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President Obama and Middle East Expectations

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with an introduction by

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SUMMARY

- President Obama's election reveals a democratic process and transfer of power that many in the Middle East want to emulate and celebrate.
- Enthusiasm for the new administration could easily turn to hostility if the new administration does not back up its words with quick and concrete changes to U.S. Middle East policy.
- To truly rebuild trust between the United States and the Middle East, President Obama must focus on three issues: Palestine, Iraq, and political reform.
- The new administration must address early the issue of Palestine to alter the image Arabs have of the United States as a friend of regional dictators and an unquestioning supporter of Israel.
- President Obama can restore U.S. credibility in the region by avoiding conflicting policies and unilateral ideology and by engaging moderate Islamist groups.

Introduction

The Carnegie Endowment has monitored closely the Arab media's coverage of the long U.S. election campaign and the reactions to Barack Obama's victory. Recently, the Carnegie Middle East Center commissioned a series of commentaries from Arab writers and analysts.

Obama's election elicited unprecedented interest and even enthusiasm in the Middle East. Arab media provided intensive coverage of the campaign, and the presidential debates were broadcast live and watched by many, even though they were taking place in the early morning hours.

Arabs were fascinated by the openness of a political system and the vibrancy of a society that could mobilize and openly reject an incumbent government—many commented ruefully about the contrast with the situation in their own countries. They were also struck by the willingness of the American voters to put behind them the country's long history

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of racial discrimination and to elect by a large margin a person whose background would have disqualified him in the past. On this point, too, many noted with dismay the contrast between the immobility of Arab societies and the dynamism of the United States.

Obama's election was in a sense a public diplomacy triumph for the United States, the first real success the United States has won in the Arab world in a long time, and probably the most important one since President Eisenhower backed Egypt's efforts to regain control of the Suez Canal in 1956. Yet the success may prove to be short-lived: Arabs were reacting to a concrete change, not to words, and are likely to revert to the old hostility unless Obama's words are backed by concrete changes in U.S. Middle East policies.

Soon after the election, Arab analysts and the public turned their attention to what Obama should do in the Middle East, presenting the president-elect with an agenda that, while not impossible, is certainly daunting. First and foremost, Arabs expect the Obama administration to focus immediately on the Palestinian issue, returning to the role of honest broker in order to bring about a settlement that respects Palestinian rights. Second, Arab commentators want the Obama administration to stop ostracizing Islamist movements and recognize that moderate Islamists must be accepted as legitimate participants in the political process and a key to political reform. Third, they demand that the United States abandon its support for Arab authoritarian regimes and clearly embrace a democratization agenda not only in words, as President George W. Bush did, but in practice as well. Unfortunately, it is not clear what the new administration is expected to do in practice, since most writers also make it clear that the United States cannot dictate what Arab countries should do. Finally, the administration is expected to open a dialogue with Iran and end the occupation of Iraq, while also restoring stability there.

Because Arab demands and expectations of Obama are so ambitious, many are beginning to express skepticism about the new administration's capacity to undertake far-reaching policy changes. Some even question whether he has the will to do so, or whether he is, as some writers put it, part of the American establishment and thus beholden to the same interest groups that have strongly influenced U.S. Middle East policy to date.

The commentaries that follow, chosen from among those commissioned by the Carnegie Middle East Center, are typical of the range of reactions elicited by the election. The full set of commentaries can be found on the Carnegie website in both Arabic and English at www.CarnegieEndowment.org. ■

Obama

GAMAL AL-GHITANY

The U.S. election was not merely a local affair. The world watched its outcome with great intensity. For half a century, I had never been interested in the American presidential election. That changed this year, and the reason is Obama. My interest was not influenced by his African roots or his middle name (Hussein), as I do not form my feelings or opinion on the basis of someone's religion, whatever it may be. Even in the United States those who pointed to Obama's roots or religion met with disapproval. Most notable was the position taken by Colin Powell—a high-profile figure in the Republican Party—who correctly asked "So what if Obama were a Muslim?" underlining that the nature of the question ran contrary to the spirit of tolerance in the United States. Powell then announced his support for Obama despite his party affiliation.

