
The Middle East: changing from external arbiter to regional player

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REGIONAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE UNITED STATES

Relative to other regions of the world, the Middle East attracts a disproportionately large part of America's foreign policy attention, presenting successive presidents with some of their most enduring challenges. Rarely, if ever, do new presidents inherit a clean slate for launching new policy initiatives in this region, and the options facing President Barack Obama from the start of his administration were no exception to this general rule.

More than ever since January 2009, pursuing the interests of the United States in the Middle East – above all, confronting the rise of Iran as a dominant regional power and its illicit nuclear activities, securing the Persian Gulf region as a major source of America's and the world's energy and protecting Israel as a key international ally while trying to broker a resolution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict – has been complicated by the continuing presence of US forces in Iraq and the interrelated nature of sub-state and intra-state relations within the region.

Relations between the United States and Israel have already begun to adjust to a new post-Bush era, in which the first steps undertaken by the Obama administration have been neither successful nor warmly received by the Israeli public.¹ Changes both within the United States (above all the advent of the new pro-Israeli and pro-peace lobby J-Street, which takes a different stance from AIPAC, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee) and in the right-leaning configurations of Israeli politics make longer-term prognoses of where this relationship will go particularly hard to make so early in the Obama presidency. Yet we can be confident that it will not remain a static relationship, despite the stresses already encountered in forging any kind of bilateral consensus over how to re-engage the peace process and, in turn, to normalize Israel's relations with the rest of the region.

However, US relations with Israel always take a different form from US relations with the Arab and Muslim states of the Middle East. In assessing the challenges and changes the Obama administration faces in this region, the focus in this chapter is principally on the dynamics of the broader Arab and

non-Israeli context of regional opinion. Understanding this context will be vital to the success of the Obama administration's policies in the region.

From the perspective of Arab and Muslim opinion towards the United States, one thing was clear from January 2009: the Obama administration inherited some of the most negative ratings in local opinion polls the United States has ever experienced. The critical starting date for this shift was March 2003, when the US-led military invasion of Iraq provoked widespread debate not only in the United States itself but across the wider expanses of a region stretching eastwards from Morocco to Iran and south as far as Sudan.

Of all the statistics arising from the 2008 University of Maryland/Zogby International poll of six Arab states (Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates), the most striking was that 88 per cent of respondents considered the United States to be one of two states that posed 'the biggest threat' to them. This percentage only narrowly followed that for Israel, which 95 per cent considered to pose the biggest threat. Asked how much confidence they had in the United States, 70 per cent responded that they had 'no confidence', 25 per cent that they had 'some confidence' and only 4 per cent that they had 'a lot of confidence'. Questioned about attitudes towards the United States in general, 64 per cent were 'very unfavourable', 19 per cent 'somewhat unfavourable', 11 per cent somewhat favourable and only 4 per cent (again) 'very favourable'. Perhaps less discouragingly in a survey that otherwise appears resolutely anti-American, these attitudes were based more on American policy in the Middle East (80 per cent) than on American values *per se* (12 per cent).²

One of the first tasks facing President Obama, therefore, was to promise change: not only in US policy towards the Middle East, but in the manner in which the region itself is perceived and dealt with in American policy circles. Three significant speeches – remotely to the Iranian people in March 2009 and in person in Turkey in April and Cairo in June 2009³ – reinforced the inclusive and respectful tone in which relations with Muslims and minorities had already been discussed in Obama's pre-electoral campaign and inauguration speeches. Unsurprisingly, and before rhetoric could be judged against actions, this articulation of a new approach was almost immediately reflected in a shift of mood in Middle Eastern opinion. As the new administration promised to balance its support for Israel with concrete support for the creation of a Palestinian state, a new atmosphere of optimism was reflected in the first of 2009's regional opinion polls.⁴

Regional opinion nevertheless remains volatile, as became evident by late summer 2009 in the slipping away of support for the Obama team's first forays into the region. The main objectives of the new administration – namely, to propel Israelis and Palestinians towards peace and put relations with Iran on a new footing – were swiftly met by the intransigence and evasiveness of regional leaders on all sides. Following the disappointments of the UN General Assembly meeting of September 2009 (when the launch of a detailed Obama-led regional peace plan was widely anticipated), the regional debate then revolved around whether the Obama administration would indeed be able to move beyond the

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traditional obstacles to reorienting US policy in the Middle East. These obstacles, it became clear, are still as much rooted in American politics as in the ability of the new administration to exert leverage and authority over regional actors. As the limits to persuasion and public diplomacy became evident by October 2009, further doubts were raised in the region about the capacity of the administration to formulate a strategy capable of translating any of its aspirations into significant actions.⁵

The fact that such statistical snapshots of public, as well as elite, opinion over these developments have been produced is significant in a region usually noted for its lack of freedom of speech.⁶ Polls generally conducted from outside the region have nevertheless failed to capture the growing immediacy of opinion shifts that has come to characterize the Middle East in recent years. Apart from in Israel, and to a lesser degree Turkey and Morocco, the region's press and state-owned media channels can rarely be deemed to reflect an accurate or uncalculated view of majority opinion. What is new is the upsurge in online blogging and instant commentary that increasingly large numbers of people can access and engage in. Likewise, region-wide access to a growing range of satellite television channels has shaped opinions and reactions to events across the Arabic-speaking world. The social and political effects have been such that the Arab League and the region's guardians of Islamic moral order have belatedly been trying to regulate and contain these developments.⁷

The rise in both open-source and covert debate nevertheless emphasizes one of the current paradoxes of the Middle East. Freedom of speech is no longer as constrained as it was, despite the continuing arrests of bloggers and journalists in Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. The problem lies in the lack of accountability, both of those disseminating their unedited views and of the central state authorities that online and on-air opinion-formers seek to critique. The growth and articulation of public opinion, in other words, have no more opened the door to greater popular engagement in the real affairs of state than did the relative silence and silencing of public debate in earlier years.

