

MEMO TO THE NEW PRESIDENT 890 words, taheri.doc 11/08

*Introduction by Si Frumkin:*

*Amir Taheri, formerly the executive editor of Iran's largest newspaper, is a frequently published contributor to foreign policy publications in Europe, Middle East and the U.S. In the November 2008 issue of "Commentary", his lengthy "Memo to the New President re: the Middle East" examines the risks and advantages that the U.S. will face in the Middle East – the region that contains two-thirds of the globe's known oil reserves and is the hub of terror, currently the scene of several wars and the area where the nations spend a greater proportion of their gross domestic product on armaments than anywhere else in the world.*

*Taheri's article sums up the dangers, lists the threats that should be addressed, mentions a number of favorable developments that took place during the past decade and reminds what remains to be done – topics that cannot be adequately covered in one editorial column but are readily accessible, for those who are interested, in "Commentary's" November issue. His summation and conclusions are, however, impressive enough to have moved me to reprint them here in somewhat abbreviated format.*

The next U.S. administration faces a daunting task in the Middle East. But consider again what it has to build on, and what clarifying advantages have accrued. As of January 2001, the U.S. political establishment still had no appreciation of the threat that was taking shape in the region. Sunni Salafi terrorists were regarded as weirdos engaged in criminal activities, to be stopped by the FBI. Democracy was thought of as a Western luxury that Muslims could not afford or did not need. The Khomeinist regime in Tehran was seen as an oddity, a system dominated by mullahs obsessed with beards and hijabs.

The new administration, by contrast, will not be walking blindly into a minefield. It will know, for instance, that the United States, whether it likes it or not, is still at war - and, in a sense, has been at war since 1979 when Khomeinist "students" raided the U.S. embassy in Tehran and held its diplo-

mats hostage. And it will know that the forces dedicated to killing Americans and challenging the United States' global leadership role cannot be placated but have to be confronted and ultimately defeated.

The next administration will also know that, as long as democracy is not established in the Middle East, the region will remain a source of threats to the West. Thus, democratization is an imperative of American national security. Fortunately, for the first time since the constitutional revolutions of Turkey and Iran in the early decades of the last century, it is also a live option in the Middle East itself. The small but growing constituency of genuine democrats that has emerged in virtually all states of the region, together with other moderate, conservative, and traditional but non-violent forces, could - if adequately supported by the United States - offer a real alternative to the despotic regimes that are the ultimate seedbeds of violent radicalism.

Democratization is all the more urgently needed because the Middle East risks becoming a center for nuclear proliferation - with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and maybe even Syria following Iran's drive to acquire an arsenal of atomic warheads. This could open the door in turn to what is known as "retail proliferation," with nuclear arms finding their way into the hands of terrorists across the globe.

In this connection, it is well to emphasize something else the next administration should know: namely, that the Israel-Palestinian issue, although of symbolic importance, is ultimately far from being the region's main problem. To the contrary, obsessive focus on this issue has served as a means of avoiding other, more pressing ones: misrule, fanaticism, economic underdevelopment, social and cultural oppression. These problems existed before Israel came into being and, unless they are solved, will continue to haunt the region and generate terrorism long after a Palestinian state appears or fails to appear on the map.

In short, as in the cold war between Western liberal democracy and Soviet totalitarianism, the fight in the Middle East is ultimately an ideological one. On the one side there is the Western ideology of human rights, pluralism, democracy and the rule of law. On the other side there is the obscurantist

Islamist ideology of Khomeini and Osama bin Laden, together with its less defined variations, all marked by the rejection of the modern world and by dreams of global conquest. No amount of material aid and commercial cooperation can, on its own, defeat that ideology, although both economic aid and trade can be powerful tools in the struggle. It is on the political field of battle that Islamism like its predecessor Soviet Communism must eventually experience its strategic defeat.

This also means that one of the first tasks of the next President will also be to win the battle of hearts and minds inside the U.S. itself. For nothing could so cripple the successful prosecution of the struggle abroad as continued dissension at home, of the kind that has disfigured the American political debate over Iraq and the war on terror. By the same token, nothing would go farther toward ensuring ultimate victory in the long struggle ahead than the perception abroad that the United States is a power capable of deploying its resources in pursuit of clear policy objectives backed by both main political parties and enjoying the steady support of the American people.