

WHAT DOES ROMNEY WANT IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

Contributed by Osama al Said, Al Watan al Arabi
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The Tsunami Race to the White House

Unexpectedly Mitt Romney won got tie in the Iowa primaries elections for the nomination of his Party for the Presidential election in November 2011 against President Barak Obama, after having lost that state in 2008. A week later the former Governor of Massachusetts won the New Hampshire vote with 40% of the votes against all other competitors combined. Even Barak Obama in 2008 wasn't able to score in Iowa and win New Hampshire as he lost the latter to Hillary Clinton in Democratic primaries. Romney came second in South Carolina to Newt Gingrich. Romney is battling in Florida, the last battleground before what Americans call super Tuesday where the vote covers twenty states and would determine whose candidates has a majority of delegates to claim victory in the summer at the Republican convention. With three scores in his hands, Romney is descending on Florida with more and more Americans, for now Republicans and independents, are selecting this businessman whose religion is Mormon. If Mitt Romney wins Florida, or gets a significant number of votes there, he will be in real position to win the nomination of the Republican Party for the Presidential election. One serious indicator that Romney is marching forward to meet Obama in the electoral battlefield is the fact that the Obama political machine has been targeting Romney even when he was one of seven Republican contenders, even before the Iowa battle. Somehow Obama's camp fears him and lobby groups have already attacked him and attacked some of his senior advisors, months ago. So who is Mitt Romney and more important to us in the Arab World and in the Middle East, what are his views on the region, its problems and its crises?

Mitt Romney comes from a business family from Michigan. His father George Romney was a Governor of the important state of Michigan, a secretary of housing between 69 and 73. The son, Mitt was a successful businessman, a Governor for the state of Massachusetts, a state leaning liberal and left, and was the President of the Olympics in Salt Lake City in 2002. In 2008 he ran for Republican nomination but lost to Senator John McCain. Some say that had Romney been nominated in 2008, and since he an expert on economy and jobs, he could have won against Obama. Others argue that if McCain would have selected him then as his running mate, they would have defeated Obama-Biden. But Obama won with a large margin of voters against McCain and his less known mate Sarah Palin. Three years later Romney came back to the battlefield, better organized and well prepared. Meanwhile the US has entered a severe economic crisis which was not solved by Obama's policies. This crisis is escalating and may affect the outcome of Presidential election in November. Mitt Romney is seen by many voters so far as able to address the economic challenge. His supporters argue that every serious economic project he managed was successful. This is attractive to concerned citizens out of work and owners of houses that lost values. But that is a domestic American situation which will most likely impact the choice of who will occupy the White House next January.

Some had argued that Romney's religion, Mormonism, may constitute a problem for traditional Evangelical and Protestant Christians in America, who form a majority in the Republican Party. However a part from few Pastors who criticized his faith, voters are not raising this matter. Perhaps President Obama has broken too many taboos in American political traditions, opening the path for Romney, ironically. If Americans have voted for a Black President whose father was Muslim, and who rarely is seen in a Church, a Mormon who goes to his Church is not a problem anymore. America has changed allowing Obama to become a President, and now has even changed further which would allow Romney to be elected regardless of his religion

But Mitt Romney's Foreign Policy is what worry and attract many in the Middle East and the adjacent regions. Many Arabs and Muslims inside and outside the United States hoped Barak Hussein Obama would transform America's Foreign Policy so radically during his Presidential mandate. In fact it did change but not in what was hoped for. Obama promised he would put efforts on resolving the Arab Israeli conflict. Three years later, the crisis has worsened. When the Arab Spring exploded, many in the region hoped the US Administration would push faster towards democracy and pluralism. Instead it was late in intervening in Libya, has abandoned the secular and liberal sectors in the Arab world and allowed Assad to crush his people for almost a year. Obama supporters claim the President killed Bin Laden but his critics in the Arab world argue that when you kill the head of a terrorist organization and allow terrorist regimes to survive, the value of Bin Laden's elimination is nullified.

