
An Inside View

The State Department and American Foreign Policy in the Middle East

AN INTERVIEW WITH C. DAVID WELCH
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C. David Welch currently serves as Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, supporting the President and Secretary of State in extensive relations with the Arab world, Israel, and Iran. He served as U.S. Ambassador to the Arab Republic of Egypt from August 2001 to March 2005 and as Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs from October 1998 to August 2001.

A career foreign service officer, Mr. Welch served as the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, playing a leading role in implementing U.S. policy in Iran, Iraq, and Libya and in negotiating a ceasefire between warring Kurdish parties in northern Iraq in the mid-1990s. From 1979 to 1995, Mr. Welch was assigned to embassies in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, and Pakistan, where he promoted security through U.S. business involvement and improved technologies. He was Executive Assistant to the Under Secretary for Political Affairs at the Department of State from 1991 to 1992 and was a member of the National Security Council Staff at the White House from 1989 to 1991.

Mr. Welch has received several awards from the State Department for exceptional service. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the American Foreign Service Association. In 1977 Mr. Welch earned MA and MALD degrees from The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. In September 2006, he returned to The Fletcher School as a distinguished alumnus to deliver the convocation address. We are pleased to welcome him back for an interview with The Fletcher Forum.

FORUM: *How has the State Department's role changed within the U.S. government and overseas during the course of your career?*

ASSISTANT SECRETARY DAVID WELCH: That is a large and sweeping question that will take some time to address. I came in in 1977, right out of Fletcher. At that time, as a young foreign service officer, when I looked at how America's professional diplomatic service was configured, it impressed me that people with regional expertise and experience seemed to control the market with respect to the conduct of our diplomacy. Good examples of that at the time were the opening to China and the Camp David Peace Process.

That may have been a somewhat naïve and youthful view of how things operate, but I think that sort of culture in the foreign service was very apparent at the time. If you were to look at it today, it would be a hugely different variety of influences at play in our foreign policy and quite a number of actors. The range of contacts with governments and peoples has changed substantially. People do not corner the market on expertise anymore. The knowledge is more freely available, although it is arguably still the case that experience is a valuable factor.

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The second thing is that when I joined, I thought most of the work we were doing was secret. Today, most of the work I do is public. In some manner we are trying to influence public perceptions. That dimension of the exercise of American national interest has really matured in a very interesting way. It might have to do with the access to information now, but it might also have to do with the realization that you have got to reach beyond elites to influence trends and directions—something that is actually playing against us right now in certain parts of the world.

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FORUM: *In the Middle East, what is the current state of public opinion with regard to the United States? Have you seen a change, or has there constantly been anti-American sentiment during your time overseas?*

WELCH: There has always been a certain level of animosity toward American policies, particularly in the Arab Muslim world. That has always ebbed and flowed, but I think it is analytically correct to say it has remained fairly high and constant through the years. What is probably an anomaly now is that you have a real bump in that, and maybe it can even be said that it extends to being anti-American in character. But I think

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you have to be very careful; we've done a lot of opinion polling and have had access to a lot of private polls, and peoples' attitudes are much more sophisticated than "I'm anti-American." They may disagree with specific American policies, they may value highly certain things that they perceive about America as opposed to about our policies, but they also, interestingly, may not perceive other things so highly.

Let me give you an example of what I mean: if you asked any young Muslim person in the Arab world, "How do you rate American policies vis-à-vis the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?" the answer probably is, "pretty badly." And probably you would see that answer hold through a period of years, maybe seeing some decline when it was perceived that the peace process was doing better.

If you asked them, "What do you think about America's scientific prowess?" they would say, "Oh! We rate that very highly." "What do you think about America's educational system?" "Oh, we rate that very highly." "What do you think about America's values?" Then, you get an interesting complexity. They would say, "Well, we think it is good that America is a religious country, but we also think it is a promiscuous country." So you would be wrong to generalize about being anti-American because it covers too much ground.

FORUM: *In its attempt to move beyond the pure contact with elites, is the State Department now taking specific actions to engage local populations? More specifically, how much time do you devote to speaking at universities, to opposition parties, or to business leaders? What is your specific role?*

WELCH: It depends on where you're working, but generally speaking I think we expect our diplomats now to have a higher profile in reaching out beyond traditional elites. We try to have communications strategies for our policies as well. So if we are taking a decision, we are not necessarily trying to counteract expected opposition or build public support in so much as we want to find the best way to explain it if we have a more precise understanding of what the likely reactions might be. So for example, when we made the decision to join with the European Three in offering an option to Iran to negotiate on the nuclear issue, we spent some time thinking about how we would unfold that decision publicly and explain it in a way that would strengthen our case. And even if you didn't like the idea that we came out with, one part of the reason we have been successful with our Iran diplomacy—in the sense that we have more people on our side for this kind of more reasonable approach—is because we took into account how public opinion might react to this and tried to unfold our decision in a way to take advantage of that.

