

Views from the Persian Gulf on Election Day – Nov. 2008

I had not been in Saudi Arabia for 30 years, so I was delighted to have the opportunity to return with a Pennsylvania trade mission on behalf of a client. Unfortunately, I had to depart on Oct. 30 before the Nov. 4 elections. Yet the real plus was that I would be able to measure personally the reactions of the Saudis themselves on the results, as well as of additional contacts in Bahrain and Kuwait during the same visit. Thus on the 30th, I flew from Philadelphia to Frankfurt to Riyadh on a 20-hour ride. Spam in a can, as far as I'm concerned.

Pennsylvania's representative in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia did a superb job of making appointments for all the mission members (I had almost 20 meetings), and I developed my own schedules in Bahrain and Kuwait. After talking business, I always worked in a few questions about our American elections.... Did you follow the debates? How effective was Senator Clinton during the primaries? What do you think of a woman VP? How about a President whose middle name is Hussein? Do you trust the Democrats to offer real protection in the Gulf? Is the region still receptive to U.S. investment?

Admittedly some of the contacts in all three countries ducked any and all questions. This was not illogical, since no one wanted to offend me in some unpredictable manner or to appear ignorant. Nevertheless, before the election itself as well as after, there was almost always the delicate comment that the USA might benefit from a change in its international policies. Residents of the Persian Gulf are sensitive to American military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and nervous about any American senior executive comments about Iran. Moreover, these residents of many nationalities, religious convictions and educational levels follow closely our policies and our actions concerning Israel and Palestine, a situation whose equitable resolution for all remains the key block to restoring U.S. credibility in the region especially for Muslims.

Although actions do speak louder than words, all Middle Easterners are accustomed to a lot of chatter and hype from their own governments; they read the coffee grounds incessantly for meaning from their own leaders and also from any American President. President-Elect Obama is being parsed, debated and analyzed by millions.

By the way, as a retired diplomat who worked on four continents during my career, I remain impressed with the depth of knowledge and degree of awareness plus curiosity which foreign business leaders have in the USA, much more than U.S. business leaders have in their own overseas markets. Many of these Americans whom I briefed officially inside the Embassy just wanted to get the deal, and move onto the next opportunity. They failed frequently in their attempts, often because they were indifferent to local issues.

After the Nov. 4th election and the results were clear, it was easier for my Gulf connections to react to my probing. There was clear satisfaction with the change of administration, but frequently a faint longing for George Herbert Walker Bush. I sensed a desire for Gary Cooper and John Wayne, with the U.S. Cavalry quietly arriving to put

things right without a lot of fuss, shock and awe, an image that the USA used to have, rightly or wrongly.

What did gratify me enormously but sadly was the implicit hope that the USA would return to its core values of fairness, trustworthiness, competence and honor which Muslims, Christians and Jews of the Middle East believe we have moved willfully away from. Nevertheless, I confirm that the United States has remained that beacon in the storm, still retaining an astonishing ability to inspire a better world. A Saudi Arabian journalist with the “Arab News” summed up the case neatly by stating, “If there is great power in the United States, it does not come from the military or Wall Street but from the hundreds of millions of people living in freedom empowered with a voice and, as important, the information to let their will be known. “

We Americans must honor that democratic and peaceful vision, especially given the incompetent meltdown of Wall Street as well as the huge cost in blood and wealth of maintaining the U.S. military at war in two countries.

The Obama/Biden bumper stickers I gave away in discrete moments were the ideal gift... colorful, uniquely American and confirmation of the optimistic spirit which gave birth to the USA and which can sustain us and our international friends in the harsh months ahead. My Gulf contacts mentioned the erratic price of oil, apparent American weakness, rising global competition and environmental concerns as the latest issues which U.S. leadership will have to confront, presumably and ideally with the collaboration of other nations in order to have any hope of solving them collectively. If ever the USA is the first among equals, it is in today's complicated and interdependent world.

In sum, it was a great trip, reconnecting me with the latest global views of the Persian Gulf while identifying potential clients for my own business. I encourage all of you international travelers to take the pulse of your local contacts on your next trip overseas. And then please share that with us on your return. My thanks in advance.

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