The polling data on regional views of the United States should be seen against this background, not least since the lack of local accountability only encourages the tendency to blame the United States for not fulfilling more of the expectations once held of the world's most powerful democracy: to liberate the peoples of the region from authoritarian rule. In response to the past decade's disappointments, the standard line of popular argument across the region (with the obvious exception of Israel) has been only partially shifted by the advent of the Obama administration, and is in danger of slipping back into place if no progress is made on any of the core issues endangering the stability of the region.

The pervasive popular argument is that the United States invaded Iraq to secure its hold over the region's oil, to preserve its regional and global dominance, to defend Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories and to subject Muslims (both Sunni and Shia) to their will. America's promotion of democracy is not genuine, but rather a smokescreen for the pursuit of the country's 'global war on terror' under a different guise by the Obama administration. 'Proof' of this

thesis lies in the US government's preference for strengthening alliances with authoritarian regimes that detain and interrogate terrorist suspects on their behalf, rather than liberating the majority of Arab and Muslim peoples, or accepting Islamism as a legitimate form of political expression. The widespread use of US military force, the unaccounted-for deaths of thousands of Iraqis, and the symbolic resonance of Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay all confirm the Americans' double standards, whereby invoking the security imperatives of themselves, their European allies and Israel allows them to ignore the miseries they and their local allies inflict on Arabs and Muslims.

A failure to close the Guantánamo Bay facility within a year, as President Obama promised in January 2009, and the direction taken in managing relations with Islamist groups, above all in relation to the Palestinian Hamas movement now controlling the Gaza Strip, will be judged as litmus tests for the credibility of the changes proposed in the Ankara and Cairo speeches of the first half of 2009. The identification of people in one part of the region with events taking place elsewhere or over wider issues of Muslim politics often provides a substitute for the limited political openings that Arab citizens enjoy locally. It also constitutes a complicating factor for US policy. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's public praise in early November 2009 for Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's 'unprecedented' concessions over the issue of West Bank settlements, for example, may well have been intended for an American and Israeli audience. However, it was circulated widely throughout the Arab and Muslim world as evidence that the Obama administration was no different in its unconditional support for Israel from its predecessor.⁸

To some degree, venting public anger over Israel-Palestine reflects popular knowledge that speaking out against the United States and Israel is officially acceptable. It is also an oblique way of criticizing local leaderships for being so closely allied to US policy in the region. In Egypt, for example, public protests and journalistic denigrations of Israel are actively encouraged, just as senior officials often articulate their own public criticisms of US policy in the region. Yet officially Egypt is a partner of the United States in the pursuit of Middle East peace, at peace with Israel, and a recipient of an annual \$2 billion in American aid.

Scepticism about America's grasp of the realities of the region is also expressed over the perceived failure of US policy-makers to distinguish between the different political and social contexts giving rise to a wide range of expressions of Islam and the desire for more accountable governments. The speeches and policy statements of President Obama have gone some way towards addressing this scepticism, but Muslim populations are still awaiting the actions that will back up his words. For better or worse, the related issues of securing a state for the Palestinians and reining in Israeli construction of settlements on the West Bank carry huge symbolic weight in popular opinion across the Middle East, where discrimination against Muslims is still perceived to underlie America's *modus operandi* in the region. For example, anger persists over the Gaza conflict of December 2008–January 2009 and is exacerbated by the blockade on the

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reconstruction efforts for the Palestinians of Gaza that is largely downplayed in American and European policy circles.

The question of how US diplomacy engages with the region's Islamists is also one of underlying rights and identities for the majority, rather than necessarily reflecting popular sympathy for Islamist ideologies and movements themselves. Even Arabs and Muslims opposed to Hamas's agenda and recent actions in Gaza have felt uneasy about the consequences and implications of the US-led international rejection of Hamas's electoral victory in 2006. The associated inference that all Islamists are potentially 'radical' and thus susceptible to the transnational enticements of al-Qaeda also sits uneasily with the more conservative majority of Muslims, and ignores the regional re-emergence of, *inter alia*, Sufist movements that explicitly reject violent action.

Even though, unlike its predecessor, the Obama administration no longer speaks so directly of the region in terms of threats, violence and civilizational divides, its apparent inability to decouple itself from the authoritarian governments of the Muslim Middle East continues to divide even the most moderate of political reformers in the region. The dilemma for 'secular' (i.e. Muslims who are not Islamists) opposition groups is particularly acute. If identified or given external support as the 'true democrats' against the perils of unfettered Islamism, they lose local credibility for having denied their own cultural and Islamic heritage. If supported by US or other external funders, these 'democrats' are also suspected of working on behalf of the West and of being in the same camp as the regimes they are ostensibly seeking to challenge.

A cursory glance at the different programmes supported by the US State Department under the Middle East Policy Initiative (MEPI) or the Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) demonstrates that American officials are only too aware of the regional, national and local differences between political movements across the Middle East. What is at issue is how the more civic focus of these initiatives meshes with the perceived thrust of what the White House, the Pentagon, the US military and the ubiquitous CIA are really seeking to achieve across the Middle East. In a region replete with conspiracy theories and top-down forms of centralized leadership, it is not the complexity and diversity of US policy initiatives that are held under scrutiny. It is what the President and his closest aides say and do that counts.

Through this prism, a misplaced word, bullet, drone attack or handshake are all taken to mean that confronting terror and backing selected Arab allies and Israel are the only considerations that matter. If the actions of the US military in Iraq (as well as in Afghanistan, and now Pakistan) appear to confirm this perception, then the most reductionist of explanations for US policy ambitions will suffice.

