

**“The Democratic Congress
and U.S. policies for Iraq and the Middle East.”
Panel Discussion January 22, 2007.**

With **Sam Wells**, Associate Director of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars; **Alexandre Adler**, editorialist and experts on geopolitics; **Gilles Andréani**, adjunct professor at the University Panthéon-Assas Paris II, former head of the Strategic planning office.

Moderation: **Lise Hartman du Fouchier**, Member of the *Directoire* of the French-American-Foundation – France and former US Congressional staffer specializing in Proliferation and Defense and Foreign Policy issues.

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Samuel Wells said that the Democratic Party is divided on whether confronting or not the Republicans; some want to do little beyond holding hearings to underline that mistakes were made; others want to try to cut off funding for the continuation of the war. What is a common aspiration though is that all Democrats feel the need for some action to respond to the voter’s desire for ending the war.

According to him, it is likely that the House and the Senate will try to pass a nonbonding resolution expressing disapproval of the surge. However, we have to wait until the Defense Supplemental Appropriation comes up for hearings and a vote in late February/early March. Even if John Murtha, the defense subcommittee of House Appropriations, feels more strongly than ever about withdrawal, and is in a strong position to accomplish something, only the facts on the ground will determine how far the Democrats will go and how many Republicans will join them.

The situation is blurry enough to have Congressmen making surprising moves, for instance Senator Sam Brownback opposing the President’s call for increased troop strength and a new clear-and-hold strategy. However, as the situation is today, the most likely action is that the Congress will put conditions on parts of the Supplemental as a message of disapproval. The problem for Democrats is that they cannot force Bush to change strategy without becoming partly responsible for the war. This is something they do not want, as they want to win a mandate for change both at home and overseas in 2008.

In this context, Bush approach has changed. In his speech of January 10th Bush has moved a good distance toward realism: he did not try to state that the situation was improving on the ground, he admitted some mistakes and took responsibility for them. Moreover, he has also changed most of his top team for Iraq policy because he admits not being satisfied with the course of events.

Bush is really concerned about his legacy, and he knows it is tied up with the Iraq war outcome: he wants it to be a clear success. This determination is going through the use of all

military tools at hands that Bush. For instance, in the next few weeks, we should be seeing a widespread use of the Special Forces.

Whether the new policy will hold or not is going to depend on the events on the ground:

If there is a reduction in violence and deaths, he will certainly push ahead. If a major attack against the US were to be a success (for instance a bombing in the Green Zone, which is not unthinkable, or large troops deaths) it would make the U.S. position more fragile, and this could lead to a U.S. reduction in exposure.

About Syria and Iran, Samuel Wells underlined that, unlike the recommendations from the Baker-Hamilton Report that stated Syria and Iran should be engaged politically in order to deal regionally with the Iraqi problem, President Bush, in his January 10 speech only declared threats to Syria and Iran; there is also some tension between the U.S. forces on the ground and Iran, as for instance the attack of the Iranian consulate in Erbil can show.

Sam Wells advocated that the prospects for an improvement of the situation are bleak: the inadequate level of forces on the ground in Iraq. The generally accepted level to tackle efficiently an insurgency is of 1 combat trooper for 50 residents (figure from the US manual on counterinsurgency. Today in Iraq, overall (combat and not-combat troops) the ration is of 1 U.S. trooper for 120 people in Baghdad and 1 for 500 people outside Baghdad: this is not promising for the future. Moreover, disengagement, as there is no talk with Iran and Syria, and no sustained Middle East peace process, is not a viable option right now. On the other hand, the option of having U.S. forces embedded in the country is also misleading: U.S. forces will be in command, and all Iraqis would unite to oppose this. As a result, tension will be higher on both sides, leading to more deaths, for which, unluckily enough, only the U.S. would be blamed.

