

Press highlights from NDI's

**2008 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL AND CONGRESSIONAL ELECTION
STUDY MISSION**

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Also available on [Aswat](#)

The Obama Presidency: Between Reality and Expectation A First Read

During the first week in November, I was invited by the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, a [research] organization that champions democracy and civil society, to the United States to observe the American electoral process. During the course of my stay, I visited campaign offices and polling stations in the DC area and some neighboring states.

The visit allowed me to witness a watershed in contemporary American history. After almost half a century after Martin Luther King struggled to grant black Americans the most basic civil and political rights, a black American was elected to the highest executive office in the world. This was a destiny once inconceivable for even the most optimistic observers of race relations in the United States.

While many factors contributed to the historic election of Barack Obama, the most salient was the ineptitude of the Bush administration throughout the past eight years. A deteriorating domestic economy, two failed foreign wars, plunging presidential approval ratings, and a unilateral foreign policy tarnished the United States' prestige around the world. Barack Obama's charismatic personality and skillfully articulated message of change appealed to a new coalition of Americans, particularly young Americans, looking to a better tomorrow. Their ability to elect Barack Obama as President despite racial sensitivities was the hallmark of the historic 2008 elections. With Obama now president-elect, expectations and hopes are high both at home and abroad.

Perhaps they are even unattainably high. Americans expect Obama to present successful economic policies to guide the economy out of crisis, reduce unemployment, alleviate the burden of healthcare, improve education, and fix national infrastructure. With a legislative ally in the overwhelmingly Democratic Congress, president Obama will likely be able to meet domestic expectations and craft effective and enforceable policies, although the road may be long and difficult.

Globally, however, Obama's potential to effect change varies widely. Despite high expectations in the Arab world for the Obama administration, there are limits to what Obama can realistically achieve:

- The world expects the United States to abandon its unilateral actions and policies of confrontation, a hallmark of the Bush administration. All indicators point to a

change on the horizon; Obama appears more inclined to use diplomatic dialogue before resorting to force.

- The world expects that the wars America started in Iraq and Afghanistan will end. While the war in Iraq can be expected to end in the near future as developments on the ground allow, the world should anticipate that the war in Afghanistan against Al Qaeda and the Taliban will continue. In this context, it seems that during the election campaign Obama demanded an end to the war in Iraq in order to provide the military force necessary to defeat al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

We, as Arabs, have high, perhaps unrealistic, expectations for Obama to solve the Palestinian crisis and also to help democratize Arab political systems. In both cases, we forget the practical realities surrounding Obama's presidency:

- Arabs, by the nature of our political culture, place the utmost importance on the individual leader in creating political change. However, in America, no matter how distinguished or daring Obama's ideas may be, he is working within a complex and entrenched political system. Passing legislation requires concert between the executive branch – i.e. the president – and the legislative branch – i.e. both houses of Congress. However well intentioned a president, he cannot change U.S. policy without the consent of the Senate and the House of Representatives.
- While Arabs expect President Obama to take action to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we must understand that without the express consent of Israel, who will ensure their own interests first and foremost, there will be no solution. The Democratic majority in Congress will turn against Obama if he attempts to implement a solution unacceptable to Israel.
- We are also making a mistake believing that Obama's presidency necessarily translates to more pressure on the Arab political systems for democratization and reform. Pressure for democratization and reform depends on the composition of the administration's cabinet as well as its view of national interests. Obama will not exercise pressure for democratization unless it furthers his administration's goals. Rather, the best agents of political and economic reform are the sons of the nation rather than foreign forces driven by their proper goals and interests.

With the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States, the American political system has regained confidence in the eyes of its citizens and the citizens of the world. The question remains, however, will Obama succeed in restoring the prestige of the United States or it will be but a historic moment lost again?