I admit that I belong to a generation that grew up with a tradition of hostility toward the United States and anything it offers on the political and sometimes the cultural levels. In the 1950s we used to criticize U.S.-funded cultural institutions such as the Franklin Publishing Institute and al-Karnack Publishing House, before realizing their significant contribution to the translation of important works. For example, the Franklin Institute published the only book available in Arabic by the brilliant French architect Le Corbusier, and al-Karnak published some of the best translations of short stories that still adorn my personal library.

Although we criticized publication projects with an American bias, we never took a similar stand against Soviet-sponsored publications. Our position was influenced by the echoes from the Cold War, which reached us through the clash between the capitalist and socialist camps. It took me many years to realize that human civilization from all corners of the world is essential for mankind and its existence. It also took me time to realize that the crucial factors influencing my judgment are my life experiences and the characteristics of the milieu to which I belong and that I should not prematurely reject or embrace preconceived positions.

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The recent U.S. election opened our eyes to the merits of American democracy in particular and those of Western democracy in general. What I have come to realize—thanks to modern information technology—is that the only perfect political form available for humanity is democracy as known by the West for centuries. All talk about specific Oriental or "southern" democracy or democracy as defined by a religion is nothing but an excuse to bolster incumbent repressive regimes, whose rulers refuse any change and do not allow any transparency. Our Arab world is the most miserable example in this regard.

I observe Obama's rise to power with amazement. He is a young man of humble origins, African roots, and immigrant descent who was given a chance to graduate from Harvard Law School, one of the most selective and distinguished schools, before ascending the hierarchy of power to reach its peak, first becoming the Democratic Party's strongest presidential candidate and then being chosen commander-in-chief of the greatest power in the world. There is no doubt that it is this environment that nourishes an individual's potential, that allowed the United States to attain its leading place among nations. If I had had a vote, I would have given it to Obama, with an enthusiasm I share with multitudes across Europe and around the world who understand the importance of such

a man's arrival at the White House. This is an important moment in human history, because Obama's ancestors were slaves, most of whom died during the Middle Passage. This human dimension of his triumph is very important to me, regardless of the details of his election platform. Equally admirable is the uncompromised transparency of an election process that holds candidates accountable for their spending and allows the press to scrutinize the wardrobe and expenses of the Republican candidate's running mate.

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We notice that although the Republican Party occupied the White House, it was nevertheless forced out of power. President Bush's disastrous decisions, especially in foreign policy, hurt the United States to the point where the Republican presidential candidate tried to distance himself from the president. On the other hand, former presidents such as Clinton and Carter were supportive of, and an asset to, Obama. How many former U.S. presidents are still alive? Watching what goes on in America intensifies my feeling that here we live on a different planet and drives me to despair and a sense of futility. Obama's rise to power constitutes an extraordinary achievement in human history. ■

Candid Words for a Candid President

SALAH AD-DIN AL-JOURCHI

President Obama has won overwhelming support not only in the United States but also in the Arab world, where people embraced him with equal enthusiasm. Many Arabs admired him as vehemently as they rejected President Bush's public persona and policies. American voters have their great expectations, but so does the Arab world, which hopes that Obama will rebuild trust between Arabs and the United States.

Before I started writing this article, I asked people around me the same question the Carnegie Endowment asked me: What does President Obama need to do in order not to disappoint Arabs? The answers focused on three issues: Palestine, Iraq, and political reform.

Unsurprisingly, the Palestinian issue was at the heart of Arab concerns. Like Americans, Arabs have a tendency to be idealistic. While U.S. politicians and policy makers have succeeded to a great degree in suppressing, betraying, and marginalizing American ideals in favor of strictly national interests and security, Arabs are still moved by abstract values and lofty demands, despite attempts by their regimes to instill some realism or rather "political pragmatism" in them.