The attention now given to Mitt Romney's policy in the Middle East is getting high because of Obama's failure with Iran and Romney's possible better alternative in this regard. In June 2009, a million demonstrators were in the streets of Tehran, chanting for a regime change. This was a real revolution, that preceded the Arab Spring. The United States could have supported them and pushed forward as it did in Egypt and Tunisia. Instead President Obama declared that he wouldn't meddle in the issue. But he did meddle in Libya and other countries later. In fact Obama's advisors on Arab

and Muslim world affairs want him to cut a deal with the Iranians. That became reality in the following years when Obama didn't stop the Iranians from building their nuclear. Not only the Ayatollahs regime is moving forward with its nuclear plans but it has developed missiles. In addition, Tehran has continued to threaten the Arab countries and those in the Gulf without a strong response from the Obama Administration, in the same way the Reagan Administration responded to the Iranian menace in the 1980s. But the question is will a President Romney do better than President Obama in the Middle East and on Iran?

In 2008, Romney was perceived as the most conservative candidate to the right of McCain. At that time the former Governor of Massachusetts didn't have major differences in Foreign Policy with his Republican rival. He declared then that America's enemies were al Qaeda's Jihadists and warned about Iran. But as he failed to reach nomination and endorsed McCain, we learned no more about his Middle East policies. In 2010 Romney published a book titled "No Apology" in which he argued that a weak America will encourage Terror forces and regimes, like Iran to expand and threaten its neighbors. Romney was right in the sense that Obama was perceived as weak by the Ayatollahs and thus Iran took advantage and made strategic advances in the region threatening the balance of power in favor of the Islamist Shia against Sunni and Shia moderates across the Arab world.

During the summer of 2011, Romney released two documents that are very telling about his Middle East Policies to come, if he is elected. He published a policy agenda on the Middle East in which he was clear regarding stopping a nuclear Iran. His agenda called for use all strategic tools to contain and defeat Iranian supremacy in the region including military means if needed and an alliance with Iran's democratic revolution. This position is by far bolder and more credible than Obama's position. Romney is not seeking a deal with the Iranian regime, that's for sure. The second move by Romney was to release the names of his Foreign Policy and National Security Advisors, those who will help him shape his Administration's policy in the region. Their names and credentials sent waves into Tehran and their allies. The top advisors included former Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, Admiral Michael Hyden the former CIA director, John Lehman, former secretary of the Navy, Dan Senor, former US spokesperson in Iraq, Dov Zakheim former deputy secretary of defense, Dr Walid Phares, advisor to Congress, Mitchel Reiss, former envoy to Ireland, and others. With these two moves Romney sent a clear message to the region: There will be no deal with the Iranian regime, its nukes will be stopped and the Arab Spring won't be transformed into an Arab winter threatened by Iran, Assad, Hezbollah and their allies.

Although Romney was still battling seven other candidates, the advisors of Obama who have been pushing for engagement with Tehran and eventually a deal with the Khomeinist regime, mobilized their friends to blast Romney and his advisors. By mid October two of his top advisors were targeted by lobbies close to Hamas and the pro Iranian pressure groups: Mitchell Reiss, a former Bush Administration official and a professor was criticized for advising to engage with all Iranian dissidents, particularly the MEK (Mujahidin Khalq). Iran's regime fears that a Romney Administration would extend support to the Iranian opposition to topple the regime. The MEK issue was raised by critics of Romney but in fact it is policy to support the opposition in general that bothers the pro-Iranians in Washington. What made the critics nervous was an article published in the Wall Street Journal by Mitt Romney clearly calling for an alliance with the Green Movement and using all the power of the US to stop the nukes. This article made Romney into the most dangerous candidate to the Iranian regime, even though other Republican candidates delivered strong speeches against Iran's. The Iranians know that Romney is serious and could have a wider support among Americans than Newt Gingrich or Rick Santorum. And the most important argument is that Romney is the only Republican who has a chance to defeat Obama, and thus become a direct challenger to Iran internationally. Most recently another figure feared by the Iranians, Ambassador John Bolton joined Romney's campaign. The planets are aligning in a dangerous way for Iran. Bolton, a former ambassador at the UN Security Council is an advocate of military strikes against Iran.