Author: Hatem Chaabouni; Member of the Political Bureau, Ettajdid (Renewal) Movement, Deputy Chairman for Tunisian League for Human Rights

Publication & Date: *Attarqi Atadid*, 11-08-08 (translated from French)

Historic victory of a black American in the presidential election

From our special correspondent in Washington:

Hatem Chaabouni

“Historic.” The word is heard on everyone’s lips. After centuries of humiliation, slavery and segregation, an African-American was elected to the White House after a trying 22-month long battle. Reverend Jackson, who more than once attempted the same feat without succeeding past the primaries, had tears in his eyes.

Fifty-two percent of Americans gave their vote to Barack Obama, leading to the defeat of his rival McCain, who was seen as a defending a continuation of the unpopular platform of George W. Bush that thousands of Obama supporters rejected Tuesday night at a celebration in front of the White House.

The U.S. will change course after eight years of conservative and aggressive politics which resulted in a financial crisis without precedent, a collapse in Afghanistan and serious difficulties in Iraq.

In a grand speech on the eve of the election before 100,000 loyal supporters at a venue in Virginia, Senator Obama clearly committed himself to end the war in Iraq in order to concentrate on Afghanistan, the hunt for Ben Laden and especially the domestic problems facing the U.S.

The crisis on Wall Street, the rising unemployment, the housing problem aggravated by the sub-prime mortgage crisis, health and social programs—all problems which exacerbate the lives of average Americans—were at the heart of Obama’s electoral campaign. His Republican rival vainly tried to refocus the debate on international issues to prevail based on his long experience on the subject and his past as a national hero but was unable to suppress the wave of Obamania that began in the primaries, where he had already eliminated the experienced Hillary Clinton and won the nomination to represent the Democratic Party.

Millions base their hopes on him. The world watches. Will he keep his promises to change the U.S., and by extension, the world? Will he fulfill the aspirations of the humble people who brought him to power? Will he usher in an end to the neoconservatives’ politics of fear and bring détente to the international sphere?

It is a bit too early to respond to these questions. Yet what people can be sure of here is that change (the catchword of the Obama campaign) is inevitable. The eight years of the Bush administration were among the worst ever known in the U.S. We cannot do worse! But can we do a lot better? How much room will Barack Obama have to maneuver? Will the financial paralysis permit him to keep his promises to improve the lives of average Americans and of the famed middle class, the focus of all of the campaign's attention? Will the touted strategic alliance with Israel inhibit all efforts for embarking on a new era in relations with the Arab-Muslim world? Will American unilateralism in the world see its last days?

Many of these questions remain unresolved, but hope is everywhere and optimism is unlimited. We are perhaps witnessing the advent of a United States with greater solidarity, internal fraternity and a more comprehensive and constructive global outlook.

The dream of African-Americans has been largely realized during the election.

Are the rest of the Americans and the world permitted to dream with them?

Author: Movement for a Peaceful Society (MSP) on behalf of Mohamed Tebbal;
National Secretary of the Movement for a Peaceful Society

Publication & Date: Official MSP Website, 11-13-08

Party Representative Participates in American Election Observation Delegation

From October 30 to November 6, the National Secretary [Mohamed Tebbal] joined a delegation of Arab civil society and political party representatives in an important matter: observing the recent American Presidential Election. The National Democratic Institute organized the mission, which consisted of a series of meetings with expert Democratic and Republican party members so as to acquaint the delegation with election campaign strategy and innovations. The delegation also visited local political campaigns and met with candidates. Then on Election Day, Tuesday November 4, delegates visited voting stations in 3 different states and attended meetings with members of the media and politicians to discuss the electoral process and possible future reform. The Secretary participated beside other Algerian delegates, as well as representatives from Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya.

Author: Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) on behalf of Mohcine Belabbas, National Secretary and Member of Parliament in Algeria's People's National Assembly

Publication & Date: RCD Official Website, 11-05-08

American democracy observed by MP Mohcine Belabbas



Mohcine Belabbas (RCD) and Vadim Zhdanovich (OSCE)

Mohcine Belabbas, national secretary for coordination and RCD member of parliament, is participating in a study and observation mission of the elections currently taking place in the United States. The event-filled program on October 31 opened with two welcoming statements from Shari Bryan, Vice President of NDI, and Les Campbell, Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa. Following this, Jennifer Collins-Foley, Executive Director of the Center for National Policy, presented on the U.S. electoral system and voting procedures before Mark Silva, White House correspondent for the Chicago Tribune, gave his analysis of the media's perspective on the 2008 elections. Both presentations were followed by a discussion among the mission's participants.