The new American administration can rebuild trust with the peoples of the region only if it makes a tangible shift in policy over the Palestinian issue. Arabs know it is unrealistic to expect the United States to abandon its alliance with Israel due to their significant mutual interests. What Arabs demand is that the U.S. government live up to its promises in supporting peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis. The region has suffered a history of disappointment. Time after time, U.S. administrations fell short of translating their rhetoric into action and achievable plans, or even backed off from previous positions. The United States should not only verbally support the Palestinians it calls "moderates," but it should provide them with concrete support.

This support should go beyond the present limited financial aid and training of Palestinian security forces to fight those whom Israel calls "terrorists." The world often interprets such a policy as inciting internal fighting among Palestinians and provoking a civil war. Vetoing every attempt to reconcile Palestinian factions is also not the kind of support Arabs expect. These policies have achieved little except weakening those "moderates" and American "friends" that have continually tried to persuade successive U.S. administrations to exert minimum pressure on Israel in hopes it will respect signed agreements. A real peace sponsor should strive to win the trust of both sides rather than maintain silence over expansion of Israeli settlements, justify Israeli aggression as "self-defense," deny Palestinians' basic rights, support the siege against the people of the Gaza Strip, and build a wall of separation and discrimination. These policies do not serve "friends" or create a climate of trust. For while there is a drive to hold talks with the Taliban, now regarded as a national resistance group, any form of contact with Hamas is vigorously resisted. Is Hamas more radical than the Taliban?

It is unrealistic to expect the United States to abandon its alliance with Israel, but Arabs demand that the U.S. administration live up to its promises and support peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis.

What the region expects, then, in regard to the Palestinian issue are three things. First, the U.S. government has to engage in an honest and serious dialogue with Israel in which Washington clearly places a limit on Israel's demands. The United States should also modify

the "road map" drafted by the outgoing administration or put forth a new plan; in either case, it should respect basic Palestinian rights. Second, the new administration should give Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas the green light to move toward achieving true national reconciliation, without which he lacks the mandate to forge a deal with Israel. The incoming administration has to engage in direct talks with Hamas and include it in any peace initiative aimed at a permanent settlement in the Middle East. Third, Washington has to call for an international peace conference to foster regional and global momentum that helps end the current impasse.

The second regional concern is the situation in Iraq. Any serious step toward ending occupation there will have a tremendously positive effect on Arab public opinion. For the first time in history, Arabs look at the United States as an occupying force in their part of the world, for they saw the invasion of Iraq as a war on the whole region. So Arabs will welcome any initiative that restores sovereignty and control over their resources to the Iraqi people as a step toward rectifying Arab–U.S. relations. Details are not as important as a clear and unequivocal declaration of the U.S. intention to return things to normal in Iraq. This was one of Obama's strongest and most effective talking points, as his criticism of the war on Iraq and how the Bush administration mishandled it built his immense popularity in the Arab world.

The third issue is of particular concern to Arab elites who demand political reform in the region. Their position has been greatly undermined by the double standard of President Bush's rhetoric and policies. What is needed is not additional public diplomacy funds to convince Arab democrats to like what the previous administration has done. The problem is more complex. What is needed is for the new president to be truly convinced that U.S. national security interests require a quick, peaceful democratization in the region. While Bush backtracked on his 2004 demand that Arab regimes move toward tangible political and democratic reforms, President Obama should retain that position, making democratization of the region a cornerstone of his foreign policy, but without seeking to

blackmail Arab regimes or control the region. The United States abandoned the view that African-Americans are inferior when they overwhelmingly voted for Obama. Isn't it time then for American decision makers to give up the view that Arabs are inferior?