Welcome as the efforts of President Obama to mark a rhetorical distance from his predecessor have been across the Middle East, he has set his administration on the difficult path of appealing simultaneously to America's traditional ruling allies and, beyond them, to their increasingly disenfranchised citizens. At some stage, the Obama administration will have to face a clear choice between

the aspirations of the former to stay in power at all costs and of the latter to play a greater role in shaping the future of the region. So far, it has steered clear of attempts to reconcile the different agendas inherent in these aspirations. The risk is that this will accelerate the noticeable drift away from the popular optimism invested in the 'Obama effect' early in 2009.

THE DILEMMAS FACING REGIONAL LEADERSHIPS

For the Arab ruling elites of the Middle East, the task of adjusting to post-2003 realities has been harder than for their populations. The main challenge facing them has been to adapt swiftly to the changes to a regional balance that they had all but taken for granted since the Gulf war of 1990–91. For the subsequent decade, the United States played the role of external security guarantor for its regional allies, particularly the Gulf states and Israel. Since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the assumptions underlying this regional balance have been unsettled, with a number of consequences for America's position in the Middle East.

The first is that the use of US military force is no longer seen as the ultimate external sanction on actors, both state and non-state, seeking to upset the regional balance. The very fact that the United States acted as it did in Iraq has broken the spell that held most Middle Eastern actors in check. For the leaders of the Arab states closest to Iraq this has been particularly unnerving, on a scale corresponding to how openly or materially (such as through providing military bases) they supported the US-led campaign in Iraq. Leaders in the Gulf in particular had to balance their continuing strong dependence on the US security guarantee with less vocal support for the invasion and its consequences when addressing their publics. It was perhaps no coincidence that the most outspoken warnings that a 'Shia Crescent' had been unleashed by the war in Iraq came from America's closest allies in the region: King Abdullah of Jordan, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and Prince Saud al-Faisal, Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia.⁹

The second consequence is that the taboo on 'regime change', and pre-emptive military action to bring it about, has been broken. Under the presidency of George H.W. Bush (1989–93), American actions in the Middle East explicitly stopped short of interfering in the domestic political arrangements of regional states. The decision not to unseat Saddam Hussein at the end of the Gulf war in 1991 did more than reassure the Ba'athists of Iraq; it also comforted other less-than-transparent leaderships in the region that they risked nothing if they stayed within the frontiers of their own states. Even though the US military subsequently became so engaged in Iraq as to preclude a large-scale military invasion elsewhere in the region, the precedent has been set, at least in the eyes of the region's wary leaders. For this reason, many of them have been highlighting to their publics the benefits of stable, if authoritarian, leadership in the face of the chaos and bloodshed that gripped Iraq after 2003. The spectre of al-Qaeda has also been used to alert the largely conservative populations of the Middle East to the consequences of seeking to unseat their own rulers through violent means.

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A third consequence of the Iraq war is that, to a large extent, the United States is now perceived as an internal regional actor, constrained by its continued presence in Iraq from intervening at will or with impunity elsewhere in the region. Even with only a residual advisory US capacity foreseen for Iraq following the withdrawal of combat forces scheduled for August 2010 and of the remaining 50,000-strong training corps by December 2011, the reinforcement of US forces in Afghanistan will continue to mark the United States out as a regionally embedded actor rather than as an external arbiter. The caution with which the Obama administration approached the disputed outcome of the Iranian elections in June 2009 and its aftermath is seen as consistent with the United States' new role as a quasi-regional actor. In struggling to counter the more volatile actions of Iran through engagement over the nuclear issue, the United States has appeared weaker in regional eyes, even if most Arab regional leaders continue to fear any form of escalation over Iran. The inability of the United States and its European and Russian allies to pin down the Iranian leadership to concrete commitments over its nuclear strategy has reignited Arab Gulf anxieties that negotiations will be allowed to drift on inconclusively, or will be abruptly terminated at will by the Iranians. In keeping with the disbelief that many felt at the lack of US planning for managing post-Saddam Iraq, Gulf leaders now also fear that the Obama administration has no clear strategy for bringing the Iranians to task if they continue to prevaricate over their nuclear intentions in public and build up their capacity in private. At the same time, the Arab states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) do not have the capacity to defend themselves, either collectively or individually, should Iran seek to extend its influence over its immediate neighbourhood, as still feared by some of the smaller states such as Bahrain. The confrontational approach of the previous US administration heightened concerns that Iran would retaliate in its immediate hinterland to any increase in international pressure. Now the seemingly less robust approach of the new American administration has unnerved the Arab leaderships for different reasons, not least over how reliable the US security umbrella over the Gulf might eventually prove to be. The challenge they face thus remains an uneasy juggling act between managing their own bilateral relations with Iran (with which they all continue to trade) and encouraging the United States to take sufficient, but not excessive, action over Iran to avoid the realization of their greatest regional security nightmares.

A fourth consequence, which disproportionately affects America's Arab allies in the region, is that they have been forced into filling gaps in regional diplomacy to counter the fragmentation of the Middle East along an unusually stark fault-line between rampant anti-American and anti-Israeli sentiment, on the one hand, and the opportunistic exploitation of this sentiment by the traditional opponents of the United States and Israel (Iran and Syria, in particular) and newly resurgent non-state actors (al-Qaeda, Hamas and Hizbullah), on the other. To counter this, since 2003, the Gulf states, Egypt, Jordan and Turkey have tried to broker deals between different Palestinian factions, between competing political forces in Lebanon, and between Israel, Hamas and Syria.

The Arab states (including Syria) have also launched one of the Arab League's most impressive (because rare) joint platforms, the Arab Peace Initiative, which proposes region-wide normalization with Israel for the first time in the League's history.