A problem, Sam Wells defended, is that none of the Bush initiatives in the Middle East are succeeding, be it the Iranian nuclear Program, the cooperation from Syria on Iraq and Lebanon, or the containment of Hezbollah and Hamas. In order to succeed on all those issues, he should be reversing the steam.

Sam supports the idea that a last problem Bush is facing today is the presence of Al-Malaki as Prime Minister in Iraq. Bush publicly states that he supports Al-Malaki and that his job is to “give confidence to Al-Malaki”. However nobody in Washington thinks you should have any confidence in him: he has often worked against U.S. interests, even though, paradoxically enough, he is the one having completely in his hands the outcome of the US policy in Iraq. The Democrats, among all, do not see a clear reason why President Bush keeps backing him.

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Gilles Andréani defends the idea that many in Europe thinks the Democratic victory in both the chambers of Congress means the political debate will orbit towards the center again. This is seen as a positive shift, as it is for Europeans a sign that their influence is going to increase. However, according to him, nothing could be more wrong: Bush has not changed his strategy at all, and decided not to follow the recommendations made by the Iraq study Group (the Baker-Hamilton report.)

Mr. Andréani, however, argues that it is true the Baker-Hamilton report comes too late. The Baker-Hamilton report, in a nutshell says: the Americans will not reach their objectives in Iraq; the Americans should prepare their pull out while making sure they make their losses as small as possible These recommendations would have been made three years ago, but today it is too late.

Mr. Andréani is not convinced either that a dialogue with Iran or Syria could help improve the situation in Iran. Since the bombing of the Samara Mosque, the estrangement between Shiites and Sunnis is such, that no easy solution could be worked through by a simple increased dialogue with Iran, notwithstanding the fact that Iran does not want so far this dialogue to take place.

In this context, what are the reaction and attitudes of the Europeans? First of all, Europeans are divided. Some have troops on the ground, other, like France, may feel they have managed to stay away from the situation in Iraq. However All the European countries will keep on asking the USA to grasp the Middle Eastern problem by not only focusing on Iraq, but by also dealing with Iran, or Israel, all the more as the democratic victory seems to induce the U.S might be more open to multilateralism that it was before.

However, it is uncertain those queries from the Europeans will have many effects:

Iran does not want to change its policies, and the USA and Israel will certainly not stay put. Ahmadinejad will not pause in his quest for a nuclear weapon.

On the Israeli-Palestinian issue, the Europeans are not doing enough. They should speak louder to be heard, and take more responsibilities in order to find a solution.

According to Mr. Andréani, the fact that Democrats have been elected will not change anything. As a matter of fact, on the last summer's war on Lebanon, the Democrats had exactly the same position as the Bush administration.

As a conclusion, Mr. Andréani sees few reasons to hope soon for amelioration in the region, and fears a degradation of the regional context may lead to an armed confrontation with Iran. In this hypothesis, it is not sure Europe will be on the American side, given the past tensions on Iraq, it is possible the European countries would choose not to participate to a military operation against Iran.

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Alexandre Adler took on the difficult task for a French commentator of defending George Bush choices (even though he made clear he was also going to give a few negative analysis oft some of his policies.)

After 9/11, America (and more generally, the West) was at odds on a vast number of issues, which asked for reaction.

Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) and most of the military were implicated in the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Many in Saudi Arabia were backing Al-Qaida. However, the Saudi Monarchy and Pakistan were great allies of the USA during the cold war. As a result, as well as for several other reasons, no war could possibly be waged on them. Saddam Hussein, on the contrary, was the perfect victim. Since the first gulf war, some work was left unfinished; Saddam Hussein financed the Palestinians and the Taleban; finally, he was also the sole Arab leader to rejoice publicly for 9/11.

For Mr. Adler, the invasion of Iraq was positive:

- It is true that what the USA has instituted in Iraq is not a Norwegian-Style Democracy. However, at the end of the day, it restored 60% Shiites and 15% Kurds there civil rights.
- It has had positive effects on Libya. Thank to Iraq, Libya felt it had to stop its nuclear program in order not to follow the same track.