The democracy the region needs is not prepackaged merchandise that comes with preconditions that cannot be examined or altered. Democracy is the same everywhere. It might come in different forms but is built on the same base of freedom of the press, freedom of expression, and respect for the will of the people expressed through transparent and fair elections. Favoring one party over another in the Arab world is not a right of the United States, but only of those who are part of the political systems of the region. If Islamist groups should benefit from any partial political opening, the development should be read in its historical and local context and not used as an excuse to repress Islamists. It is time for President Obama to explore building a different relationship with Islamist groups, for they are part of the current political reality and cannot be excluded. Because of the weakness of Arab regimes, attempting to integrate Islamists into the internal reform effort might be a gamble with possible undesired consequences. Nevertheless, it remains a better option than falling into the trap of treating all Islamist political organizations indiscriminately as enemies. That would play into the hands of increasingly powerful radicals.

Democracy can come in different forms, but everywhere it must be built on the same base of freedom of expression and freedom of the press, and of respect for the will of the people expressed through transparent and fair elections.

In short, there is an expectation in the Arab world that President Obama will turn a new page in U.S.–Arab relations by abandoning a rhetoric that threatens the region with more wars and adopting instead a more reassuring language based on dialogue on thorny issues, such as the stand-off with Iran. The region cannot tolerate another military conflict that only serves the interests of warmongers. ■

Obama and the Middle East: Palestine First

KHALED AL-HROUB

The Arab and Muslim worlds see the United States as an imperial power concerned only with protecting its own interests, even when that means harming the interests of other nations in the region, and ready to do so by force if necessary. Many surveys have shown that the majority of people in the region view the United States as an ally of the despotic Arab regimes, while caring little for the suffering of the average Arab. Above all, for the past 60 years, the United States has stood firmly by Israel's side, throwing its weight behind Israel's expansionist projects on Arab lands and providing it with unlimited support. U.S. alliance with Arab dictatorships and its blind support for Israel are the components of the paradigm through which Arabs perceive the United States. This perception has deteriorated in recent years to an unprecedented level of anti-Americanism. For the public, any understanding or analysis of U.S. policies in the region is explained through this double lens. Every new direction and every new American move or policy is interpreted as directly or indirectly aiming to strengthen autocratic regimes or to support Israel at the expense of Arab and Palestinian rights.

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In fact, I believe that America's pro-Israel stance outweighs its alliance with regional dictators in influencing Arab perceptions. Accordingly, toppling Saddam Hussein was not viewed as regime change but as an imperialist war intended to control Iraq's oil and protect Israel's security by destroying the greatest Arab military power. Consequently, any long-term U.S. policy to change Arab and Muslim public perception of the United States should place a just resolution of the Palestinian issue at the top of its priorities. Otherwise any move, policy, or war by the United States will be seen through the aforementioned paradigm, even if it is based on a moral pretext, such as the removal of a dictator as brutal as Saddam Hussein.

A settlement that restores the Palestinians' basic rights through the unanimously approved two-state solution, UN Security Council resolutions, and the Arab initiative is not impossible to achieve. All the new administration has to do is build on what outgoing Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said recently in a rare moment of candor: There will be no peace without an Israeli pullout from most, if not all, Palestinian land occupied in 1967, including East Jerusalem. When the official U.S. position is to the right of Israel's official position, as it was under the Bush administration, then Washington can only expect more public hostility and growing radicalism and Islamic fundamentalism in the Arab world.

If the Obama administration wants to serve American interests in the region and transform its image from that of an ally of dictators to a friend of the masses, then it has to avoid mimicking previous administrations and dispel a common myth: that the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is terribly complicated and impossible to resolve. This notion is untrue, especially since the Palestinians (and Arabs before them) agreed in 1988 to a two-state solution in accordance with UN resolutions (this decision was taken by the Palestinian National Council in Algiers). These resolutions were drafted by

the United States and Western powers to protect the security of Israel and its interests. Now, ironically, they have become a basic Arab and Palestinian demand. What is absent is the political will to settle the conflict, particularly on the U.S. side.

