

President Obama, the United States and the Middle East

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At the time of writing this piece, events in Gaza and the Israeli operation are still unfolding. While the outcome is unclear, what is known is that there has been a terrible toll on the civilian population, that passions in the entire region are again inflamed and that peace is certainly no closer. When the fighting halts and a ceasefire is achieved, the same problems will still be there confronting Israel, its neighbors and the new Obama administration—though perhaps with an added sense of urgency. What the latest Gaza crisis has again shown, if indeed further evidence were necessary, is just how iconic an issue the unresolved Palestinian grievance is for the region and beyond, and how this issue has a capacity to generate crises that also affect the United States and its interests.

On several occasions during the presidential campaign and transition, Barack Obama suggested that he was well aware of the centrality of this issue and would move swiftly to address it. When introducing his national security team to the world on December 1, he explicitly referred to Israeli–Palestinian peace as one of only three items that were highlighted. During the campaign, in a particularly compelling interview with Jeffrey Goldberg of *The Atlantic*, the then-senator from Illinois noted that “what I think is that this constant wound, that this constant sore, does infect all of our foreign policy. The lack of a resolution to this problem provides an excuse for anti-American militant jihadists to engage in inexcusable actions, and so we have a national security interest in solving this, and I also believe that Israel has a security interest in solving this because I believe that the status quo is unsustainable.”

Of course, there will be a multitude of demands on the new president's time, not least an almost-unprecedented economic crisis and two wars. But he seems to be exhibiting a clear intention to take on the Israeli–Arab conflict (unlike his

predecessor). The key question then becomes less whether or when the Obama administration will pursue a peace process, but rather how and with which toolbox?

The temptation will be to pick up the existing Annapolis process initiated under President Bush in November 2007 and to run with it. It is a temptation that should be resisted. The failure of Annapolis is about more than bad luck and bad timing. It is a structurally flawed process that embraced all of the shortcomings of the earlier Oslo efforts and then added some more of its own (gradualism, excessive reliance on bilateral negotiations, exacerbating Palestinian divisions).

The Middle East that President Obama inherits will be a very different one from that which Bill Clinton bequeathed to George W. Bush. The policy instruments deployed under Clinton (successful compared to the Bush years, but that is a very relative yardstick) require retooling in light of the new regional realities.

“Birth pangs of a new Middle East” was the unfortunate and now infamous phrase used by Secretary Rice during the 2006 Lebanon crisis to explain America’s insistence on delaying early ceasefire efforts in order to pursue this more far-reaching change via military means. President Obama will indeed, in many respects, face a new Middle East, but not necessarily the one that Secretary Rice was hoping to birth. Regional divisions and rivalries have intensified to breaking point. The image of two camps competing regionally, moderates and extremists, is an incomplete one—the so-called moderates often do not seem that way to their own domestic opponents, while the so-called extremists often include in their coalition popular, secular and democratic reformers. And it is this so-called moderate camp that is very much on the defensive against a narrative that has an increasingly broad popular appeal in the region. They tend to also suffer from a democracy and legitimacy deficit. Simply put, America’s allies are not on the winning side.

Within this mix, ironically, Iran has been much empowered by the policies of the Bush years. With America having generously neutralized its neighborhood rivals (the Baathists in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan), Iran has been able to increase its regional focus and influence.

The experiment with Islamist political inclusion in Palestinian democracy and the subsequent election victory of Hamas was woefully mismanaged by the West (including Israel), helping to produce a violently divided Palestinian house—an edifice upon which it will be almost impossible to construct Palestinian statehood. Israel, too, albeit in less dramatic ways, appears to be in a period of deeply entrenched political dysfunction, and any peace process ignores this factor at its

peril. Even the outgoing Israeli prime minister, Ehud Olmert, who was probably bolder than any of his predecessors in articulating how existential and urgent a need it is for Israel for there to be a viable Palestinian state, will leave office having presided not over peace and de-occupation, but rather over two wars and further settlement expansion.

When President Obama turns to the Middle East, he will discover a region in which America's credibility and standing have been painfully sapped. This is a result of not only war, but also of perceived American indifference to legitimate regional grievances, most notably the Palestinian issue. This, of course, has enhanced an environment ripe for exploitation by the most extreme salafi jihadist forces of al-Qa'ida and its ilk. Into this fray will enter an America that is stretched both economically and militarily. It is also an America that has limited the number of actors, including key actors, with whom it is engaging in the region. The Bush administration frequently indulged in self-marginalization.

The vacuum created has been partly filled by others. Turkey, for instance, has been mediating proximity peace talks between Israel and Syria. Qatar brokered the arrangement for internal Lebanese political reconciliation. The Saudis managed to create a Palestinian national reconciliation and unity government in Mecca in 2007, and the Egyptians were the mediators for June 2008 ceasefire arrangements between Israel and Hamas (efforts undermined by the Bush administration). On occasion, America's diplomatic downsizing in the region has created new openings for Europe—the EU 3 talks with Iran, French outreach toward Syria and in the latest Gaza crisis and the Italian efforts during the Lebanon 2006 war are examples. Russia, too, has reasserted itself as a regional player, and while China continues to tread only gently in regional affairs, it will not have escaped anyone's attention that China dispatched its first foreign naval expedition since the fifteenth century when it joined international patrolling efforts off the coast of Somalia to prevent piracy in late 2008.