FORUM: *Do you do anything to shape opinion or explain our policies through foreign media outlets?*

WELCH: Yes. I would not doubt that if you were to take a comparison of what American secretaries of state have done, that you would find that in recent years they have spent a lot more time with foreign media than they might have in the past. I do a considerable amount of regional media—much more than I do American media. So if you were ever to Google what we are doing, you would find that most of the statements are coming out on local media. Sometimes those are in Arabic, so the American audience is not even attentive to it, and even our own journalists do not catch up on it sometimes. Basically, 30 percent of the people who are watching satellite news in Arabic are watching al-Jazeera, and you have to be after that market in order to get their attention. We do that a lot more.

FORUM: *We would like to get a little more into regional policy now. You accompanied Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to the Middle East. We are hoping to get a little insight into U.S. actions and what you saw while you were there. For example, what measures, if any, are being taken by the U.S. to avoid another conflagration like the one that we saw in Lebanon last summer?*

WELCH: We were out in the region with the Secretary of State right in the middle of the hostilities in Lebanon. She returned from the region to Washington and then to New York to conclude the negotiations on Security Council Resolution 1701, which was wrapped up on August 12, if I remember correctly. The cessation of hostilities went into effect two days later.

What our work concentrated on during that period was to put into place elements for greater security and stability along that border than those put into the resolution. In effect, we negotiated what ought to be done and then wrote it into the law, so to speak, and then passed it to the Security Council—a unanimous vote, by the way. It was an important decision because it was actually the first new peacekeeping mission established in the Middle East since 1982.

In this most recent trip, the focus was somewhat on Lebanon, but much less so than in the summer, because I think what we have seen by now is a resolution being implemented in a reasonably successful manner. It is not completely done, but the record so far is good—the cessation of hostilities is holding, Israel has withdrawn, the blockade on Lebanon is lifted, major new troops are in place, and the arms embargo is functioning. So that is going well.

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to undermine either Lebanese democracy or American influence in the region. This is basically the nuts-and-bolts work of what we do every day—trying to keep people on our side.

The Secretary went to Saudi Arabia, then Egypt. Bilateral meetings in Saudi Arabia concentrated on Iraq, Iran, the Israeli-Palestinian issue, Syria, Lebanon, and to some degree, Sudan also. In Egypt, it was the same agenda, but with a higher profile on Israel-Palestine and Sudan issues. There, we also met with GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] countries, plus Egypt and Jordan, together in a very public event, which was our way of signaling that there is a moderate core group of friends in the Arab world who are determined to stand up against extremists and have a positive approach to regional stability and peace.

Then we went on to Israel and the Palestinian Territories for meetings with Israeli and Palestinian leadership. That was very much focused on how we try to restore contacts between Israelis and Palestinians and try to get things moving back towards a negotiating track.

And then, while we had not announced it before, we went into Baghdad and stayed overnight there and met with the Iraqi leadership, members of the opposition there, and members of parliament. Then we went to northern Iraq to see the leader of the Kurdish regional government, Massoud Barzani. We went back through London, where the Secretary had some meetings on Iran, and then from London, we came back to the States. We did quite a bit of work on the basket of regional issues. Secretary Rice spends a lot of time on the Middle East, as you may have noticed. It is not surprising given that it is the main focus of U.S. foreign policy; it is a big part of her job. I think that may be her fourth trip to the area this year.

FORUM: *Going into a little bit more detail, can you help us to understand what we are doing to help the Lebanese government assert more control over the south and why measures in the past may not have been effective?*

WELCH: Well, UNIFIL [United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon] was not an effective force. The Lebanese government was not present in the south, and the Hizbollah militia filled a vacuum. And, as the hostilities in July and August demonstrated, they had a capable military presence. So

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what we had to do to redress that were several things to completely change the situation. First, get the Lebanese army to do its job. There are Lebanese troops now in the south for the first time in 40 years, deployed right up to the border with Israel, or what is called the “Blue Line,” because the border is not yet agreed between the two. Second, UNIFIL, I think, had somewhat less than 2,000 soldiers on July 12, the day the Hizbollahis attacked Israel. Today, they have more than 6,000, so three times the amount, and they have only completed the first phase of a three-phase deployment. Also, the quality of those troops, with all respect to those who contributed in the past to UNIFIL, is quite a bit different. There are considerable combat elements from France, Italy and Spain—all NATO countries, and all with very capable military establishments. I think, before, the main troop contributors were Ghana, India, and Fiji. This is a different standard, with all due respect to their contributions to United Nations peacekeeping.

