



Populist Islamists in Middle East Elections: Why We Get It Wrong

Introduction:

At a recent CNA event, an observer with extensive experience in the region argued that U.S. policy makers lack sufficient understanding of the populist Islamist milieu in the Middle East and fail to take into account the Islamists' long-term objectives and extended time frame. This is particularly evident in the context of national elections. The observer originally spoke on the basis of non-attribution but agreed that we might make limited distribution of his comments if we preserved his anonymity.

Remarks:

When looking at elections in the developing world, one should be cautious about applying the technical standards and assessments that we use in Western elections. This is particularly true about **the self-described “Camp of Resistance,” a group of populist Middle Eastern Islamists who are veterans of the activist movements of the past few decades. They view elections very differently than we do.**

For example, in late 2004 Iraqi leaders held a meeting in the resort town of Dokan which is under the control of Jalal Talibani's PUK. The purpose of the gathering was to work out a consensus regarding the Iraq national elections scheduled to take place in January 2005. The religious Iraqi Shiite politicians, with the blessing of Ayatollah Sistani, offered interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi a top slot in the United Iraqi Alliance, the main Shiite list. They offered him the possibility of becoming Prime Minister. It is my understanding that the Americans, who had appointed Allawi interim Prime Minister, advised him to turn it down. They didn't want Allawi to join the Iranian-sponsored list.

Abdul Aziz al-Hakim's SIIC party, backed by Iran and the clergy of Najaf, wanted to win the Iraqi national elections and they didn't care how they won. They even put Ahmed Chalabi on their list. They were convinced that their brand of Shiite Islamic politics would eventually come out on top in Iraq no matter with whom they partnered. They even invited the Kurds, to join the list. If SIIC built up its power base using Muqtada al-Sadr, that was acceptable as well. But SIIC preferred to build an alliance with Allawi and move toward the center rather than towards the extremes. Allawi might have rejected them any way, but the Americans wanted Allawi to run as head of his own list. They wanted a secular, liberal candidate to win the elections. Election funds were provided. Millions of dollars in TV ads were run on Arabic satellite channels but Iyad Allawi lost very badly and was relegated to the margins of Iraqi politics forever.

Meanwhile the Islamist Shiites, bolstered by Muqtada supporters and backed by Iran, won two big elections. Some time later, one of Abdul Aziz al-Hakim's deputies, a relative moder-

ate, told me that he would never forgive Allawi and the Americans for forcing them into a political alliance with Muqtada. He said, I wonder how history might have changed if we had had an alliance of relatively moderate Shiites and secular liberals?

I have often wondered why this strategic mistake took place. Why didn't the U.S. try to position its allies into the winning coalition, just as the Iranians did -- successfully as it turned out. The Americans may have convinced themselves that Allawi was going to win but that was short-sighted. The U.S. was playing a totally different game than the Iranians, with a totally different time span. Washington wanted a quick victory for Allawi, in the way that you get a decisive victory in a U.S. election, not thinking about what an all or nothing victory or defeat would mean a few years down the line. The Americans weren't considering long-term strategic implications, not thinking ahead a few steps.

There are now two different camps in the Middle East, one backed by the U.S. called the moderate Arabs and one which calls itself the "Camp of Resistance." This is the term that they use to describe themselves in conferences and meetings. It seems clear that **these two sides are playing totally different games with totally different time frames**. Another example: American officials in Baghdad and Washington were heartened that the secular Nouri al-Maliki's allies had won provincial elections in Iraq. This was construed as a great defeat for the Iranian-backed forces. I have known Nouri al-Maliki for years. He is part of the same populist Islamist wave in the Middle East that includes Hamas, the Islamic Party, Hezbollah, Iran. Al-Maliki has become his own man and is nobody's fool. For Iran, that is fine. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah is his own man too and that is fine as long as Iran sees him as one of them.

In the West, there is a misperception that Iran doesn't like al-Maliki. The truth is that Iran doesn't have to like al-Maliki. The Iranians don't mind which Shiite leads Iraq. It doesn't matter if he is not a prominent supporter of Tehran, as long as he's a Shiite and, as an added bonus, if he is pious and surrounded by an entourage of Farsi speaking deputies like the Da'wa party's Ali al- Adib who has spent long periods in Iran. As long as an Iraqi Shiite leader would not act against Iran's strategic interests in the long-term, the Iranians are willing to accept him.