With the advent of the Obama administration, however, much of this activism has been diverted, if not dropped altogether, in favour of awaiting the outcome of the US administration's own bilateral pressures on Israel to cease settlement activity as a precondition for a return to peace negotiations. In tactical terms, this has also meant that America's Arab allies have resisted US pressures on them to make up-front concessions to Israel, such as overflight rights, as an incentive to return to the negotiating table. In trying to draw on moderate Arab support, as the Bush administration also tried to do in its last year, the Obama administration has misjudged the sequencing of events. From the perspective of the Arab world, the underlying logic of the Arab Peace Initiative has always been that Israel has to make the requisite moves to withdraw from the occupied Palestinian territory before reaping the rewards of full diplomatic recognition.¹⁰

The fifth consequence of the presence of America and its allies in Iraq is that the opponents of the United States and Israel in the Middle East have enjoyed unparalleled success in drawing on the latent anti-colonial sentiments that still prevail across the region. The reinforcement of the view that external forces have always intervened to pursue their own ends and prevent the region from following its own path may well be far from the outcome that recent US actions in the Middle East were intended to create. Thus opponents of the United States from President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran and Hassan Nasrallah of Hizbullah in Lebanon to the networks of al-Qaeda sympathizers across the Middle East have tapped into this vein of anti-interventionism to present US intentions as being far from benign. The inconsistencies of American policy have merely enhanced the coherence of the counter-arguments. Compounding this are the shock and surprise felt in elite Arab circles that America – not traditionally a colonial or interventionist power in the region on the scale of the United Kingdom or France – should have considered the invasion of Iraq without planning for the inevitability of having to govern the country, directly or otherwise, for some time to come.

President Obama has shown every sign of being fully aware of these dilemmas, but undoing the reputational damage caused by the crisis of US authority in the region will take more than minor steps. However, following a brief honeymoon period in the first half of 2009, the Obama administration continues to labour against the popular suspicions stoked up by America's opponents in the region. Every setback to diplomacy, however small, runs the risk of being taken as confirmation of continuity, not change, in US policy in the region. Moreover, and given the deliberate search by the Obama administration for compromise and agreement rather than confrontation, these opponents now present the failure to overcome obstacles to progress on the interrelated tracks of US Middle East diplomacy as a sign of its weakness, or even of the declining US commitment to engaging seriously with the underlying problems of the region.

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The strength of opposition sentiment has nevertheless only led to passing and unsustainable success for the region's self-appointed champions. It has been one thing to condemn the presence of US forces in Iraq, or Israel's very existence in the region as an 'illegitimate' arm of American policy, but entirely another to translate this condemnation into concrete achievements for the people and overall stability of the Middle East. The polling data in this respect are quite ambivalent: the regional anti-heroes that have emerged since 2003 do not, over time, command uniform or majority support as viable alternatives to the status quo.¹¹ Hizbullah's failure to win a majority in the Lebanese elections of June 2009 left it with the ability to block the formation of a new government over ensuing months, but not to shape any consensus over the future of the country, much less the region. The inability of Hamas to conclude a 'national unity' agreement of any kind with Fatah has also done little to promote its popularity in a region more concerned with the creation of a Palestinian state than with the divisions that continue to beset the Palestinian leadership. As for Iran, and the newly re-elected President Ahmadinejad, the scenes of protest and violence that succeeded the June 2009 elections only served to delegitimize his role as a regional champion and promote popular regional identification with the 'Green Revolution' movement contesting the election results and denouncing the repressive measures used against it.

In terms of countering Iran's and Hizbullah's influence across the region, it is notable that in early 2007 none other than King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia spoke openly of the US presence in Iraq as 'illegal' and unacceptable in the longer term.¹² The alternative vision implied by this statement, and in the statements of other conservative leaders, is of the region taking charge of its own destiny to pre-empt worse being imposed from outside. On the political front, as noted above, there is little sign of sustained diplomatic action to back up this vision, but economically the wealthier, conservative Gulf states have been reinvesting their oil wealth at home and more widely across the region. Whether the rapid, but somewhat elite-focused infrastructural and economic investment projects undertaken from Morocco to Dubai over the past five years will limit popular discontent constitutes the essence of the challenge facing much of the region in coming years. The fallout from the continuing sovereign debt crisis in Dubai is likely to rein in the kind of bold policy initiatives required to invest in education and business development across the region.

What this type of regional shift also illustrates, however, is the final and most enduring legacy of the US invasion of Iraq. This has been to link all the region's crises and challenges into a single web of interrelationships. Before 2003, it was possible for the United States to conduct policy over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in parallel and relative isolation from other policy tracks, such as bilateral military cooperation in the Gulf and the dual containment of Iraq and Iran. The disturbance of the regional balance now means that state and non-state actors alike have the ability to influence and upset policy outcomes across several policy tracks at once. This makes the sequencing and cross-referencing of US policy endeavours critical to the success of any and all of them. So far, this new reality

has been reflected more in principle than in the far more difficult translation into practice of the Obama administration's regional ambitions, and it is here that most attention will need to be paid in coming years.

As America's Gulf Arab allies, and indeed Israel, have already demonstrated, compliance with US initiatives in the region is not a one-way street, nor is it free from the conditioning environments of domestic politics and the broader Middle East. Nor have US allies been susceptible to the kind of zero-sum game calculations engaged in by the Bush administration, which frequently acted on the assumption that there were net losses and gains to be made in the region and, with them, net losers and winners to defeat or bring over to the US side. The calculations of all Middle Eastern leaders, including those of Israel in making overtures to the moderate Arab states to join the fight against Islamic extremism, are based on maximizing their regional leverage and potential alliances, rather than finding themselves trapped irrevocably on one externally determined side or another.