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The new rule for the area of operations for these forces is that there can be no other armed presence there. That is, there can only be the government of Lebanon, the army, and UNIFIL—which means no Hizbollah. And so far that has held. I am not saying that does not mean there is not a Hizbollahi trooper running around there who is a

baker during the day and a sympathizer at night. Of course there is. They live there. But they are not there with their weapons, moving around, establishing checkpoints and building bunkers, as they were in the past.

Also, there is an arms embargo, so countries cannot ship arms into Lebanon, except to the government of Lebanon. There is also a maritime surveillance mission for UNIFIL. There was not one before. All of these are new elements, and they are all, happily, being put into place now with some effect. They were not there on July 12. This is a big change.

FORUM: *What do you make of allegations that Israel violated rules of humanitarian law regarding proportional use of force?*

WELCH: Well, there are always going to be these allegations because Israel has capable military forces and they strike back hard when they are attacked. But, we have concerns from time to time with how Israel exercises its military options. We do not quarrel with their right to self-defense, but we ask them to bear in mind the consequences of some of the things they do. And from time to time, that concern emerged during the recent hostili-

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ties in Lebanon, because there was, I believe, some Israeli military targeting done that was hard to see the purpose for.

FORUM: *Switching gears, there have been some claims that Iraq has over-dominated U.S. policy in the Middle East for the last couple of years and that this has taken attention away from the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Could you comment on that and perhaps describe the administration's current vision for what the U.S. role is going to be for promoting peace in the region?*

WELCH: Well, I think that would be a little unfair. I think the problem before was that Yasser Arafat was an unreliable partner and, until his passage from the scene, it was very hard to do anything effective with the Palestinians. He died in November 2004, and President Abbas was elected in January 2005. Once he was elected, we were able to concentrate more on that part of the agenda. By then, however, the Israelis had gotten fed up with trying to find a Palestinian partner with any reliability and were moving ahead with their Gaza disengagement plan, which took the better part of 2005 to implement. That was the first significant turnover of Palestinian territory to their own control in some time.

Unfortunately, that did not get the positive bounce that everybody had hoped for. For one reason or another, including political divisions among the Palestinians, when they held their PLC [Palestinian Legislative Council] elections in the earlier part of this year, Hamas won a majority in the PLC on the basis of winning a plurality of the votes. So now you have a government that is run by terrorists in charge of one part of the Palestinian Authority and a president who embraces all the principles of peace that we do, on the other side of it. The difficulty is in trying to get past that impasse in Palestinian governance. But I would point out that 2005 did not pass without results. Gaza is not a pretty place, and certainly we read about it in a negative way nearly every day, but it is in Palestinian hands, it is their responsibility. That is, I think, a big change on the ground.

Now we would like to refocus more on this. That is what the Secretary was trying to do. We think it is part of our national interest and part of our responsibility—but others have to take steps also. I do not believe that Iraq has drained that energy from our diplomacy. I think people would be critical if I were to say that it has reinforced it, because there is a connection in public opinion between all these conflicts and issues, particularly in the Arab world. But the practical connection is, I think, really not all that great. I think the reality is that even before the liberation of Baghdad you had difficulties on the Palestinian-Israeli side, so I do not know how tight that linkage can be substantiated.

FORUM: *You alluded a bit to the impasse in Palestinian government. What is the U.S. position right now in terms of engaging Abbas when he does not have a lot of power, and moving forward given the position of Hamas?*

WELCH: Well, the situation is awkward because we do engage with him; we have a good relationship with him—as does Israel, by the way—and that is not a problem. His legitimacy is also not a problem. He got a higher percentage of the vote, by a substantial margin, than Hamas did. He was elected with over 60 percent of the popular vote. Hamas was elected with a majority in the parliament with 45 percent of the vote. It is not that [Abbas] lacks legitimacy. The problem here is the basic law: the constitution of the Palestinian Authority was written when Yasser Arafat was in power as president. It was designed, therefore, to strengthen the office of the prime minister and the government as a counterweight to this sort of corruption and influence of Chairman Arafat. So now when you have a good guy in as president, you have a constitution that does not give him the range of authority that he would like.

For example, if you open the press today—*The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*—[Abbas] talks about some of his political options in addressing the Hamas government. He mentions that he does not have some of the authority he would like, but he is prepared to use what he has. So I think he is trying to sort through these dilemmas. To give him and the Palestinians some credit in this issue, we do not contest that Hamas was democratically elected. We just do not agree with their policies, so we do not have to pay rent for them while they're in office. That is our decision. It is their problem to run the government, not ours. And they are not succeeding.

