first, pivotal Arab issue, that of Palestine. In the end, all the competitors reach the goal of maintaining Israel's security, which is a common objective for all." However, the writer states, the majority of presidential aspirants:

... [A]re very much aware of the American interest in establishing a just peace in the region. They know well how much suffering the Palestinian people endure, and know of Israel's practice of organized, programmed state terrorism against unarmed Palestinians and the racial discrimination, which Israel applies in the Palestinian territories ... but at the same time they recognize that the path to the presidency passes through hypocrisy and favoritism for the Israelis and does not involve infringing in word or deed upon American-Israeli relations.¹⁴

Arab sympathy for Obama

Many Arab opinion articles have expressed sympathy for Obama, possibly because his experience in the primaries seemed to be a microcosm of American policies, domestic

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

and foreign, toward the “other.” Obama’s candidacy has also provided an important occasion for exploring the problems of discrimination within American society, and for reaffirming that the American model (on the level of society and the political system) is still afflicted by many shortcomings. In this context, most of the Arab opinion pieces discussing the U.S. election have singled out Obama and mentioned his personal background. Many of these have presented a very positive overall picture of Obama. In an article entitled “Barack Obama and Us,” the author, Talhat Jibril, says:

It is certain that Obama ... is an attractive personality, with strong leadership skills and unusual rhetorical ability, brilliant, bold, and fearless. He brims with intelligence, surrounds himself with smart people, and respects intelligence. Distinguished by an abundance of integrity and depth, he is an organized tactician and inspiring strategist, not searching for the meaning of events, but giving them the meaning that he wants, speaking in tones burning with enthusiasm. He is cultured and quiet by nature, but he is unable to contain his amazing energy for endless work.¹⁵

Jibril concludes his characterization of Barack Obama by saying:

The most important quality of Obama is his ability to bring people together around him, even if they have differing orientations and leanings ... a liberal closer to the leftists, he stands at the far left of the Democratic Party and his economic platform is for the poor social classes and against the rich and the special-interest groups. He stands for an America of ‘hope and change’ and for an America of peace ... He has an idea for an Islamic summit with America ... Obama is black but does not have the bitterness of black Americans that generation after generation have inherited from years of humiliating slavery, because his father is African.¹⁶

On an episode of “The Fourth Power,” a satellite television show broadcasted by Al-Arabiyya, entitled “Democrats See Obama as Strongest Candidate,” the presenter asked a guest: “*The Washington Times* mentioned that a large number of Americans have begun naming their children Barack Obama ... in your opinion, does this reflect the influence of Obama’s personality on American society, especially women?” The guest answered:

15 Talhat Jibril, “Barack Obama and Us,” http://sacdo.com/web/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=3122.

16 Ibid.

Barack Obama will have made history whether he wins or loses the elections. As a man of African origin, whose father was Muslim, who challenged all those negative factors within American society, it will be said about him that he maintained his charismatic personality as well as his attractiveness, his grace, and his wonderfully fluent, spontaneous style. Obama is close to both hearts and minds, and I think that I salute him more than anyone else in the world of politics.¹⁷

When the presenter asked about Hillary Clinton, he drew a largely negative image of her, claiming that she has not reached the hearts of Americans in the way that Obama had.

In stark contrast, the Arab media has painted a picture of McCain as both harsh and unyielding. In an article on Al-Jazeera's website, McCain was described the following way:

A self-confident person, hot-headed to a certain extent, having preferred violent sports such as boxing and wrestling in his childhood. Aging and married into a wealthy family, he is notorious for his erratic temper and his harsh criticism of the presidents, his colleagues in the US Senate, and the leadership of the religious right. Above all, he is known for being an independent figure, ready to stand against all the members of his party in the Senate if need be.¹⁸

Despite the positive image that many Arab opinion-makers have of Obama, many also feel that he will have difficulty being elected. In an article in *Al-Watan*, Abdul Malek Salman argues that there is no chance the world can escape from the despair it has experienced during the past eight years under the Republican administration.¹⁹ Salman describes the two terms of President Bush as "the lean years," wherein:

Hatred for American policy increased around the world, thanks to the policies of arrogance and haughtiness that the Bush administration, influenced by the neo-conservatives from the Zionist Christian Republican Right, followed, as well as imperialist military attacks launched under the banner of the war on terror ... After all this, the world was looking forward to the end of this dark era in American policy with the

17 Program transcript at: <http://www.alarabiya.net/programs/2008/02/28/46247.html>.

18 Alaa Bayoumi, "Who Doesn't Like John McCain?" *Al Jazeera*, February 5, 2008, <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/22D7DE19-58D9-4BFC-81D0-17F132D0AA7F.htm>.