Despite these reservations, the pro-American elites of the region do not see any alternative to maintaining their strong alliances with the United States for some time to come. The defence and security imperatives are still there, especially in view of the recent increase in US arms sales to the Gulf, Egypt and Israel. Even with France and other military powers making openings to the Gulf states,¹³ the operational imperative to act in concert with the world's largest military power remains intact. Bilateral trade and investment relations with the United States are still highly important, as are the bilateral cultural and educational links that have been built up over the years. What the Arab leaders are working to change is the way the relationship with the United States is managed, within a context that has already been transformed radically since the 1990s. It is no longer a question of complying with US requests in an 'anything for a quiet life' fashion. What has been truly revolutionary in recent years is the extent to which previously reticent leaders have publicly criticized US actions in the region.

The Arab world is forging stronger commercial and political relations with China, India and even Iran, not so much to displace the United States but as a reflection of the new reality that China and India are increasingly influential players on the world stage as well as growing clients for the energy resources that the Gulf states and others can supply. Iran will remain a neighbour long after the United States has left Iraq and found a solution for its bilateral differences with the Iranian regime. The same might be said of links being forged beyond the region: inviting President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela or President Nicolas Sarkozy of France to discuss nuclear energy contracts or resource nationalism over tea is not an attempt to substitute them for the United States in the region, but rather evidence of the increasingly globalized nature of the Middle East's trade and diplomatic relations.

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THE CONTINUING CAPACITY OF THE UNITED STATES TO EXERT INFLUENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Although diminished in regional eyes, the United States is nevertheless a key player in the Middle East, if not *the* key player in the spheres of energy investment, security and strategic relations for the foreseeable future. Policy options still exist for the Obama administration to restructure American approaches towards the Middle East in ways that reflect the very different Middle East that the United States now encounters from that which existed five years ago.

The first challenge consists of the likely shape of the longer-term US role in Iraq. The shift of the Obama administration's attention to Afghanistan and Pakistan does not mean that, for the Middle East, Iraq constitutes finished business. For as long as the US military presence in Iraq endures, the future configuration of Iraqi politics and its regional role will not be settled, even with the notable improvements in the overall security and investment climate since 2007. The bomb attacks in central Baghdad in August, October and December 2009 demonstrate that only a sustained transfer of powers and real capacity to Iraq's own security forces will ensure normalization over the longer term, and only then if the still fragile federal and national unity of the country can be maintained. Iran, Turkey and Iraq's Arab neighbours are thus all closely monitoring events as the competing political forces within Iraq position themselves for the 'day after' the formal withdrawal of all US forces in December 2011.

The main question, then, remains what form a more permanent US presence in Iraq might take, and whether residual training and support bases, even in the more sympathetic northern Kurdish region, will continue to provoke the anti-interventionist forces in Iraq and beyond. The best approach might be to evaluate the threat as the drawdown proceeds; what should not drive the decision is the desire to retain a US presence in Iraq at any cost. If a minority of Iraqis continues to resist the idea of foreign occupation, however minimal and benign in intent, and if al-Qaeda affiliates are able to regroup in any numbers in Iraq, resistance to that presence will continue until the foreign forces and associated administrations withdraw. Foreign bases cannot be sustainable over the longer term in Middle East states where borders are porous and local populations, as in Iraq, are divided enough to focus insurgencies against the main external allies of their local adversaries. The exception has been in the Gulf states, where local populations are small, less internally divided and under heavy centralized surveillance. In the larger society of Saudi Arabia, the presence of American bases played a key role in galvanizing local and regional recruitment to al-Qaeda, with consequences for Iraq and beyond that have already been well documented since 2003.

The second challenge relates to the unavoidable US role in re-engaging Israelis and Palestinians in a process of sustainable peace. The Obama administration appeared temporarily to have abandoned this as a diplomatic priority in the second half of 2009, but the one lesson learnt by all American presidents over the past 40 years is that the persistence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict overshadows all other policy initiatives in the immediate region. With

Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan close at hand, the overspill effects are felt in the broader Muslim world too. The solidity of the US–Israeli relationship represents both the key opportunity and the biggest hurdle to overcoming the current impasse and to fulfilling the obligations to the Palestinians that President Obama articulated in his Ankara and Cairo speeches. Here, the underlying strategy laid out was undermined in the first half of 2009 by an unfortunate choice of initial tactics, but there is still time to take stock and learn from this experience.

One unlikely starting point might be to examine the mistakes made by the United States and its European and UN Security Council allies in relation to Iran over the past five to six years. In this instance, the attempt to impose on Iran the precondition that all its nuclear enrichment activities be suspended before negotiations could take place and international sanctions be lifted has merely allowed the Iranian government to prevaricate, delay and continue enrichment virtually unhindered since 2005. If preconditions are such that governments clearly have neither the political will nor the domestic backing to fulfil them, then defining a more focused set of parameters, unhindered by preconditions, is the next best option for limiting their margin for manoeuvre and avoidance of the core issues. In the case of Iran, the Obama administration's preference for suspending preconditions in favour of direct engagement to iron out the details of a nuclear deal has not so far answered the challenge of how to monitor and ensure Iran's adherence to more than an agreement in principle. In practice, however, the options open to the Obama administration, including securing the sustained compliance of other UN Security Council members such as Russia and China in votes at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), have increased through this still evolving strategy, even though nuclear break-out by Iran remains a significant risk.¹⁴

As regards Israel and Palestine, it is not only in the Middle East but closer to home that the Obama administration's first steps towards restarting peace negotiations are perceived as having faltered badly.¹⁵ The main tactical mistake was to try to bolster the position of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas by insisting that the Israeli governing coalition, led since February 2009 by Prime Minister Netanyahu, suspend all West Bank settlement activity as a precursor to returning to the negotiating table. Not only has the Israeli government been politically unwilling and constrained by its domestic support base from offering more than a curtailed and temporary 10-month undertaking to suspend new building permits, but the Palestinians have rejected anything less than a full settlement freeze as falling short of the necessary precondition for them to return to the negotiating table.¹⁶ A more fruitful strategy might be to concentrate on creating the conditions for all sides to gain more from peace than from the unsustainable status quo. This may well mean rethinking how to engage with the Palestinians, including with leaders such as Marwan Barghouti who may be one of the few capable of commanding respect on both sides of the Fatah– Hamas divide. A number of commentators have also pointed to the Obama team's lack of direct appeals to Israeli public opinion as a critical missing element in this