Iran feels that it has consolidated its strategic objectives in Iraq for decades to come and the details of how that came about are not important. One election this way or that way in Iraq or Lebanon doesn't really matter to the Iranians. It's not important. Recently, the speaker of Iran's parliament, Ali Larijani, said that the United States has to play chess not boxing. I thought that was an interesting comment.

If we turn to Lebanon we see similar dynamics. In late 2006, there was an 18-month political crisis that began over a disagreement between the government and the Hezbollah-led opposition over whether Hezbollah should have a blocking minority in the Cabinet. There were other issues, but this was the main one: whether or not to establish consensus government. The Siniora government, apparently advised by the Americans, refused to buckle on this de-

mand. But the power vacuum which ensued served Hezbollah's interests well. Hezbollah fed off of the abnormal situation. They probably could have waited out the government until the end of time, quietly building up their support and armaments and patronage networks. Meanwhile, Lebanon's liberal forces became weaker, the economy suffered, the Lebanese middle class fled to the Persian Gulf. **This was a big miscalculation born of not considering, much less countering, the long-term strategic objectives of the other side.**

I think that this kind of mistake often leads to potentially dangerous miscalculations. Luckily, we haven't had a situation where there was hostile action taken on the basis of those miscalculations. During the May 2008 events in Lebanon, numerous analysts and political leaders in the U.S. and Europe were saying, "This is it. Hezbollah is going to perform a *coup d'etat* and take over Lebanon. We better get ready for this." At present, you again hear people say that if Hezbollah doesn't win the June 2009 election in Lebanon, they will take to the streets. I think they misunderstand the vision and time frame of Hezbollah and the Camp of Resistance. **Hezbollah is slowly and surely amassing weapons and political know-how. They are looking and planning far ahead. They don't care if they lose an election or two.** In the long run, it doesn't matter to them. Hezbollah can take its time more than the West can -- they don't have the same demands for transparency and accountability.

The strategic time frame of the populist Islamists doesn't always mean that they get it right. For example, earlier this year the fourth annual Conference on the Resistance took place in Tehran. The Conference on the Resistance is a forum for bashing Israel and the U.S. Despite the fact that there was a new administration in Washington, there was no new nuance, no olive branches, no outreach. They just spewed out the same slogans and fiery rhetoric typical of these events. It is the same with Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah. When he gives a speech, often times it is misinterpreted as a reaction to some news event. Most likely, it is not that at all. Nasrallah is simply giving one of his pre-set speeches for one of those cyclical holidays commemorating a Shiite martyr or a group of martyrs. That is because they are not thinking month to month or year to year. **They are operating on a multi-year calendar where policies, people, and slogans don't change quickly.** Very few in the West are familiar with the milieu of populist Islamists in the Middle East.

In Baghdad not long ago during the visit of Iranian President Ahmadinejad, at a certain point Ahmadinejad's entourage, al-Maliki's entourage, and al-Hakim's entourage were mingling on the stage and you couldn't tell them apart. They were all dressed in the same distinctive manner: no ties, shirts buttoned up, neatly trimmed three/four day beards. They all seemed to know each other. These are people who have been around for decades now. They have served lengthy prison sentences under Saddam, under the Shah, in Israeli prisons. They have been tortured. They have lost many close friends and relatives, they have slowly amassed power and understanding of the world -- everything from how to enrich uranium to how to manage a national budget. **They constitute a distinct strata of people and they are playing a very long-term game.** Precision strikes on Iranian nuclear sites -- it won't matter. They will just rebuild better and more underground next time. Destroy half of Lebanon as a deter-

rent against Hezbollah, maybe that will work for a few critical months, but they envision projecting their power and eventually taking on Israel over the course of decades.

I asked a Shiite cleric in Najaf once why he agreed to tolerate Muqtada al-Sadr who was such a loose cannon, so brash and dangerous, and power-hungry. The cleric replied: **“We’ve waited more than 1,000 years for this opportunity.** Eventually, Muqtada will burn himself out or mellow out. **Maybe it will take five years, maybe 20. We can wait.”**