

# What the Prospective VPs Got Wrong

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The October 3 debate between Alaska Governor Sarah Palin and Delaware Senator Joe Biden was disturbing for those of us hoping for a more enlightened and honest foreign policy during the next four years. In its aftermath, pundits mainly focused on Palin's failure to self-destruct and Biden's relatively cogent arguments. Here's an annotation of the foreign policy issues raised during the vice-presidential debate, which was packed with demonstrably false and misleading statements.

## **Getting the Facts Wrong on Iraq**

*PALIN: I am very thankful that we do have a good plan and the surge and the counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq that has proven to work... You guys opposed the surge. The surge worked. Barack Obama still can't admit the surge works.*

Obama actually has claimed that the surge worked. This makes both he and Palin wrong, however. The decline in violence in Iraq in recent months has largely resulted from a shift in the alignment of internal Iraqi forces and the tragic de facto partitioning of Baghdad into sectarian enclaves. What's more, the current relative equilibrium is probably temporary. The decision by certain Sunni tribal militias that had been battling U.S. forces to turn their weapons against al-Qaeda-related extremists took place before the surge was even announced. Similarly, militant opposition leader Muqtada al-Sadr's unilateral ceasefire resulted from internal Shia politics rather than any U.S. actions.

*PALIN: And with the surge that has worked we're now down to pre-surge numbers in Iraq.*

This is completely untrue. Prior to the "surge" in January 2007, the United States had approximately 132,000 troops in Iraq. Currently, there are 146,000 troops in Iraq. This is less than at the surge's peak, but the decline had to do with the fact that U.S. forces could not be realistically maintained at that level, not from a decision to pull down the number of forces because of any success.

For no apparent reason, Biden didn't challenge Palin on this clear misstatement.

*BIDEN: With regard to Iraq, I gave the president the power [in the October 2002 Iraq War Resolution]. I voted for the power because he said he needed it not to go to war but to keep the United States, the UN in line, to keep sanctions on Iraq and not let them be lifted.*

This was perhaps the most seriously misleading statement of the entire debate.

Palin correctly countered with the fact that "it was a war resolution." Indeed, the resolution supported by Biden explicitly stated that "The president is authorized to use the Armed Forces of the United States as he determines to be necessary and appropriate." Biden certainly knew that.

It's also hard to imagine that Biden actually believed Bush's claim that it was necessary to "keep sanctions on Iraq and not let them be lifted." There was absolutely no serious effort in the UN or anywhere else at that time to lift any sanctions against Iraq in a manner that could have conceivably aided Iraq's ability to make war, develop "weapons of mass destruction," or in any other way strengthen Saddam Hussein's regime.

It's particularly disturbing that a man who may well be the next vice president seems to think that the United States has the right to try to "to keep the UN in line." The United States is legally bound — by a signed and

ratified international treaty pursuant to Article VI of the U.S. Constitution — to provisions of the UN Charter. And the charter prohibits wars of aggression, such as the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The UN's job is to keep nation-states in line regarding international law, which the Iraq War — made possible in part through Biden's vote in support its authorization — was one of the most serious and blatant violations since the world body's establishment in 1945.

In any case, at the time of the Iraq War resolution, the UN had for well over a decade imposed the most comprehensive disarmament regime in history and had already successfully disarmed Iraq of its biological and chemical weapons; its biological, chemical and nuclear weapons programs; and its long-range delivery systems. Furthermore, at the time of the resolution and as a result of pressure from the UN, Iraq had already agreed to the return of UN inspectors under strict modalities guaranteeing unfettered access to confirm Iraq's disarmament. As a result, Biden's belief that the United States had to "keep the UN in line" is indicative of his contempt for the UN Charter and the post-World War II international legal order, thereby raising serious questions regarding Obama's judgment in choosing him as his running mate.

*PALIN: I know that the other ticket... opposed funding for our troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.*

In reality, Biden has consistently supported unconditional funding for Bush's war in Iraq and Afghanistan, even as evidence of torture, widespread killings of civilians, the resulting insurgency, and other problems have become apparent. Furthermore, as Biden pointed out, John McCain also voted against "funding for our troops" when the appropriation was tied to certain conditions he disliked. Similarly, Obama's votes against other appropriations bills were because he had objections to certain provisions.