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strategy.¹⁷ Others, including the former US ambassador to Israel Daniel Kurtzer, have advocated setting out the parameters for a final peace settlement, rather than focusing on ways to restart negotiations without an end solution in sight.¹⁸

However the Obama administration re-engages with the Middle East peace process, its progress will be monitored by the rest of the region for evidence of a new balance being struck between America's traditional alliance with Israel and its promise of new openings to the peoples of the region. For the first months of Obama's presidency, regional opinion accorded him the necessary leeway to reorient relations with regional leaders towards supporting his new initiatives on Iran and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Subsequently, and in the wake of the renewed personal expectations invested in President Obama on his being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in October 2009, regional opinion will be increasingly likely to focus on the missing ingredient so far in his strategy: the renewal of American support for regional democratization. In forging links across the region, it has not gone unnoticed that the Obama team has given scant attention to engaging the leaders of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and other countries in a critical dialogue over human rights and democracy.

This neglect will not go without comment or action for long.¹⁹ What most in the region have been expecting of the Obama administration, and some indeed feared, was a break with the top-down, elite- and personality-driven approach to regional deal-making that characterized the Bush era. The advent of President Obama promised a place on the agenda for the aspirations of ordinary people, and this can only mean a move away from the procedural and election-based approaches to democracy promotion favoured by the Bush administration. In terms of exerting renewed American influence in the region, the good news from the polling data is that the region's Muslim populations see no contradiction between their Islamic traditions and accountable democratic governance.²⁰ The majority are in favour of significant political and institutional reform in this direction. What they object to is outside interference that impedes the emergence of genuinely democratic forces and the legal frameworks to protect and promote democratic rights.

Responding to the region's democratic aspirations thus constitutes the third challenge, and the best opportunity for the United States to renew and reinvigorate its influence in the Middle East. The main regional criticism of US programmes designed to promote democracy, however, is that they seek to change the content of the political debate but not the context. US democracy promotion bodies tend to select and train political parties (often excluding groups and political figures deemed to be too radical), while other US actors and agencies turn a blind eye to the manipulation of electoral processes by incumbents. Unlike the policy positions adopted with respect to the post-communist states of Eastern and Central Europe in the 1990s, Arab Middle Eastern leaders have not been required to present themselves for free election under the rule of law, or in the case of dynastic rulers to accept the restraints of constitutional monarchy. Instead, and including into the Obama administration, the United States is perceived to have strengthened the region's authoritarian leaders in

recent years in ways that have stifled the growth of democratic alternatives.

The opportunity that presents itself is for a review of policy that situates democracy and the rule of law at the heart of a US security strategy for a region hitherto perceived primarily in military, policing and intelligence terms. Such a policy could seek, above all, to create a new climate for constructive change, rather than supporting the specific parties or politicians capable of taking on this change. It would also require focusing on the details of country- and context-specific reforms needed for realizing longer-term changes in the overall security environment of the Middle East. So long as the US regional agenda is dominated by short-term security goals – namely, the containment of terrorist networks and forestalling Iran's nuclear ambitions – then the democracy agenda will suffer. The extra-judicial measures employed by governments in policing against terror are by nature restrictive in contexts where the police and security forces primarily serve to protect the interests of the existing regime, rather than those of the broader population.

With the spread of new technology, however, encouraging signs have emerged in recent years of local attempts to hold security services to account. This includes, for example, the use of mobile phones to provide photographic evidence of the abuse of detainees in Egyptian prisons. If US policy were to rebalance priorities towards the promotion of good governance, the strengthening of legal regimes to protect basic rights and the encouragement of local initiatives to impose limits on the impunity with which local security forces currently act, then a strong signal would be sent to the region that democracy and security are elements of the same policy, rather than (as currently widely perceived there) separate and largely contradictory objectives.

The Obama administration's decision to discard the language and umbrella approach of the 'global war on terror' – the most potent symbol of this contradiction – has been a very positive step. Now, however, the administration needs to implement policies that put the incentives for positive change for the majority of Middle Eastern populations at the heart of its strategy. More public acknowledgment of the US administration's awareness of the very different currents of Islamism would help defuse tensions, as would a focus on the country-specific injustices that underlie much of the attraction to anti-American alternatives in the region. The absence of any specific or visible initiatives to this end is beginning to sap the goodwill evoked by President Obama's Cairo speech. The danger in the aftermath of the commitments he made in this symbolic capital of the old Middle East is that the emergence of the new Middle East will be stifled by continuing US support for President Hosni Mubarak and the ruling elites of Egypt. The populations of Cairo and beyond to whom the speech was more directly addressed are still waiting for tangible, not symbolic, change.

To date, however, President Obama has not been personally involved in specific policy initiatives relating to individual countries and issues in the region. Reserving his political influence for critical future moments may be one of the best cards the administration still has to play, but this is also risky. The lack of clear and coordinated leadership across the different tracks of US regional

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diplomacy in 2009 undermined the coherence and standing of the whole when the administration met its first setbacks barely six to eight months into its term. The impression that President Obama is personally engaged for the long term will need bolstering by more than interim gestures and words in a region swift to make negative judgments about the ability of American officials to understand the region's complexities. Regional commentators may continue to question the administration's status and understanding of the region, through the kind of trivializing debate that emerged over whether or not President Obama bowed to the Saudi King Abdullah in April 2009.²¹

A final requirement is to reassess how the military track of US policy feeds into its economic and political tracks to ensure that they are mutually supportive. The use of military force is necessarily a blunt instrument that almost inevitably creates innocent victims. In regional cultures that hold the principles of dignity and justice dear, the use of force invokes notions of retribution. This means that external actors have to exercise extreme caution on the ground, especially in situations of asymmetric warfare, as in Iraq and Afghanistan.