Yet the US remains an indispensable player. The efforts of others at mediation in the absence of American support or follow-up, more often than not, will fall short. This was the experience in Lebanon 2006, and on the issues of Iran, the Israel–Syria peace talks, Palestinian division and elsewhere, and is playing out in Gaza as these words are written. To restabilize the Middle East, achieve a new equilibrium and advance the peace process, America will very much be needed at the table, and often in a leading role.

Against this gloomy backdrop, there are at least two pieces of good news for the incoming US president. Firstly, there is an increasing consensus within the US regarding the failures of Bush Middle East policies and the need to chart a new

course. Crucially, this includes an acknowledgement that a restabilized Middle East and an effective peace process are important American national security interests. Already in December of 2006, the congressionally mandated Iraq Study Group report, led by James Baker and Lee Hamilton, expressed at length the connection between America's prospects in Iraq and the need to create a new regional environment principally via reengagement on Arab–Israeli peace. A report published in December by two of the most establishment US think tanks, the Council on Foreign Relations and the Brookings Institution, entitled “Restoring the Balance: A Middle East Strategy for the Next President,” is further evidence of how mainstream and consensus this trend of thinking has become. The bottom line—if the US wants to reestablish its standing, re-empower its allies, create a conducive regional climate for troop withdrawals in Iraq, push back against salafists and decrease Iranian leverage, then it has to deliver a credible peace process and especially progress on the Palestinian front.

Secondly, the Middle East is ready to look again at an America led by Barack Hussein Obama, and eager to turn a new page. The hope that is manifest in so much of the world, a world that is not anti-American but has been concerned by American policies, has not passed the Middle East by. President Obama is popular and has a new opportunity. It should not be squandered.

How, then, might the Obama administration use this moment to its advantage? Here are seven suggestions for a new approach:

1. Count to Ten and Rethink

Once the Gaza crisis is over, there will be pressure to dive headfirst into the Israeli–Palestinian issue, to relaunch the Annapolis talks and to use the channeling of donor assistance for Gazan reconstruction as a way to continue playing internal Palestinian politics and accentuate division. Don't do it (well, do the reconstruction, but deploy the aid wisely). Take a long, hard look at why Annapolis failed to deliver. Can the Palestinian economy be rebuilt under a system of closures and checkpoints that themselves are the product of the basic unresolved conflict and ongoing reality of an occupation duty bound to protect a civilian settler population? Are Israeli security concerns going to be sufficiently addressed by building Palestinian security forces that are likely over time to lack credibility with their own public and come under intense pressure to turn their guns on the IDF and/or settlers? When it comes to the thorniest issues on the two-state agenda, can the parties alone in bilateral negotiations resolve these issues? Will a leadership on the Palestinian side that presides over a geographically and politically divided Palestinian movement and that is increasingly lacking public

support be in a position to close an historic and difficult deal? And after all of the past failures and public cynicism, will Israel close a deal without a significant incentives package, Arab support and security guarantees and, on the other hand, real disincentives for not doing so? I would suggest that all the answers to those questions are negative and that the first challenge is to undertake a serious policy rethink.

2. Find a New Language

It is not only policy on the Middle East that must change, but also the vocabulary. No one in the Middle East is expecting America to drop its Israeli ally, nor should this happen. The US will, and should, remain staunchly and unwaveringly committed to Israel's security. But it needs to find a way of doing so while at the same time articulating genuine and convincing understanding for the Palestinian predicament. It is possible. No president could be better placed than Barack Obama to find such a vocabulary. It will be a question more of nuance than of absolutes. And the new administration will be judged from the very first words it utters.

3. Get America's Regional and International Allies on Board

Before embarking on a new policy, the Obama administration should conduct a round of frank discussions with its allies in the region and beyond. Friends in the Arab world will need to be told that America is now in the business of calming and resolving, rather than exacerbating, regional tensions. It will do so by being inclusive in whom it talks to and whom it encourages others to talk to. It will continue to promote democracy, but focus on building the software—rule of law, various freedoms in civil society—rather than an obsession with the hardware of elections.

The US will expect significant Arab support in advancing peace with Israel and will seek to build on the Arab peace initiative. Ultimately, in ratcheting down tensions and reconciling intra-Arab conflicts, the US will begin to develop an inclusive regional security architecture.

A similar conversation should take place with Israel, its main predicate being that the US is interested in a peace outcome more than a peace process, and will walk in lockstep with Israel on all of its key legitimate concerns (on security, finality of borders and their recognition/legitimacy), while making clear that it wants to get this done, to see de-occupation and Palestinian statehood. Finally, the US should articulate this new approach to the Quartet, particularly its European partners,

and expect strong European support—diplomatic, financial and otherwise—in moving forward.