Another indicator of the fears by the Iranian regime was the appointment by Romney of Professor Walid Phares as one of his top advisors on the Middle East and North Africa. Phares, originally from Lebanon, is a known scholar among the defense and security circles in the United States. He appears on American and Arab media and lectures at various defense agencies. Last year he was the only author who published a book titled "The Coming Revolution: Struggle for Freedom in the Middle East" in which he predicted the Arab Spring and called for supporting the Green Revolution in Iran and the Cedars Revolution in Lebanon. Phares speaks fluent Arabic and is a strategic expert on Iran and Hezbollah. As soon as his appointment was announced the pro-Iranian lobby in Washington and their allies among the radical left organized a propaganda campaign unseen before against an advisor of a candidate not yet a nominee. Observers said the level of the attacks indicated how frustrated are the pro-Iranian lobbies in the US with the appointment of Phares. One propagandist for Hezbollah, according to an article by John Hajjar, described Phares as "scary and dangerous." The attacks against Phares tried to smear him as he was a young leading figure during the 1980 and was representing his social democratic party in the Lebanese Front and Lebanese Forces. Phares was never in the military but the real reason behind the attacks was because of his strategic role in advising Romney on the Middle East.

Attacking Reiss, Bolton and Phares are the indicators that pro-Iranian propagandists are preparing for what is to come. Romney's team is perceived as one of the best in the country and will help him moving on the Syria issue and crumble the Assad regime, on the Lebanon issue to weaken Hezbollah, and on the Iranian issue to stop the nuclear bomb and put an end to Iran's threats in the Gulf. A source close to CAIR (Council of American Islamic Relations) told us that Romney will side with Israel and his advisors are "anti-Muslims." But a Muslim American leader who opposes the Iranian

agenda told us "CAIR invents these issues but in fact is protecting the Iranians back." Dr Zuhdi Jasser, the President of the American Islamic Forum for Democracy said "we Muslim Americans who stand by our Government regardless of partisan politics know that the Iranian and Syrian regimes are oppressing their people. It is against the interests of Arab, Iranian and Muslim peoples in the region to block US policies against Iran." On his part Attorney John Hajjar, the US Director for the Cedars Revolution told us "Romney is a more serious ally of the region against Iran's ambitions. He is a friend to moderate Arabs and to free Iranians."

An Arab American analyst told us "it would be a mistake for Arab Americans and Arabs in the region to think that President Obama, just because of his middle name Hussein, would stop Iran from its expansion. Obama has tried but he has no plans to confront Iran. He withdrew from Iraq so fast that Iran moved in within days. Bahrain doesn't feel safe from Iranian ambitions, East Saudi Arabia is threatened by Iran's operatives and so is Northern Yemen. Obama has grated Iran half of the region from Afghanistan to Beirut. If Obama doesn't deliver a campaign to crumble that regime before the beginning of the summer, it would be in the interests of the Arabs to see Romney President of the United States."

But American politics are tricky and the way for Romney to get to the White House is long and filled with land mines. He will still have to fight within his own Party from Florida to the West of the country to collect the delegates he needs for nomination. Then he will have to face the most formidable political and financial machine in the History of American politics. In front of him, Obama has gathered one billion dollars for his campaign and is mobilizing his very wide coalition that brought him to power in 2008. Some calls it the Armageddon of US elections. For us in the region, next November may decide if we will see Iran pushed back or we would see a deal between Washington and Tehran at the expense of the Arab countries in the Gulf.

Obama used all his Muslim credentials to get our support last time but he has failed the Arabs. Mitt Romney is a Mormon and a conservative and has no fear of Iran's regime.