There is growing doubt in the United States, as in allied European countries, whether armed campaigns against militants of the al-Qaeda or Taliban complexion will ever result in conclusive victory. At a time when the American and global economies are still undergoing severe and protracted contraction, it is also unlikely that a military-focused security strategy towards the Middle East can be sustained over the longer term. However, the recent increase in the volume and value of US arms contracts concluded with friendly regimes in the Middle East raises local concerns that the United States might seek to ensure its military capability and political presence in the region by proxy. There may well be economic imperatives to seeing these contracts through to fruition. However, the signal they send to the local opponents of American interests in the region are extremely dangerous in terms of perpetuating the pretexts for terrorist and insurgent activity in arenas stretching beyond the Middle East into the conflict zones of Asia.

CONCLUSION

American policy in the Middle East over the past decade has undoubtedly provoked the law of unintended consequences across the region, and the Obama administration has been trying to change tack to deal with the resulting fallout. Many of the negative repercussions can be traced back to the US-led intervention in Iraq, but others – above all the Israeli–Palestinian conflict – predate this. As the greatest symbol of perceived injustice across the Arab and Muslim Middle East, the resolution of the conflict should continue to take pride of place in the overall US Middle East policy agenda, as much for the future security of Israel as for the Palestinians themselves.

The changing US policy direction observed in 2009 still needs to take greater account of the new political environment in the region. Middle Eastern diplomacy and external alliances have become much more diversified, not only with

regard to India and China, but also in relation to the new regional activism of states such as Turkey. This reality requires a further change in America's diplomatic style to counter the prevailing image in the region that the policy of successive administrations tends to move by U-turns between greater confrontation and deeper engagement – with Syria or Iran, for example. The traditional pattern whereby each new administration produces a new policy template for the Middle East is unsustainable. Not only are regional actors less compliant with and convinced of the authority of the United States, they also enjoy more policy options of their own. This is not an entirely bad situation for the United States. If American policy-makers cannot always prevail, they can nevertheless point to the need for regional actors to assume more responsibility for their own future, and structure regional relations accordingly. In increasingly substantive ways, the United States now enjoys more opportunities to engage in the region via the multilateral avenues promoted by others, even if this means adopting a supportive, rather than leading, role.

A clear repositioning of US policy in the direction of settling regional disputes through multilateral negotiations would also help promote a greater sharing of regional burdens. Such an approach would place the United States within the mainstream of regional and international thinking about unblocking regional deadlocks through consensus, rather than through external leadership.

One area of policy that could be assisted by this approach is the Israeli–Palestinian conflict itself. The Obama administration needs to look beyond the narrow confines of the bilateral security concerns of the Israelis and Palestinians and towards regional supporting mechanisms. The current deadlock in the peace process is caused as much as anything by domestic dynamics within Israel and the Palestinian community, and may be impervious to American bilateral diplomacy alone. In fact, much of the debate surrounding the failed Annapolis process of 2008 and the Obama administration's own diplomatic endeavours in 2009 hinges on bilateral security conditions and guarantees that neither side has been able or willing to provide without outside help. The United States may still be the main political broker for peace but others, such as the EU, Norway, Canada and other former members of the now defunct multilateral processes of the 1990s, need to be brought back in to foster an incentive-based, rather than precondition-based, resolution to the conflict.

Helping to create a more explicit regional framework within which the emergence of a two-state solution could be supported multilaterally could pay dividends, therefore, especially for Israeli public opinion, which is reluctant to make unilateral compromises. Current Arab regional initiatives are by no means as antipathetic to Israel and its role in the region as they are often portrayed outside the region. The Arab Peace Initiative, for example, which has the endorsement of the Arab League and fits well with the road map and UN resolutions regarding the Palestinians, needs to be revisited by US policy-makers as a vehicle for the longer-term stability of the region as well as for its specific proposals regarding the Arab world's normalization of relations with Israel.

In respect of Iran, appealing to the segments of Iranian society currently

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contesting the legitimacy of President Ahmadinejad's re-election is a much more problematic proposition for the Obama administration. For the foreseeable future, the Iranian nuclear programme and the need to maintain the IAEA's access to Iranian nuclear facilities is the greater priority. Nevertheless, as for Israel and the Palestinians, the opportunity to explore multilateral means to find a more balanced role for Iran in the Middle East should not be ruled out. The internal political dynamics of Iran are likely to evolve, perhaps faster than currently anticipated, and while the Obama administration has been wise not to intervene for the time being, outside regional support for what may emerge as a movement for longer-term change in Iranian society may require some flexibility in the way the United States and other international actors engage with individual groups within Iran.

Finally, despite the region's reputation for unrest, most societies in the Middle East are deeply conservative and weary of long-standing conflicts. The advent of the Obama administration appealed directly to the majority seeking a more balanced set of roles and identities within a globalized world. But the time for engagement with this middle ground is running out. In 2009, the American strategy appeared to be one of confronting the largest issues (Iraq, Iran, Israel–Palestine) before turning to more locally rooted grievances. The most important shift the Obama administration could make from 2010 would be to rethink the involvement of the region's populations in making the necessary changes to ensure that any high-level agreements reached will stick. This means appealing to Arabs and Israelis not only directly in words, but in conditioning the kind of support the United States gives to the current leaderships of the Middle East. Real leadership for change and reform can only emerge from within the region itself. The United States is the most influential actor both outside and within the region. As such it remains best placed to shape the context for gradual and positive change, rather than continuing the debilitating crisis management of recent years. If regional actors other than the local elites with which the United States has traditionally chosen to partner are given more say, the drain on American political, human and financial resources could be significantly reduced in coming years. This may mean that the United States will also need to adapt to a less prominent role in influencing the future direction of Middle East politics. But many Americans will be grateful if, as a result, the Middle East proves capable at last of assuming its own responsibilities.