*PALIN: We cannot afford to lose against Al-Qaeda and the Shia extremists who are still there, still fighting us, but we're getting closer and closer to victory. And it would be a travesty if we quit now in Iraq.*

There was no heavily-armed al-Qaeda or Shia extremists in Iraq until the Bush administration — backed by Senators McCain and Biden — decided to invade that country and overthrow Saddam Hussein, who had prevented such groups from emerging. Prior to the invasion, authorities on Iraq repeatedly pointed out the possibility of such extremists gaining influence in Iraq. If the Republicans were actually concerned about the rise of such extremist groups, they would never have supported the war in the first place. This is simply an excuse to defend the long-planned indefinite occupation of Iraq to control its natural resources and maintain a permanent U.S. military presence in this strategically important region. Claims of being "closer and closer to victory" have been made by Republican leaders ever since the initial invasion in March 2003, and it remains doubtful whether a military victory can ever be achieved.

*PALIN: Your plan is a white flag of surrender in Iraq and that is not what our troops need to hear today, that's for sure. And it's not what our nation needs to be able to count on.*

As Biden pointed out, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has pushed for a withdrawal plan that's essentially the same as Obama's. And public opinion polls show that a majority of Americans — including most U.S. troops currently in Iraq — prefer Obama's plan over McCain's open-ended indefinite commitment of U.S. forces. And Obama's plan calls only for the redeployment of combat units, which would not be completed until well into 2010.

Much to the disappointment of those in the anti-war movement, Obama's plan also calls for maintaining thousands of other U.S. troops within the country to ostensibly protect U.S. personnel, train Iraqi forces, and engage in counter-terrorism operations. Furthermore, Obama's plan calls for stationing many tens of thousands of U.S. forces in neighboring countries for possible short-term incursions into Iraq.

To claim that this is the same as “a white flag of surrender” is demagoguery at its most extreme.

*BIDEN: But let's get straight who has been right and wrong: ...John McCain was saying the Sunnis and Shias got along with each other without reading the history of the last 700 years.*

McCain was indeed wrong about many things in regard to Iraq, but the fact is that Sunnis and Shias in Iraq largely did “get along” – until the U.S. invasion supported by Biden created the conditions that led to the subsequent sectarian conflict. Saddam’s secular regime did persecute Shia, but the widespread sectarian massacres of recent years were a direct consequence of the divide-and-rule policies of the U.S. occupation. Prior to the U.S. invasion, millions of Sunni and Shia Iraqis lived peacefully together in mixed neighborhoods, intermarriage was common (particularly in urban areas), and many in rural areas worshiped in the same mosques.

Furthermore, as with conflict in Northern Ireland, the inter-communal violence in Iraq hasn’t simply resulted from religious differences but has erupted over perceived national loyalties, with the Sunnis traditionally identifying with pan-Arabist nationalists and the U.S.-backed ruling Shia parties historically allying with Iran.

### **Distorting Iran**

*PALIN: Israel is in jeopardy of course when we're dealing with Ahmadinejad as a leader of Iran. Iran claiming that Israel...should be wiped off the face of the earth. Now a leader like Ahmadinejad who is not sane or stable when he says things like that is not one whom we can allow to acquire nuclear energy, nuclear weapons. Ahmadinejad... seek[s] to acquire nuclear weapons and wipe off the face of the earth an ally like we have in Israel.*

Ahmadinejad never said that “Israel should be wiped off the face of the Earth.” That idiom doesn’t even exist in the Persian language. The Iranian president was quoting the late Ayatollah Khomeini from more than 20 years earlier when, in a statement largely ignored at the time, he said that “the regime occupying Jerusalem should vanish from the pages of time.” While certainly an extreme and deplorable statement, the actual quote’s emphasis on the Israeli “regime” rather than the country itself and its use of an intransitive verb makes the statement far less threatening than Palin was trying to make it sound. As recently as the week before the debate, Ahmadinejad once again clarified that the statement was analogous to the way that the Soviet Union is today no longer on the map, emphasizing his desire for Israel’s dissolution as a state, not the country’s physical destruction. Biden inexplicably refused to challenge this apparently deliberate effort by Palin to make American viewers believe Iran is a greater and more imminent threat than it actually is.

Palin’s argument that nuclear energy is something the United States cannot “allow [Iran] to acquire” was rather bizarre since Iran has had nuclear power since the 1950s, as a result of a program initiated by the United States. The United States continued to be the primary supporter for Iran’s nuclear program through the 1970s.

Finally, as Biden observed, Ahmadinejad doesn’t control Iran’s security apparatus. Unlike in the United States, the Iranian president isn’t the commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Such responsibilities lie with the Supreme Leader, currently Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Indeed, the Iranian presidency is relatively weak compared with other centers of power in that regime.