- It has led to the independence of Lebanon: without the collapse of the Saddam regime, never would have Syria withdrawn from Lebanon.
- Finally, it forced Pakistanis to make more effort in their fight against terrorism, which led to the arrest of Abdul Qadeer Khan.

It is true however we cannot call what has been achieved in Iraq a success. It is nonetheless a standing defeat for Arab nationalism. Indeed, today in Iraq, the Shiites feels Shiites first, and Arab second, if not Arab at all. This is the beginning of a great revolution in the Middle East.

About Iran, Alexandre Adler feels that what is happening in Iraq is also a problem for Ahmadinejad. Extreme Sunnis and extreme Shiites may ally, and create a new political force to deal with. Ahmadinejad is also facing contestation within his own country: the Iranian official press, not only the political opponents, ridiculed his tour in Latin America, which hints to the building of a real coalition of opponents. Moreover, Iran has to deal with a situation where many countries of the region are becoming in favor of the USA. Even in Syria, even though they would never state it publicly, many top officials are backing the USA. Saudi-Arabia is relying on the U.S. troops to fight in Iraq, as upheaval in Iraq could be a threat to the political stability of Saudi-Arabia.

To conclude this pledge for the Bush policies in Iraq, Alexandre Adler contends that this was part of the war on terrorism that has shown pretty effective, with more than 50% of the Al Qaida top persons now under American custody.

However, this positive appraisal of Bush's work should not hide that there are some negative points. For instance, it is true Cheney and Rumsfeld made a really bad job by scoring a few 'cold war' goals. The U.S. encirclement of Russia only had negative effects, with restrictions put on the Russian democracy and for instance the fall of Youkos. The policy led by Powell was much more effective.

nevertheless, overall, what will always be true, according to Alexandre Adler, is that any president that would have had to face Iraq in 2003 would have had to make decisions over it, as Iraq could not stay as it was. Maybe there were some problems in the way the political decisions were implemented. However, Bush was right to go there, and he fears that now, with the Democrats back, we may come to counterproductive policies which would led to surrender most of the time, when the needs would be to fight back.

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Questions and Answers.

What do you think about the role of Dick Cheney today in the American Government?

Sam Wells: Dick Cheney is very much still in office. His position is not really weakened, though it is true that with his former chief of Staff (Libby)'s trial that has begun, and a series of other backlashes, he will certainly be less able to reach out to the Media.

Alexandre Adler: Plus, Al Gates, the new Secretary of defense is not what you would call a really good friend of his.

How can the attitudes of Europe towards the USA be characterized today?

Alexandre Adler: European governments can alleviate the pressure on the USA. That is for instance the case with NATO in Afghanistan, where Europe gets more and more responsibilities, allowing the US to dedicate to other scenes of battle. It is also true about anti-

terrorism. The cooperation has increased, not decreased with the US. 2/3 of the German navy is for instance today in the Indian Ocean to back the strategic moves of the USA. France also plays an active role, and cooperation is the rule with the USA, which also compromise with France's objective, for instance on Lebanese independence from Syria.

Question to Gilles Andréani: the USA will not stand aside on Iran. Will Europe?

Gilles Andréani: there is no question the USA will go as far as it has to (intervention) if it feels it has to in Iran. The real key issue is the timeline: How long do we have, and what military options are on the table? I don't have any idea about that: estimates that are made today are based on old assessments.

There is a window of opportunity on the American Side. I would not be surprised if a man of conviction like George W. Bush would decide to solve the problem himself rather than leaving it to his successor. If a military intervention has to happen, this could even happen during the last year of his mandate. This is all speculative, but what is certain is that what the U.S. will do will depend on what the Iranian will do. Apart from that, it is difficult to foresee where it will be going, even though the path taken today (the Iranian stand off about UN sanctions) is a dangerous one.

Question to Samuel Wells: US Congress does not want to own Iraq, but if the surge gets early successes, will Democrats come up with a Plan B?