One of the missteps the Obama administration must avoid is delaying any serious interest in the Palestinian issue until its second term—this has lately almost become a tradition for U.S. presidents. Every American president seeks re-election, and re-election requires him to not anger the powerful Jewish lobby. Palestinians and Arabs know and despise this. This was the case for both President Clinton and President Bush. Delaying attention to the Palestinian issue only feeds animosity toward the United States in the region, because belated peace efforts lack serious motivation and are often pressed by lack of time and deadlines. It would be naïve not to assume Obama will seek re-election. But there is a new development that both Obama and the Arabs could exploit to push the Palestinian issue to the forefront during Obama's first term: the global financial and economic crisis centered on the United States.

This global crisis represents the top priority for Obama both on the national and international levels and is likely to dominate the first few months of his term. There is widespread agreement that to address the crisis, the United States needs a collective effort by all influential economic powers in the world. Recently, the West has been showing special interest in the Arab world, in particular the Gulf states. The aim is to attract liquid capital and investments to make up for the staggering losses in the U.S. and other Western stock markets and to revive the global economic and financial cycle. Obama could use this card—assuming good intentions on his part—to persuade Jewish lobbies and Israeli leaders of the need to trade a quick move toward resolving the Palestinian issue for Arab financial intervention. More importantly, Arab countries should be courageous and conscientious enough to demand this bargain: Arab assistance in exchange for Palestine!

The Obama administration must not wait to address the Palestinian issue until the second term of a new presidency—a misstep taken by both presidents Clinton and Bush.

There remains the fear, possibly exaggerated but not unfounded, that the new administration will continue to display the excessively arrogant attitude of the outgoing one, embodied in its unilateral policies. The Bush administration was unilateral in order to make up for the absence of political capital. The Obama administration has an excess of political capital; this could create another type of arrogance, based on the fact that the administration has different priorities and unprecedented popular and international support. The outgoing administration made the unilateral decision to shelve the Palestinian issue because it did not see it as pressing. The new administration might postpone any involvement, counting on the world's understanding of the presence of other pressing priorities. In either case, the end result would be the same. ■

The Obama Administration and Islamist Parties:

ANY HOPE OF TURNING A NEW PAGE?

MUSTAPHA AL-KHALFI

There is a unanimous agreement in the Middle East that the election of Barack Obama will bring about a change in U.S. Middle East policy. There is still, however, disagreement over the extent and range of that change. This is due not to an absence of clarity in the president's program or lack of the credibility needed for a successful foreign policy, but to the complex political reality that Obama will inherit. The Bush administration has tried many inconsistent policies, and the effect has been to isolate the United States and dampen the prospect of far-reaching changes. How will the new president fulfill these high expectations of change, while being weighed down by the Bush administration's legacy?

What the new administration needs to realize is that political reforms are interconnected with engaging in a dialogue with Islamic parties.

U.S. policy toward moderate Islamist movements is a clear example of this inconsistency. Arab hopes for a tangible change in this policy have often clashed with the Bush administration's complex legacy. This, in turn, leaves the impression that all options have been exhausted and makes the choice more appealing simply to avoid dealing with the Islamist movements. However, U.S. progress in the Middle East hinges on abandoning this uncertainty in dealing with moderate Islamist groups.

George W. Bush's policy failures stem from three factors. The first is lack of credibility owing to his administration's double standard in dealing with developments in the region and the contradiction between the administration's stated policies and actions. This was clear in the way in which the Bush administration dealt with the Arab–Israeli conflict and with Hamas, as well as with the situation involving Lebanon, Syria, and Hizbollah. In both situations, U.S. policy can be best described as a coup against its own program of democratizing the Middle East, advocated in the previous two years. In addition, the administration's unilateral and illegitimate decision to go to war with Iraq was a demonstration of a U.S. foreign policy that leads to destructive chaos and alienates allies. The resignation of several heads of the Bush public diplomacy office clearly shows a crisis of credibility.