*PALIN: “Ahmadinejad, Kim Jong Il, the Castro brothers, others who are dangerous dictators are ones that Barack Obama has said he would be willing to meet without preconditions being met first. And an issue like that taken up by a presidential candidate goes beyond naiveté and goes beyond poor judgment. A statement that he made like that is downright dangerous. “...These dictators who hate America and hate what we stand for, with our freedoms, our democracy, our tolerance, our respect for women’s rights, those who would try to*

*destroy what we stand for cannot be met with just sitting down on a presidential level as Barack Obama had said he would be willing to do. That is beyond bad judgment. That is dangerous... But diplomacy is hard work by serious people. It's lining out clear objectives and having your friends and your allies ready to back you up there and have sanctions lined up before any kind of presidential summit would take place."*

As Biden observed, Obama never said he would meet with Ahmadinejad, but with Iranian leaders, presumably those with more power and less extremist views than the Iranian president. And, for reasons mentioned above, while Ahmadinejad is part of an oppressive, authoritarian regime, he is not, strictly speaking, a "dictator."

Secondly, if it is really poor judgment and "downright dangerous" to meet with dictators without preconditions, why hasn't Palin ever taken issue with decisions by such former Republican presidents as Eisenhower, Nixon, Ford, Reagan, and Bush, who met with dictators who were as bad or worse than the ones she mentioned and did so without self-defeating preconditions like those demanded by the current administration and by McCain? Indeed, President Bush himself has met with the king of Saudi Arabia, whose regime is far more repressive in terms of freedom, democracy, tolerance, and women's rights than Castro's Cuba: the rights of women under Castro have improved greatly relative to previous Cuban regimes, while the U.S.-backed family dictatorship in Saudi Arabia remains the most reactionary and misogynist regime on the planet; religious tolerance is Cuba is far greater than in Saudi Arabia, where non-Muslims are forbidden to worship openly; and, while individual freedom and electoral democracy is certainly quite limited in Cuba, that country still compares favorably to Saudi Arabia.

Finally, Palin's insistence that the goal of the Cuban, North Korean, and Iranian regimes is to "destroy" America's freedom, democracy, tolerance, and respect for women's rights is completely inaccurate and ahistorical. The anti-Americanism of these regimes is rooted not in opposition to America's values, but U.S. militarism and intervention in relation to those countries, which were taken not in defense of freedom and democracy, but in support for previous Cuban, Korean, and Iranian dictatorships. Biden, however, didn't challenge Palin on this simplistic distortion.

### **Israel and its Neighbors**

*BIDEN: Here's what the president [Bush] said when we said no. He insisted on elections on the West Bank, when I said, and others said, and Barack Obama said, "Big mistake. Hamas will win. You'll legitimize them." What happened? Hamas won.*

Biden's position of opposing democratic elections in Arab countries is quite disturbing and represents a significant step back from the Bush administration's limited support for such elections. The lesson that should have been learned from Hamas' victory in the January 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections isn't that the United States should oppose free elections. Instead, Biden should have recognized that Hamas' victory came about as a direct result of U.S. policies, supported by Biden, that have provided Israeli occupation forces with the sufficient military, financial, and diplomatic support to engage in its ongoing repression and colonization in the Palestinian West Bank. It's such policies that led to the rise of this radical Islamist group, which did not even exist until after a quarter century of U.S.-backed Israeli occupation and the failure of the United States to move the peace process forward in a manner that could have provided the Palestinians with any realistic hope that a viable Palestinian state would result.

Failure to prevent the Palestinian government from allowing all major Palestinian political parties from participating in a parliamentary election doesn't "legitimize" Hamas. Unfortunately, Hamas was already seen as legitimate by the plurality of Palestinian voters who gave them their parliamentary majority.

*PALIN: “We will support Israel[,]. . .this peace-seeking nation, and they have a track record of being able to forge these peace agreements. . .They succeeded with Egypt. I’m sure that we’re going to see more success there, also.”*

Israel “succeeded” in its peace agreement with Egypt because, under pressure from the Carter administration, the Israeli government agreed to withdraw from all Egyptian territory captured in the 1967 war. By contrast, Israel — with the support of the Bush administration as well as Senators McCain and Biden — has refused to consider a complete withdrawal from Palestinian and Syrian territory despite assurances by Syrian, Palestinian, and other Arab leaders of full diplomatic relations and strict security guarantees in return.