During the afternoon, the delegates received a presentation from Vadim Zhdanovich, Deputy Head of Mission of the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) observer mission to the United States in 2008, on the role of his organization. Joe Gaylord, of Chesapeake Associates, analyzed the Republican Party's perspectives on the 2008 elections. The day closed with a discussion led by Richard Klein, elections expert from NDI, on the principles of international observation of elections.

During the different presentations, Mohcine Belabbas focused in particular on the political situation in Algeria and the head of state's violations of the constitution. He

reiterated the RCD's demands for a wide-reaching international observation for the upcoming elections.

A member of parliament representing the RCD, Belabbas was invited to the U.S. by NDI, an American NGO with ties to the Democratic Party, to take part, from October 30 to November 7, 2008, in an observation mission of the American elections.

Author: Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) on behalf of Mohcine Belabbas, National Secretary and Member of Parliament in Algeria's People's National Assembly

Publication & Date: RCD Official Website, 11-06-08

MP Belabbas meets various American officials



Mohcine Belabbas, national secretary for coordination and member of parliament representing the RCD, traveled to Philadelphia on November 1 where he met with Pat Eiding, President of the Philadelphia Labor Council, to discuss the role that workers' unions play in the elections. He then was received by Marwan Kredie, Founder and President of the Philadelphia Arab-American Community Development Corporation.



The members of the delegation attend a campaign event for Mark Warner, candidate for Senate in Virginia

On November 2, 2008 the participants in the NDI mission traveled to the state of Virginia where they met with various candidates' campaigns. They attended two meetings, the first with Bill Day, a Congressional candidate, and the second with Mark Warner, candidate for U.S. Senate from Virginia.

Author: Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) on behalf of Mohcine Belabbas, National Secretary and Member of Parliament in Algeria's People's National Assembly

Publication & Date: RCD Official Website, 11-10-08

End of MP Belabbas' visit to the U.S.



From left to right: L. Campbell, Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa, NDI; M. Belabbas; and, K. Wollack, President of NDI

Mohcine Belabbas, national secretary for coordination and member of parliament representing the RCD, took part in a series of discussions at NDI headquarters in Washington, D.C. on November 3. Led by Peter Fenn of Fenn Communications, the first presentation covered the Democratic Party's perspectives on the 2008 elections.

The speakers for the second discussion, Larry Diamond, senior fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, and Andrew Albertson, Executive Director of the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), spoke on the subject of American foreign policy before and after the 2008 elections. In the afternoon, Phil Carney spoke of his experience as a local candidate for an Advisory Neighborhood Commission in Washington, D.C., which was followed by a visit to the headquarters of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, which was founded in 1963 at the request of President John Kennedy.

The members of the delegation then traveled to Virginia where they attended the last campaign rally of candidate Barack Obama in Manassas.

On Election Day, Mohcine Belabbas observed voting at eight polling stations in three states: Washington, D.C., Virginia and Maryland.

November 5 was an opportunity to draw lessons from the election observation with Ken Wollack, President of NDI, and Les Campbell, NDI's Regional Director for the Middle

East and North Africa. The day closed with a presentation from Allan Rivlin of Peter D. Hart Research Associates on public opinion and the fallout from the elections, followed by a discussion with David Nassar, a campaign organizer who encouraged voter participation in Arlington County, Virginia.