NOTES

- 1 A December 2009 New America Foundation survey of Israeli attitudes found that 'Overall, Obama has a 41 per cent favorable /37 per cent unfavorable rating among Israelis, which is notably stronger than opinion toward the Israeli Defense and Foreign Ministers, and his unfavorable rating is only four points higher than the unfavorable rating for George W. Bush, who is routinely characterized as very popular among Israelis.' See <http://asp.newamerica.net/sites/newamerica.net/files/profiles/attachments/NAFExecutiveSummary.pdf>.

- 2 University of Maryland with Zogby International, '2008 Arab Public Opinion Poll', [http://www.sadat.umd.edu/surveys/2008%20Arab%20Public%20Opinion%20Survey.ppt#348,84,Slide 84](http://www.sadat.umd.edu/surveys/2008%20Arab%20Public%20Opinion%20Survey.ppt#348,84,Slide%2084). See also note 5 below.
- 3 Transcripts of the speeches can be found as follows: Remarks on the occasion of the Iranian New Year (Nowruz), 20 March 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Videotaped-Remarks-by-The-President-in-Celebration-of-Nowruz/ Remarks to the Turkish Parliament in Ankara, 6 April 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-President-Obama-To-The-Turkish-Parliament/; and Remarks at Cairo University, 4 June 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6-04-09/.
- 4 See University of Maryland with Zogby International, '2009 Annual Arab Public Opinion Survey', in which 51 per cent of respondents in the states surveyed were 'very hopeful' and 'somewhat hopeful' about US policy towards the Middle East within a few weeks of the arrival of the Obama administration. This rose to 59 per cent when figures for Egypt were excluded: http://www.brookings.edu/-/media/Files/events/2009/0519_arab_opinion/2009_arab_public_opinion_poll.pdf.
- 5 See Rami G. Khoury, 'Nine months of inconclusive US diplomacy', *The Daily Star* (Beirut), 24 October 2009, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=5&article_id=107889.
- 6 Since 2003, Zogby International, the Pew Research Center, the University of Maryland, the BBC and ABC have all sought to measure Middle Eastern views on a variety of topics, above all on how the United States is regarded in the region. For 2008, most figures reflected the negativity of the Zogby/University of Maryland polls. By the first half of 2009, where gauged (as above), the tide of opinion had turned upwards.
- 7 See Daoud Kuttab, 'Satellite Censorship Arab League Style', *Arab Media & Society*, March 2008, <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=651>.
- 8 Khaled Amrayeh, 'America's old ugly face', *Al-Ahram Weekly* (Cairo), 5–11 November 2009, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2009/971/re2.htm>; Craig Nelson 'Obama betrays hope in the Cairo speech', *The National* (UAE), 2 November 2009, <http://www.thenational.ae/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20091103/FOREIGN/711029816>; Ian Black, 'Arab anger as Hillary Clinton backs Israel on settlements', *Guardian*, 2 November 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/nov/02/arab-anger-clinton-backs-israel>.
- 9 For a commentary on the fears underlying the emergence of a regional Shia–Sunni divide, see Amr Hamzawy, 'Adventurism versus submission', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 27 July–2 August 2006, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2006/805/op121.htm>.
- 10 For the most eloquent expression of the moderate Arab position on this in the immediate aftermath of the Gaza conflict, see Saudi Prince Faisal al-Turki's injunctions to the new Obama presidency in January 2009: 'Saudi Arabia's patience is running out', *Financial Times*, 23 January 2009, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/a11a77b0-e8ef-11dd-a4d0-0000779fd2ac.html?ncklick_check=1.
- 11 See data in University of Maryland with Zogby International, '2008 Arab Public Opinion Poll'.
- 12 Hassan M. Fattah, 'US Iraq role is called illegal by Saudi King', *New York Times*, 29 March 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/29/world/middleeast/29saudi.html>.
- 13 See Richard Spencer, 'Deal making Sarkozy aims to capitalise on tarnished British image in the Middle East', *Daily Telegraph*, 15 November 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/6575134/Deal-making-Sarkozy-aims-to-capitalise-on-tarnished-British-image-in-Middle-East.html>.
- 14 Laura Rozen, 'IAEA vote seen as vindication of Obama approach', *Politico*, 27

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- November 2009, http://www.politico.com/blogs/laurarozen/1109/IAEA_vote_seen_as_vindication_of_Obama_approach.html.
- 15 See commentary of US analysts in Robert Zelig, 'Middle East Political Uncertainty Stymies Peace Process', PBS Online Newshour Update, 13 November 2009, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/middle_east/july-dec09/mideast_11-13.html.
 - 16 See 'Israeli settlement move helps peace talks – Clinton', Reuters, 25 November 2009.
 - 17 See Aluf Benn, 'The communicator's challenge', *Bitter Lemons International*, 31:7 (13 August 2009), <http://www.bitterlemons-international.org/previous.php?opt=1&id=285#1165>.
 - 18 See Rozen, 'IAEA vote seen as vindication of Obama approach', for views of Daniel Kurtzer and Robert Malley (former Clinton era peace negotiator), *inter alia*.
 - 19 Regional bloggers are already picking up on the missing democracy dimension in President Obama's policy; see, for example, 'Middle East: Where the US treads, democracy does not spread', <http://www.iran-resist.org/articles5712.html>.
 - 20 See data in University of Maryland with Zogby International, '2008 Arab Public Opinion Poll'.
 - 21 See YouTube, 'Did Obama bow to Saudi King Abdullah or was he cleaning the floor?', 2 April 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LEUifr--r38>. This is the downside of instant news reporting that now affects Middle East opinion as much as that of other global observers.