The refusal of Israel to agree to a complete withdrawal from these occupied territories — even with minor and reciprocal border adjustments — as called for in a series of landmark UN Security Council resolutions and by virtually the entire international community, raises serious questions regarding Palin’s characterization of Israel as a “peace-seeking” nation.

*BIDEN: When [in 2006] . . .along with France, we kicked Hezbollah out of Lebanon, I said and Barack said, “Move NATO forces in there. Fill the vacuum, because. . .if you don’t, Hezbollah will control it.” Now what’s happened? Hezbollah is a legitimate part of the government in the country immediately to the north of Israel.*

Neither France nor the United States “kicked Hezbollah out of Lebanon.” France was the primary supporter of the August 2006 UN Security Council resolution — initially opposed by the United States because it wanted the devastating war to continue in the hopes of a more clear-cut Israeli victory — which required forces of Hezbollah’s armed militia to withdraw from areas south of the Litani River, located about 20 miles north of the Israeli border. Hezbollah forces withdrew and UN peacekeeping forces have moved into the area. (These forces include troops from NATO countries, but aren’t part of a NATO operation, which would have likely been unnecessarily provocative in a region that had suffered under the colonial rule of three NATO countries.) There’s no “vacuum” in the southernmost parts of Lebanon where the UN peacekeeping forces are stationed and Hezbollah does not “control it.”

In any case, there was never a serious attempt to kick Hezbollah — which is one of Lebanon’s largest political parties, not simply an armed militia — out of Lebanon as a whole.

Furthermore Hezbollah was already “a legitimate part of the government” of Lebanon during the time period referred to by Biden; the Lebanese government at that time included one Hezbollah cabinet member and a second cabinet minister of an allied party. It’s not “what’s happened” subsequent to the alleged failures of the Bush administration to push for the deployment of NATO forces, as Biden claimed. Biden actually knows this: he was a cosponsor of a Senate resolution in July 2006 that included the clause, “the Government of Lebanon, which includes representatives of Hezbollah, . . .”

*BIDEN: Iran[’s] . . . proxies now have a major stake in Lebanon, as well as in the Gaza Strip with Hamas.*

Neither the Palestinian Hamas nor the Lebanese Hezbollah are “proxies” of Iran.

Hamas evolved out of the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni movement that came into being decades before the Iranian revolution and that has had no significant ties with Iran. From Hamas’ founding in the early 1980s until just a few years ago, this Palestinian Islamist group’s primary outside funding came from Saudi Arabia and other Arab monarchies in the Gulf region that have traditionally been hostile to Iran. Since the U.S.-led international sanctions against the Hamas-led branch of the Palestine Authority was launched in early 2006, Iran has contributed funds to help keep the government functioning, but this does not make Hamas an Iranian “proxy.”

By contrast, Iran played a significant role in the establishment of Hezbollah as an armed resistance movement against the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon in the mid-1980s, and Iran has provided some funding and armaments for the militia. However, Hezbollah has long evolved into a populist political party with substantial support from Lebanon's Shiite population — the country's largest community — and follows its own agenda.

### **Afghanistan and Pakistan**

*PALIN: Barack Obama had said that all we're doing in Afghanistan is air-raiding villages and killing civilians. And such a reckless, reckless comment and untrue comment, again, hurts our cause.*

Obama never said that that is "all we're doing in Afghanistan." Furthermore, it's well-documented by the Afghan government, independent journalists, reputable human rights groups, and even the U.S. military itself that U.S. air strikes on Afghan villages have killed civilians. Indeed, the civilian death toll is in the thousands and has been a major contributing factor in losing the hearts and minds of the Afghan population, particularly in the countryside. Strangely, however, Biden refused to defend Obama on this point.

*BIDEN: There have been 7,000 madrassas built along that [Afghan-Pakistani] border. We should be helping them build schools to compete for those hearts and minds of the people in the region so that we're actually able to take on terrorism ...*

A madrasa is a school. Most madrassas offer a general education with a special emphasis on Islamic principles. Only a small minority are affiliated with reactionary strains of Islam that preach the kind of doctrine that rationalizes terrorism. Biden's comment simply reinforces Islamophobic bigotry.

It's also important to note that most of the extremist madrassas in that area were started in the 1980s when the United States — in a policy Biden supported — armed and financed hard-line fundamentalist mujahideen fighters based in that border region who were then engaged in a war against the Communist regime and its Soviet backers then in power in Afghanistan.

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