19 Abdul Malek Salman, "Why Are American Elections Causing Frustration Around the World?" *Al-Watan* (Oman), April 1, 2008.

election of a new president who would reexamine the aggressive policies abroad that the Bush administration carried out.²⁰

Salman, like many other journalists in the Arab world, argues that change in administrations will not necessarily result in a change in American policy toward the Middle East, saying:

All the indicators from the presidential battle so far within the Republican and Democratic parties suggest that hopes for change are dwindling, and the Bush's administration's hated policies ... appear as if they could extend in one form or another beyond the end of Bush's term ... This incites worry, annoyance, and frustration around the world, because it does not seem like the American elections will bring about the long-awaited change.²¹

Salman cites a number of "realistic" indicators for his prediction that the United States will not experience a drastic transformation, such as McCain winning the Republican nomination after crushing his competitors, as well as the ongoing division within the Democratic Party. Salman suggests that the drawn-out Democratic nomination process will hamper the party's eventual candidate in the general elections.

Despite McCain's long political experience, Salman suggests, the candidate's "views concerning the War on Terror revealed a shocking ignorance of its workings, a lack

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of knowledge that may well cause him to institute random, unconsidered policies that will threaten world security and stability."²² Salman further says that if McCain wins, "The confused and conceited policies that constitute the Bush administration's foreign policy and approach to the War on Terror, from which the Arab and Islamic world, not to mention the world at large, suffered heavily, would

be likely to continue, prolonging the era of Bush's hated policies in some form."²³

In this framework, Salman criticizes efforts to portray Obama as merely a black man with an Islamic background, labeling this approach of discrediting a candidate as a confirmation that America has not overcome the problem of "racial discrimination

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

in its mentality and social practices.”²⁴

Some writers have been content to lower Arab expectations for change to a simple change of administrations, regardless of prospective shifts in policy. In an article on the “Islam Memo” website, Mohammed Lafi Al-Jibrini states, “If the Arab world rejoiced with the defeat of George H.W. Bush in the 1992 elections, just as Asians celebrated the departure of Nixon, then there is no doubt that the world will feel more relieved regardless of who is coming.”²⁵

American society: still discriminatory

Many Arab opinion articles jumped on the elections as a chance to affirm that American society has not yet shed the specter of discrimination, whether religious or ethnic. Negative portrayals of Obama, then, are not just components of the Clinton and McCain campaigns, but also evidence of wrong-headed U.S. attitudes. Arab sympathy for Obama must be viewed in this context. Al-Jibrini, for instance, highlights the continuity of anti-black sentiment in the United States, noting that the history of U.S. racism “is not yet over, despite the wars that America has waged all over the world under the pretext of human rights.”²⁶

In light of American racism, Arab commentators are willing to forgive Obama for taking stances that Arabs decry when they are taken by other U.S. politicians. This discrepancy is the result of a faulty assumption: that Obama’s race handicaps him, demanding that he take seemingly “safe” positions on controversial issues like U.S. support for Israel. Last year, Arab blogger Amr al-Ghareeb posted a letter to Obama in which he offered the candidate advice on how to negate criticism and mitigate rumors being spread about him.²⁷ The letter reads like a satirical laundry-list of reliable U.S. political moves, sure to assuage fears about Obama’s priorities:

- “1. Make a quick surprise visit to Israel and give a speech before the Knesset wearing a Jewish skullcap (like [former U.S. President] Bill Clinton). Vow to protect Israel as a Jewish state and to support its right to rebuild the Holy Temple.