What I think is important here is that Palestinians want a democratic exit from their problem. They want an exit, but they want it to be democratically based, and they do not want to fight each other. One can understand those two impulses: both for a democratic way out and for an avoidance of civil war.

FORUM: *Do you think there is anything, specifically, that the U.S. can do to help Abbas?*

WELCH: Well, I think the most important thing is that the international community be there to support him as an alternative, or the approach that he takes as an alternative, and to signal firmly that if Hamas wants to continue in government while not embracing the principles that everyone in the international community accepts, then there is going to be a price. It will not gain the support of those who have traditionally been very helpful with the Palestinian interests.

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FORUM: *Is there any risk that isolating Hamas might strengthen them?*

WELCH: Yes, of course there is that risk. The question is: how likely is that risk? How high should we rank it? I think the Palestinian people are resilient. Their struggle to gain their national aspirations has been built on their unity and their sense of purpose. So anytime you pressure them, even if it is indirectly, I think there is some reaction to that. That said, I think there is a widespread feeling among Palestinians nowadays that their government is not functioning, and that is not their fault; it is the[ir] government's fault. So if we can be clever and create that distinction, I think we will reduce their solidarity.

Of course, Hamas will have the opposite tack, and one has to expect that. If you watch their statements and their interviews, they blame it all on the Zionists and the Americans, with the feckless Europeans following dutifully behind. Well, they have to construct that story, because they are not going to put out there that the reason [Palestinians] are enduring this blockade on financing their government is because their government does not agree with anyone else.

FORUM: *On a different note—how might recent events in North Korea have an impact when we are dealing with the nuclear issue vis-à-vis Iran? Do you think there are any linkages that might be made?*

WELCH: I think that there are. People are going to look at the proliferation examples across the world and are going to try to assess what is the best approach—are there modifications to suit the circumstances in each case, what works and what does not. So there are a number of different ways in which it could have an impact. There are also other cases that might have an impact, too. In the past, South Africa has forsworn a nuclear weapons program, and Libya has dumped all its weapons of mass destruction programs, too. And then there are countries that are historically capable but have taken themselves out of the nuclear arms race—Brazil, Argentina, Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea are examples. India and Pakistan are other examples. So it is true that North Korea represents something, but we have to be careful that we do not conceive that it is the only one in the universe of role models.

I am concerned that Iranians not misread this. They may say a couple of things. “Well, you know, obviously the way to limit everybody’s options is to race ahead.” Second, they may say “Ah! Look what gets thrown at North Korea. It is not so bad. We could withstand that.” So on the one hand, they may find themselves emboldened to pursue their nuclear weapons program more quickly and on the other hand, they might feel that they

could do so while enduring the best shot that the international community might take at them. They will be misguided on both counts.

First, they are not as far along, by a long shot, in their nuclear program as North Korea. Second, [Iran] conceives of itself as a nation moving outside its borders, open, a real player. North Korea is a sequestered autarchic little place that is doing so “well” internally that its people, on average, are several inches shorter than South Koreans. The comparisons are really stark. So even the beginning of sanctions, vis-à-vis Iran, could potentially have quite a serious impact on that population. And even though they bluster now about how high oil prices have protected them from economic effects, they still have an extremely young population, very high unemployment rates, high inflation, and a lot of state enterprises that are overfed and underproductive, so they run a pretty substantial risk. I think they know that, or they would be a lot less aggressive in their own diplomacy. They really are working very hard to avoid this being taken up in any way in the Security Council.

FORUM: *In the absence of diplomatic relations with Iran, how does the U.S. communicate with them—if and when it wants to—or with opposition groups? What is its line of communication?*

WELCH: It is a relatively open place in comparison to North Korea, but certainly not as open as some in the Middle East. Our communications are somewhat narrow and formalistic. We have an intersection in the Swiss embassy in Tehran, and we can exchange messages through them. That, in diplomatic terms, as I said, is a very narrow and formalistic platform.

We have lots of contacts who are not members of the government, whether they are in Iran, outside Iran, or traveling in Europe. We have tried to increase our capability. When I entered the foreign service, one of the biggest offices in the Middle East bureau was the Iran office. By early 1982, it had shrunk to a tenth of its former self. When I took this job, there were two people in my bureau working on Iran. Today there are seven or eight, and next year there will be even more.

We have established what we call “Iran watcher” positions in a number of our embassies overseas where there are substantial exile communities or trade interactions—a good example of that would be Dubai; another would be London—so that we can stay in touch with people who may be applying for visas. When you do that bureaucratically, it helps us maintain a cadre of expertise. We are training some people in the Farsi language, which one day we will need. We want to have more of them when we do.

FORUM: *Thank you so much for your time. ■*