The second factor is a blunt unilateralist ideology, shaped by neoconservatives, which lacks local and international support. This vision is the polar opposite of the equally blunt pragmatism of the Clinton era, which produced policies that ceaselessly used slogans of democracy and reform to push other priorities in the region. It reduced them to mere rhetoric without any effort to translate them into action. What the Bush administration adopted was a counter rhetoric under the banners of creative chaos and spreading freedom, which were a pretext for regime change. Spreading democracy was a war of ideas to win hearts and minds, rather than a direct connection to a true understanding of democratic values, which tolerate differences of opinions and reject closed-mindedness. The result was resistance in the Middle East to what many perceived as an arrogant U.S. project to dominate the region.

In addition to unilateral ideology and lack of credibility, the failure of the Bush admin-

istration was due to ambiguity in its policies. This stemmed from conflicting priorities in the Middle East: supporting Israel's security while pressing for the democratization of the region, ensuring the flow of oil, protecting allied regimes while fighting terrorism, opening markets, and pursuing public diplomacy. Because of these conflicting policy goals, the United States found itself without true allies and with limited and ineffective achievements. Its projects, such as the Future Forum, were doomed to failure, and several key goals, such as the creation of a U.S.–Middle East free trade zone, were shelved. This conflict of interests shaped the U.S. public position and made it hostage to other developments elsewhere.

It is clear that the success of U.S. policies in the Middle East under the Obama administration depends on avoiding these three policy flaws. With the landslide mandate the new president won on November 4, he should be able to restore substantial credibility and build a clearer and more harmonious policy compared to the unilateralist ideology of his predecessor. Obama has already made some progress in this regard by announcing his intention to open a dialogue with the Muslim world, stressing his intention to devise a well-defined exit strategy in Iraq, and expressing his willingness to hold direct talks with Iran. What remains ambiguous is his policy toward the Arab–Israeli conflict, in which he must adopt a more balanced and even-handed mediating role. As a result of the across-the-board policy shift the Obama administration is promising, we can expect the United States to turn a new page in its relation with Islamist parties, particularly in light of the setback in its democratization efforts in the past two years.

Islamic parties' victories in the 2005 Egyptian and Palestinian elections have radically changed U.S. policy toward these groups and led to a sterner congressional restriction on any sign of openness with them. But has this shift in policy been productive? Absolutely not. U.S. disengagement from a diplomatic process that includes talking with Islamist groups has proven to be a failure. Imposing a siege on the Palestinian people has not weakened Hamas, and ultimately Egypt was asked to sponsor channels of negotiation to end the stand-off. The stability in Lebanon was made possible only by an understanding between the government and Hizbollah, one the United States opposed. To integrate Sunna into the political process in Iraq and contain the resistance, the United States had to open talks with some of its enemies. The government in Afghanistan, the scene of another U.S. war, knows that it eventually has to start negotiating with the Taliban and integrate them in the political process. The balances of power in the Middle East have shifted, a development that made Bush's and Clinton's approaches unworkable. What the new administration needs to realize is that political reforms are connected with engaging Islamic parties in a dialogue.

The past two years have proven that the claim that democracy in the region has to wait until the development of education, civil society, and party pluralism are strengthened is a myth. The claim, in fact, is based on fears that anti-American politicians might rise to power through elections. Unfortunately some of the president-elect's advisers are echoing this position, dampening expectations for a new direction in U.S. foreign policy in the region. The path the Obama administration should take instead is to engage in a serious discussion with Congress about a gradual but profound reassessment of U.S. policies in the Middle East. People in that region, like Americans, are yearning for change. ■

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RESOURCES

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Sharing the Burden in the Middle East, Marina Ottaway, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Brief no. 71, December 2008, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/sharing_burden_middle_east.pdf.

Syrian–Israeli Peace: A Possible Key to Regional Change, Paul Salem, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Brief no. 70, December 2008, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/syrian_israeli_peace.pdf.

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