Author: Ibrahim Nawar, Member of the Executive Board, Democratic Front Party

Publication & Date: Al-Ahram Weekly Online, 11-19-08

Letter to the president-elect

Listen to the people of the Middle East and allow them, too, to taste the joy of hope, **Ibrahim Nawar** counsels the next US commander-in-chief

I'd like first of all to deeply congratulate you for your remarkable victory in the presidential race -- a victory you rightly deserve. Your hard work throughout the campaign has been equally rewarded. You have shown us how a political leader can be clear, simple and deep at the same time. Your words "Yes we can" have reached out to every man and woman struggling for freedom, peace and prosperity. Now they all believe that however disadvantageous some people might be, they can together make their dreams come true. As a citizen from the Middle East that happened to have been in Washington DC the night you were declared the presidential winner, I believe that hope has prevailed and that a man with hope and determination can win, too, in the fight for justice, democracy and peace.

In the Middle East, people can easily identify themselves with you. They see your middle name "Hussein" as familiar to them, your colour as closer to theirs and your early upbringing as similar to most of them. But that is not why they identify themselves with you. Above everything they believe in your message, "Change is needed". They also see hope in your promises and your good intentions; these matter to them a lot. Your future policies when you assume office will determine the way they will judge you.

US policy in the Middle East has been a matter of great concern in the last decades. In the last eight years alone the credibility of this policy has been seriously damaged. The policy was seen from here -- the Middle East -- as driven by selfish interest in keeping oil supplies to the US running and the unjust political situation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict going, even at the expense of the people of the region. What made things worse was the use of force to bring about "regime change" in Iraq. The war on terrorism has become a tool used by US policymakers as a justification to support and strengthen conservative allies in the region. Long-term interests of the people of the Middle East in freedom, the rule of law, development and just peace were at the bottom of the outgoing Bush administration's priorities. The war in Iraq has resulted in changing the balance of power in the Middle East, pushing Iranian influence deeper inside Arab countries (Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Bahrain, Kuwait and Yemen). The heavy US military existence in the region, though seen as strategically important to balance out Iranian threats, has ignited negative feelings against the United States. Restoring credibility to US foreign policy in the Middle East should be one of your priorities when in the White House.

I see three pillars of what can be a credible US policy in the Middle East. One is a just peace settlement to the dispute between the Israelis and the Palestinians. A two-state solution has been already agreed on paper. Your goal should be to build upon that. You may need to exert some pressure on the Israelis. You will have to do that if necessary. I know how strong the Israeli lobby in the US is, but I equally know that your campaign did not financially rely on donations from strong political or business lobbyists, but rather on small donations from young and ordinary people who hold strong hope in a better tomorrow. So please don't let down those young and ordinary people in Palestine who hold such hope. They feel that they have been let down for decades by broken promises and unjust policies. Make them feel that "together they can" live in peace. Desperate Palestinians are fighting each other. In this fight it is the ordinary man and woman who pays the price of war. Palestinians are fearful of a situation in which they may not find land to negotiate about. There is still some left, but Israeli settlers and Israeli settlements are infiltrating Palestinian land day after day. This has first to stop, measures to build real mutual trust to start, and a process to apply a viable and practical two-state solution to succeed.

Just peace in Palestine is the first pillar. But closely connected to it is the Syrian hope in peace. This hope should be kept alive by tempting the Syrians to join in the peace process, not to alienate them.

The second pillar is to remove oil gradually from US foreign policy in the Middle East. The people of the Middle East believe, right or wrong, that oil is the driving force behind US foreign policy towards their region. It is encouraging to hear you, in speech after speech, affirming your intention to rid the US of energy dependency and to start a promising grand programme of investment in clean renewable energy resources in the US. If successful, you will also be able to rid US foreign policy of dependency on the conservative masters of oil fields in the Middle East. US interests in the Middle East have polluted US foreign policy in the region. You will be able to have just objectives achieved by clean and just means. That, we know, can't be achieved overnight but gradually. Signals have to be clear pointing in that direction. This is the only way to convince the people of the Middle East that US foreign policy sees them being as human as other people in the world, not just as some who happen to live in an oil rich region.