2. From Israel, take that day’s El-Al flight to the Danish capital of Copenhagen and give an exclusive interview to *Jyllands-Posten* on the role of freedom of expression

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Mohammed Lafi Al-Jibrini, “Behind Every White Woman is a Black Man: Uncle Tom from the Cabin to the Doorstep of the White House...and No More!” January 21, 2008, <http://www.islammemo.cc>

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Amr al-Ghareeb, “Dear Barack Obama: The Solution for You,” <http://news.maktoob.com/forum/news6638/>

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in national progress. Don't forget to show how pleased you were with the caricatures (which Muslims hate).

3. From Copenhagen, head for the British capital London to meet the writer ... Salman Rushdie. During a joint press conference, ask him to read selections from his famous book *The Satanic Verses* and keep a copy of the book.
4. From London, head south to the Italian capital of Rome and then to the Republic of the Vatican to see the Pope. During the press conference that you will hold with the Pope, mention that you were influenced by his comments on Islam, and that he 'opened your eyes' to the truth about this religion, and that you wish you had been among those attending this historic lecture.
5. From Rome, head to the Indian capital New Delhi and announce your support for India getting a permanent seat in the [UN] Security Council. Acknowledge India's right to the Jammu and Kashmir region, and voice your concern about the negative influence of Islamic terrorism in Pakistan and Afghanistan on security for our Indian brothers.
6. After returning from this successful trip (and before changing your clothes), ask your wife Michelle to call the Somali writer Ayaan Hirsi Ali to get to know her and invite her – as a warrior against Islam – to speak at a forum entitled 'Women in Islam: Oppressed, Subjugated, or Dominated?' that Michelle can organize in cooperation with the American Enterprise Institute and the Rotary Club and that Fox News can sponsor.
7. Personally call the head of the Zionist organization AIPAC [American Israel Public Affairs Committee] ... Congratulate him on the great work the organization does to strengthen American-Israeli relations, and express your desire to be a regular speaker at AIPAC's activities.
8. Avoid any contact with the Islamic organization CAIR (at least until the elections are over) and turn down any invitation to speak at CAIR activities with the excuse that you're too busy with your electoral campaign.
9. Hire a law firm (preferably one whose founders are of Jewish origin) to raise a defamation suit against any newspaper or website which claims – or even hints

– that you're Muslim, not Christian, and demand from the defendants compensation for the terrible moral damage that this accusation has caused for you and the members of your Christian family.

10. If you feel that the previous steps did not succeed in killing off the rumor, you have to use the final solution. Announce an expanded press conference, saying that you need to come clean before the American people and confess the complete truth. The fools will think that you're going to admit that you're Muslim, but at the press conference you announce that you're gay, that your marriage was just a cover for your real identity, and then declare that you had a sexual relationship with Republican candidate John McCain!"

Though al-Ghareeb is obviously being facetious, the underlying point is unmistakably serious. That is, American society cannot shake off its lingering suspicions of African origins and blackness, and any candidate tainted by these qualities must compensate with strong support for Israel and championship for anti-Islamic causes. In other words, the blogger is suggesting that moderation within American society means opposition to Islam and Muslims.

Along the same lines, on the "Modern Discussion" website, an article by Ahmad Sukarno Abdul Hafeez points out that African-Americans, women and non-Protestants still suffer from discrimination in American society and the American political system, despite the country's grandiose claims in this regard. As Abdul Hafeez writes:

Since the founding of the American state in 1776 they have called their country a melting pot, meaning that the origins of this country's population melt and completely fuse ... [R]eality, however, shows that this fusion was incomplete, with populations of African or Latino origins living in separated neighborhoods of American cities. Anyone who does not believe this should go to Harlem in New York City, the Latino neighborhoods in California, or the Cuban districts in Florida. Americans also never hesitate to call their country 'the land of opportunity,' though reality suggests that these opportunities are available to only Protestant men of Anglo-Saxon origin. The evidence for this is that all 43 American presidents have been Protestant men except for one Catholic man, 35th President John Kennedy (1961-1963).²⁸

28 Ahmad Sukarno Abdul Hafeez, "Barack Obama and the American Elections," *Modern Discussion*, number 2186, Feb. 9, 2008, <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=124325>.

After he asserts that Obama has “returned hope to the Americans” and represents an important opportunity for American society to be rid of these problems of discrimination, Abdul Hafeez ends by asking a question: “Will Barack Obama win the Democratic nomination, or will racism and intolerance prevent that?” ■