Samuel Wells: there is no real Democratic Plan B. the fact is, there is no real agreement among the Democratic leaders in the Congress, because there are too many Key democratic Players that have presidential agenda. They then need to differentiate, which hinders any possibility to find a common ground between them. They would need to sacrifice their personal ambition to the good of the country. I fear this will not happen.

Question to Alexandre Adler: is the Shia Revolution in Iraq a good thing?

Alexandre Adler: the Shiites are not liberal. We see them as such here in Europe, because they appear as a minority. This is the result of a general thinking scheme. We, particularly in France, have the feeling protestants are liberals because they are a minority; and it is true in France, the protestants have grasped and pushed forward most of the liberal issues. However, when we say protestants are liberals, we think of the French, not the Orange militias in Northern Ireland, the Apartheid hardliners or the one living in the Bible Belt...

However, there is a common historic thread: Reform generally brings liberalism. In that sense, the Shia upheaval could be a good thing.

There are three positive key points for which the Shia surge is a good thing:

First, in Shia Islam, there is the liberty of the commentary, meaning religious leaders have autonomy of the interpretation of the Quran. Ayatollahs in Iran are permitted to have opposite ideas.

Second, in Egypt, a Sunni country, the elite is pro-west. However, the people are widely anti-west. The Shia Iran is different: a lot of people think positively of the West, when only the religious elite and the current political men in charge are against it.

Third, the Shiite Iran will have to deal with the USA. Indeed, the USA allowed them for the first time since the 16th century to recover access to Nadjaf and Kerbala, two of the main

Shiite pilgrimage locations. If they want to keep access to them, they will have to negotiate on the Nuclear weapons. They can have either of them, but not both of them.

In the past, discussions between Washington and Iran were open. They can be open again, but Ahmadinejad has to be liquidated. With him at the helm, a reopening of negotiation will never happen. As he aims for having nuclear weapons, his aim is to continue with a major crisis. That is a choice the Iranian people should make, and they will certainly not make the same decision were they given the choice.

Alexandre Adler said what happened in Lebanon, Libya... were positive results, which stemmed from the U.S. policies in the region. Do you really think that is a fair statement when, for instance, we know negotiation with Libya had begun even before Bush was elected? You also said that 'christian traitors' were supporting Hezbollah in Lebanon. I take it you were referring to Aoun: Do you think that is fair?

Gilles Andréani: to me, there was no virtue to the War in Iraq. It did not favor the West's hand. Iraq had no effect on softening Libya. In Syria, this is a bit different. Bashar El-Assad was not always in the past a convincing leader. Many Syrians perceived the fact of letting Americans get to the door of Syria as a sign of weakness. However, it is true that given what had happened in Iraq, he was given a staunch warning that he had crossed a bridge too many.

Sam Wells: About Libya, my understanding is that the British had the lead on the negotiations, and were close to an agreement when Iraq invasion began. The Bush administration only used the political ambiance to make the Libyan negotiation appear as if they were a direct result of their invasion of Iraq.

I'm taking the chance of having the speech to add one word about Iran. About Iran, I would agree with almost all that Alexandre Adler said. I would just point out that, when it is true many moderate Iranians are in favor of an opening of negotiation, I am not sure they will be able to get round the iron fist of the Republican Guard. Ahmadinejad might be a thug as Alexandre Adler would say, but he is surrounded by a lot of other thugs. Moreover, thanks to the money coming from oil, he is able to implement a populist internal policy that gives him internally good ratings, especially on international matters. Finally, the fact that Bush fails to understand the subtleties of Iran and always take Ahmadinejad to his words does not help.

There are many concerns among anti-Bush people that Bush and other Republicans surrounding him will go ahead with striking Iran if constraints do not work. There should be in the coming months tiny incidents in Iran maybe because of US secret services checking the vulnerability of different sites for potential strikes.