Taking oil out of the US foreign policy equation in the Middle East will help the new US administration restore credibility to US foreign policy in the most troubled region on earth. It will make men and women in the Middle East believe that US policymakers consider the value of a drop of oil below the value of a drop of blood. Three wars in the Gulf in almost two decades -- the Iran-Iraq War, the Kuwait liberation war, and the war to remove Saddam in Iraq -- have left the belief that the US cares only about the security of oil supplies from the Middle East. Your administration will, of course, have a lot to worry about in the region in the short to medium term, but if you give the right signal, you will gain the trust of the people and the security of oil supplies. In the end, the people of the Middle East don't produce oil to drink it. They produce oil to sell it and to buy water and food with its returns.

You may have seen the huge demonstrations against the Iraq war. You have bravely opposed that war in the US Senate. Taking such a stand was definitely the right response to the feeling of the ordinary man and woman across the world. You stood in rejection to the use of force to achieve foreign policy goals. Saddam was never an imminent threat to the US. He was indeed a tyrant that his own people suffered. The US should have helped the Iraqi people to rid themselves of him and his regime. That may have required more time, better coordination with international and regional allies, and more ground work to help Iraqis themselves on the battleground. Regime change by force is a bad idea and the people of the Middle East hope that the US will never resolve differences with others by using force. Using force is the last way to achieve peace and build prosperity. This is the third pillar on which the credibility of US foreign policy in the Middle East can be restored.

Now, you have more than 150,000 US personnel in Iraq. Some of them may be able to easily go back to their homes. But don't rush most of them out. They went there for a reason, not just to topple Saddam's regime, but also to help Iraqis to build a new democracy. Where is it? By rushing American troops out of Iraq, a vacuum of power -- military and political -- will appear. Others may exploit it and do no good. Iraqis, so far, have not proved able to defend their borders and their security forces are still unqualified alone to defeat terrorism and elements of political instability. Yes, ordinary men and women in the Middle East did not want American troops to invade Iraq in 2003, but today is a different story. The US is already there in Iraq. Its troops and former Civil Administrator Paul Bremer managed to destroy the Iraqi state and created a new balance of power in Iraq that made its regime sectarian rather than secular. In order to undo that and to repair the damage caused in Iraq, the new administration, yours, will have to get more politically engaged in Iraq, not less. In the end, US troops should leave, but to leave behind a stable secular political system at peace with itself and its neighbours, not a fierce civil war that may draw many to intervene and make the situation worse. You should establish an honest dialogue with the Iraqi people and help them avoid an unstable future.

US military withdrawal from Iraq in any form is closely connected with two other issues. First is Iran's nuclear programme, and second is the security of the Arab Gulf area. I agree with you that a nuclear Iran will bring no stability to the region. On the contrary, it may open up a nuclear weapons race at the expense of people's prosperity and peace. The US and the oil producing countries alike have a strong interest in ensuring peace and security in the region. At the moment, only US troops in the Gulf can do the job. Nonetheless, this is unacceptable to the people of the area. A new vision for achieving peace and security in the Gulf is needed; a vision based on partnership and equality. I know that you are a good listener. You said it and people believe it. Our hope is that you will listen to the voice of the people of the Middle East, especially when they disagree with you.

The people of the Middle East have been eager to move to democracy and to live in a free, secular and plural society. People in the Middle East witnessed with joy the collapse of the old military regimes in Greece, Spain and Portugal in the mid-1970s. They were saddened to see themselves left far behind. They have also witnessed the end of military

dictatorship governments in Latin America. They were saddened that this kind of government still exists in their region. The people of the Middle East witnessed with joy the collapse of Berlin Wall, the end of the Soviet bloc and the emergence of new democracies in Eastern Europe. They were saddened that democracy looked far away from them. Democracy is not just ballot boxes or clean elections. It is much more. It is freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of organisation, freedom of belief and cultural diversity. Democracy is equality, the rule of law, political transparency and accountability. Democracy is to have hope for a better tomorrow. Together, we can. We want you to share this hope with us. Hope for peace, rather than war. Hope for prosperity, rather than poverty. Hope for freedom, rather than oppression. Can we? Yes we can. We are "ready to go".