



Looking to the Horizon

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Brent Scowcroft on American interests in the Middle East

By Nicholas Tatsis

Now the founder and president of a major international consulting firm, Lt. General Brent Scowcroft (Ret.) remains one of the most venerable figures in America's foreign policy establishment. Gen. Scowcroft served as National Security Advisor to Presidents Gerald Ford and George H. W. Bush. Renowned for his coolheaded demeanor and strategic insight, Scowcroft recently sat down for a phone interview with the HPR.

Harvard Political Review: To what extent has Iran been a strategic beneficiary of America's invasion of Iraq and its subsequent dismantling of Saddam Hussein's Government?

Brent Scowcroft: Well, I don't think there's any question that Iran has been a beneficiary of our activities in the Middle East. First of all, one of their principal adversaries has been Iraq. They fought a seven-year war in the 1980s against an Iraqi invasion; we removed that enemy. In the East, the Taliban had been very hostile to Iran. The Taliban are fundamentally a Sunni movement, and, Iran, of course, is a Shiite-movement. We have removed their enemies on both sides, so it's not surprising that they would be feeling better about their situation in the region.

HPR: Staying in the Middle East, but moving to Arab-Israeli relations: Saudi Arabia's 2002 peace plan, which was unanimously endorsed by the Arab League, promises official diplomatic recognition of Israel, provided that Israel fully withdraw from the lands it captured in the 1967 War. Do you think it would be wise for President-elect Obama to urge Israel to accept this plan? And, how much emphasis should the next President put on mediating Arab-Israeli relations, and addressing the issue of Palestinian statehood?

BS: I think the Arabs have recently reiterated that offer. It is an important part of any peace process, and it was the one thing that was missing in President Clinton's efforts. The Arab states were not behind Arafat. He was all by himself there. Now, they're behind a settlement. I happen to think that the Palestinian peace process is one of the most critical issues for a new President to focus on, because it is, in a psychological sense, key to the entire region. Not everybody is concerned about the issue of the Palestinians, but all of the Muslim world is concerned about what they think is a fundamental injustice the United States is supporting in the region. So psychologically, it would be a big boost. It would also turn the psychological atmosphere against Iran, which is now on the offensive, because it would steal the thunder of Hezbollah, Hamas, and it would get the Arabs back in

support of U.S. principles in the Middle East. So, I think it's one of the critical elements of the foreign policy the new President needs to pursue.

HPR: You served as the national security advisor in two different presidential administrations, and, from what I understand, the advisor's role is to sometimes act as an honest broker, weighing and balancing different foreign policy options among different figures in the administration. Could you speak a little bit about how you did this?

BS: Well, the role of the National Security Advisor depends heavily on what the President wants it to be. And each administration has been just a little bit different. But in the first Bush administration, the President really wanted two things. He did want me to be the honest broker—that is, to bring issues together with the points of view of all of the participants for his consideration. Now, in order to do that, you have to have the confidence of all of the members of the National Security Council that you will represent their views honestly. If not, the system breaks down.

The other thing that President Bush wanted was an independent source of advice. And, so, separately, the National Security Advisor provides that, but he has to be distinguished as a separate source of advice, and one the President should consider with all the others. So it's a complicated personality of trust exercise to make it work right.

HPR: You serve as the Chairman of the American-Turkish Council. In 2005, the House of Representatives briefly considered a resolution that would “commemorate the Armenian Genocide.” Normative judgments aside, would this resolution have harmed the United States' strategic and commercial interests in Turkey?

BS: Yes, it would have. The Armenian Genocide Resolution is very neuralgic with the Turks. It was considered again in 2007, and was actually reported out of the House Foreign Affairs Committee to the House, but the House did not take it up.

The resolution has no practical impact. It seeks merely to describe the terrible events of 1915, which took place in the course of World War I in that region, as a genocide. Whether it was or it wasn't is a matter of definition. The Turks have offered to submit all of the records of those events to an independent historical panel, and they're willing to abide by the results. That seems to me a reasonable way to resolve it.

But it's a political issue in the United States, and the Armenian Diaspora pushes it very hard, so I think that it is a very live issue. Its passage would do great psychological harm to U.S.-Turkish relations. The Turks are very solid allies, and we are very dependent on Turkey for logistic support for our activities in the Middle East.

HPR: Building off that point, Turkey is a very important American ally in the sense that it can affect proceedings in the oil-rich, more peaceful, Kurdish-dominated northern region of Iraq. But at the same time, Turkey's rival, Greece, served as an ally during the Cold War, especially since it was in the

Western Bloc. How can the United States best be seen as an honest broker between both of these nations?

BS: Of course they're both U.S. allies; they're both members of NATO. And in some respects, they cooperate as members of NATO. The main points of contention between them are their border in the Aegean Sea and the island of Cyprus, specifically the civil war there in 1974. It's very hard. We have been trying to be a facilitator of reconciliation there. The previous Secretary General, Kofi Annan, put out a plan for solving the Cyprus situation. There was a referendum on Cyprus. The Turkish part accepted it. The Greek part did not. Now both parts of Cyprus are in discussions again. Greek-Turkish relations are gradually improving and the governments of both nations are trying hard. We are friends of both, but it's very hard to be a peacemaker in this one.

"Looking to the Horizon" was mistakenly credited to Joey Michalakes in the print edition. The HPR regrets the error.