Alexandre Adler: Negotiation with Libya did not begin with Bush, but if the US had decided to stay put in Iraq, nothing would have happened in Libya. Syria has been looting Lebanon for 20 years. If Syria was kicked out, it is because they were frightened by what the USA did in Iraq. Bashar El-Assad is a much better person than his father, and the fact he is being besieged is well understood by him. About Michel Aoun. Yes, I call him a traitor, he made his career by opposing Syria, and now he begs for their returns and allied with Hezbollah. It is a common accepted fact that he sold himself to the Syrians.

Two questions: why does Congress fail to talk about Iran? And Malaki is always depicted negatively... Is he really an idiot?

Sam Wells: The Congress speaks a lot about Iran. The problem is the White House monopolizes the speech, and you cannot hear a thing of what the Congress is saying.

Malaki was never the choice of the USA; we had another candidate in line, but we could not show publicly our support. Malaki is a compromised person, and not a strong personality.

Adler: and he has a Sunni wife.

Sam wells: he has a Sunni wife, and he is compromised, the truth is, we will never get to the point where we will be able to deal with senior Iraqis and we dealt with senior Vietnamese.

If you were elected president tomorrow, how would you pull out the US troops while avoiding a bloodbath? We talked a lot about ethnicity and religion here, but are we not forgetting to quickly the economic matters, and the central role of oil in the region?

Gilles Andréani: the U.S. came to Iraq to overthrow the Baathist regime. Is there anything more the US could do there? I do not think so. The Hamilton-Baker solution is the most realistic answer to your questions. The Economic matters are key to the problems in Iraq, however we tend to focus on a number of other factors, forgetting some. Nationalism is also disregarded, and that is a mistake.

Sam Wells: the Iraq Study Group was an unsatisfactory hybrid; however, if there is need for tough battle in Iraq, in ought to be one by the Iraqis themselves; this is the only solution for battle to be less bloody. The 80% solution leaves the mandate of working it out in the hands of the Kurds and the Shia. The US should tell them to find a solution while it pulls out his troops, providing help in the implementation of the decisions taken in case those decisions are seen as positive. If it does think the solutions given are bad, they should just quit.

The thing is the US must give the impression they will not stay for decades. I am in favor of a relatively organized pull out, within a matter of years, not decades.

Alexandre Adler: War is not on Iraq but on terrorism. This war is concentrated today in one part of the World, and this is the Middle East. The intervention created major upheavals of Islamic states. However, that does not imply that not having done anything would have had brought more positive results. This war on terrorism will last 5 to 10 years. That is a new situation full of hopes and full of horrors. The likely solution is between the “always stay option” and the “pull out totally right now” one. The US should make a very short commitment to Iraq Stability, Iran and Saudi-Arabia should come to an agreement. The USA has to be in favor of the Shia, which is good, as Iran is Shia, and on the long term, I am sure Iran will become a strategic ally of the US.

Moqtada Al-Sadr however has to become the main target. Hitting him will give the Sunni the proof America is neutral as far as the Sunni-Shia conflict is concerned.

If that is achieved, and the US can improve the situation in Baghdad, the UX will be able to withdraw within 1 to 1.5 year, redeploying their forces in Qatar, Emirates, but NOT in Saudi-Arabia. A truce between Shia and Sunni could then be possible.

If all this can be achieved within 2 to 3 years, it will truly help the war on terrorism and will bring the 9/11 allies together again.

What would have been the negative effects of not invading Iraq?

Alexandre Adler: Most of the people who opposed the war on Iraq opposed Afghanistan invasion too (*all other panelists disagree*)... Not invading Iraq would have been a sign of weakness from the US, a proof that it was unwilling to confront its duty in the war on terrorism. Moreover, a lot of money was going from Iraq to the Palestinian Intifada and a bit also to the Taleban. If they had not invaded Iraq, the U.S. would have been more unable to withstand another attack against them: the whole question is to know if preemption is legitimate or not. I think it is.