4. Apply the Rethink to Israel–Palestine

In seeking to address the key concerns of the respective Israeli and Palestinian sides, the US should rely less upon and defer less to bilateral negotiations, and should advance its own solutions, where relevant, finding international, regional and multilateral substitutes for issues on which the parties are in bilateral deadlock. This could include proposals for solutions on key issues. Security arrangements could emphasize, initially at least, an international role (i.e., NATO forces to guarantee that there is no vacuum or anarchy for a period of time post occupation), Arab guarantees for the finality of claims and recognition of Israel and its new borders, and an international mechanism for rehabilitating Palestinian refugees, including an acknowledgement of the historic injustice.

To this would be added a package of benefits and incentives that an international alliance would be in a position to confer. Finally, the US should encourage internal Palestinian reconciliation and create a division of labor whereby regional parties and certain Europeans (rather than America itself) work to motivate and test Hamas to clearly move away from armed resistance toward an exclusively political focus.

5. Re-engage with Syria

The US has not had an ambassador in Syria since February 2005. The US should rebuild its own relationship with Syria, and directly involve itself with Israeli–Syrian talks, something it has avoided since the re-launching of those talks via Turkey. An Israeli–Syrian agreement would be needed in the context of a comprehensive Israeli–Arab peace and normalization as per the Arab peace initiative, and is almost certainly a prerequisite for an Israel–Lebanon deal. In addition, there is strongly emerging support in the Israeli security establishment for a deal with Syria, including all that it would entail regarding Golan withdrawal, largely because of the positive regional implications from such a deal for Israel (regarding Iran, Hamas, Hizbullah, etc.).

A deal will not be easy and has floundered in the past on details or on Israeli political and coalition concerns. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to consider that at this stage a broad package on the Palestinian, Syrian and pan-Arab front would make more sense, be more attainable, and even more marketable in Israel than a piecemeal process, especially if the incentives are well calibrated and sufficiently attractive. Even absent a breakthrough with Israel, the US should work on its

bilateral relations with Syria, in concert with the Europeans, in attempting to maximize the prospects of Syria playing a constructive regional role.

6. Lock in the Political Process in Lebanon

In working to avoid a return to violent internal conflict in Lebanon, efforts should be enhanced to strengthen the current political process, notably in advance of elections this June. All sides should be encouraged to be invested in that process, and part of that process will be the signals that other regional actors are sending. The US should discourage its allies and others that it will now reach out to (such as Syria) from pursuing proxy conflicts in Lebanon. It should also seek to remove as many as possible of the outstanding issues with Israel that can be exploited to trigger tension—such as the Rajah and Shebaa Farms territorial issues and Israeli air force over-flights. Efforts should also be made to strengthen the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 and the demilitarization of Lebanon (notably of Hizbullah). It is interesting to note that as of this writing, Hizbullah has not opened up a second front against Israel during the current Gaza crisis, which suggests that incentives can be created that can significantly and even decisively influence the calculations and actions of parties like Hizbullah.

7. Face the Challenge of Iran Policy

The dramatic recent decline in oil prices has had more of an impact on the Iranian economy and Iranian decision making than years of sanctions. Taking the steps outlined in 1 through 6 above would be the diplomatic parallel of the oil price plummet. In other words, Iran's regional political leverage would be significantly reduced if these steps were to be taken. Iran, after all, is able to use and feed off the unresolved Palestinian issue, Palestinian division, crises within Lebanon and overall regional tensions, including the existing Syria policy. As the US seeks to enhance its leverage in advance of, and as part of, negotiations with Iran, it would do well to consider utilizing these aspects of regional policy as more effective tools than the issuing of further threats.

Direct US engagement with Iran is now almost inevitable. Indeed, it already exists to an extent on the Iraq issue (with the previous ambassadorial meetings in Baghdad) and in Undersecretary William Burns having joined the recent P5+1 in Geneva. In moving forward on such engagement, the US might consider these five suggestions:

- be willing to engage in the broad range of issues of mutual concern, not just issues of US interest;

- try to build on areas of agreement—Afghanistan might be one, certain Iraq-related questions another;
- display a degree of patience—there is a long history here, and while negotiations cannot be used as a time waster by Iran, they should also not be conducted with a stopwatch in hand;
- maintain the international alliance moving forward; and
- be creative on solutions that accord Iran its Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) rights to pursue a civilian nuclear energy program while insisting on the maximum safeguards to guarantee and verify non-militarization.

Of course, this might not work, and one might have to return to the exclusive path of sanctions and containment. But the regional dynamic will always be crucial, and there seems little reason to continue to empower Iran regionally.

In fact, this might be the central message for an Obama administration—to face the region holistically and to appreciate the connections that intertwine the various issues. The Bush administration connected the Middle East dots in a way that left a very ugly mess. The Obama administration does not have the luxury of a blank page, a clean slate. But it does have a new opportunity, and that is a rare and precious thing that if thoughtfully nurtured can indeed help create a livable equilibrium in this most troubled of regions.



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