International Involvement in the Middle East

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The United States remains the most influential international element in the Middle East. This is so notwithstanding its relative weakening internationally and the slow move of the international system towards a more multi-polar dynamic, the involvement of additional actors in the Middle East, and the American failures in the region. The influence of the United States is based on its political, economic, and military weight; its determination to persevere in its involvement and spearhead processes; and the fact that states in the region simply need the United States. For the most part, other international elements conduct their Middle East policy in coordination with or with reference to American policy.

Europe strives – at times successfully – to exert influence, but this is at best a tenuous goal, as Europe is not a united element in the field of foreign policy and defense. It is hard pressed to realize the same kind of potential for cohesive action in the international arena that the European Union enjoys with regard to internal matters (the economy, citizenship, social and legal issues). There is frequent tension and competition between diplomatic institutions and officials; there is no continuity in moving processes forward because of the rotation of the EU presidency every six months; the need for consensus is limiting; and above all, there is a serious difference of opinion about priorities between the "leaders" of the EU and the other EU states, between East and West, between those pulling towards the center and those with a tendency to independence. As a result, a unified stance is usually based on a moderate and relatively weak common

denominator (e.g., policy towards Russia) or on passive resistance (e.g., the response to the American invasion of Iraq). On the other hand, activist and strong leaders of the large EU states – Tony Blair in the past and Nicolas Sarkozy today – have definitely succeeded in wielding influence, at times thanks to their personalities and at times by leading the entire EU. In the Middle East, Europe usually supports American political objectives, while maintaining an ongoing attempt to refine and/or improve methods of action – to play Athens to America's Rome.

For its part, Russia has based the rehabilitation of its status as a superpower on defying the United States, which is perceived by Russia as a threat and a power interested in a weak Russia. In only a few issues of importance to national Russian interests, such as control and oversight of nuclear materials/arms or the war on Islamic terrorism, does Moscow cooperate with Washington. By and large, however, the general trend is to reconstitute Russia's might while thwarting America's policies (in Eastern Europe), present a neutral alternative to Western ideology (in Asia and Africa), and/or challenge the United States (in Latin America). At the same time, it is important to Russia to demonstrate responsible participation in every political process and in constructive multinational efforts. In this way Russia is trying to regain its influence in the Middle East. Russia views the region as very important not because of its energy sources but rather because it is the locus of highly significant geopolitical processes and because of the region's effect on Russia's own Muslim population. The Russian strategy is to nurture ties particularly with regional elements that the Bush administration opposed in order to remain the only international player with connections to all the region's elements. In this fashion, Moscow encourages the radical anti-Western axis, and at the same time, tries to build for itself the role of mediator.

China too is against uni-polar hegemony, but defiance is not its style. The leading principle in Chinese foreign policy is the notion of peaceful development: managing its growing power while (as opposed to most rising nations in history) soothing the qualms of its neighbors and other powers, possibly the United States in particular. China has uncompromising stances regarding issues directly affecting it: Taiwan, Tibet, and pressure to democratize. Beijing also takes a direct interest in

issues that are geographically close: the Korean peninsula, Central Asian states, and Japan. China is investing heavily in developing ties that will allow it access to energy sources and raw materials. Beyond this, China avoids taking a stand, opposes international intervention in internal matters of problematic nations (Burma, Sudan, Zimbabwe), and tries to embrace the international consensus. This policy is noticeable in the Middle East as well, and thus there is no tension between China and the United States in the region. A good example from the recent past is the Chinese stance on the American invasion of Iraq: China opposed it, but left the task of leading the opposition to France and Russia, so that its relations with the United States were not affected. China has recently increased its presence in the Middle East (by means of economic delegations, a special regional envoy, observers in Lebanon), but at this stage its involvement is cosmetic rather than indicative of active involvement.[1]

The common model functions as follows: the United States leads the international political activity in the Middle East; Europe supports (Afghanistan) or encourages (the Roadmap, negotiations with Iran); and Russia seesaws back and forth (limited contact with Hamas) or opposes (sanctions against Iran). The capability by others of pursuing independent action is very limited; essentially, nothing can be done in the region without the US. Yet except for cases in which the United States decides on independent American military action, international elements can indeed slow down, deflect, and on rare occasions, even halt the United States. This explains why the Bush administration failed to meet its objectives in the Middle East regarding issues for which international cooperation and support were critical to success, e.g., the Iranian challenge.

More than seven years after the overthrow of the Taliban government, Afghanistan is more than ever in a precarious and potentially reversible state, al-Qaeda still enjoys a place of refuge, and the fighting has spread to Pakistan. The policy toward Iran failed: Tehran is actively pursuing its nuclear program, and the diplomatic-sanctions route has failed miserably. In Iraq, the military successes of the surge have provided a ray of light, but according to administration spokespeople, the situation is "fragile and reversible."[2] The Annapolis process between Israel and the Palestinians failed in terms of the timetable (a shelf agreement by the end of 2008). The

sides do not share an idea of how to overcome the Hamas obstacle. The United States boycott of Syria also failed – not only France, but even Israel ignored the boycott, and in Lebanon, the United States was in effect forced to support Hizbollah's joining the government as a party with veto power. Perhaps above all, at least from President Bush's perspective, the vision of democratization, defined in 2002-2003 as the cornerstone of American policy, was effectively taken off the table three years ago. By the end of 2008, all the important issues had scored either non-successes in achieving stated objectives (Afghanistan, Iraq, the Annapolis process), deadlocks (Syria), or failures (Lebanon, Iran).

This is a situation that President Barack Obama intends to change, primarily by dialogue with adversaries and multilateral listening/cooperation instead of the Bush approach, which focused largely on self-reliance. This change, which will be dramatized as America tries to cope with current Middle East issues, will also affect the overall international involvement in the region. The article below analyzes American policy regarding the central issues on the Middle East table, with an emphasis on the transition from Bush administration to Obama administration policies.

Afghanistan-Pakistan

In September 2008, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Michael Mullen declared publicly: "I am not convinced we are winning in Afghanistan."[3] This is an understatement. In terms of security, 2008 was the worst year for the United States since it toppled the Taliban regime in 2001. Today the Taliban dominates more than half the country (outside the cities), particularly in the south and east, while local warlords rule most of the rest of the country. Thus the central government is capable of enforcing its will only in the capital, Kabul. This situation explains President Karzai's attempt in the second half of 2008 to induce the Taliban, or at least the relatively moderate wings within it, to negotiate a settlement: immunity and government positions in return for halting terrorism, severing ties with al-Qaeda, and providing intelligence about terrorists.[4] This attempt, America's silent agreement to the move, and the Taliban's refusal are perhaps the best indicators of the balance of power and general trends.[5]

At the same time, al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and their allies in Pakistan have grown in strength and are using their power against American and NATO forces in Afghanistan. The problem is focused primarily in the northern province of Pakistan, a semi-autonomous tribal region where extreme Islamic movements have traditionally had a stronger hold than the central government. Their success there is evident both in the blocking of the strategic Khyber Pass, essential to supply convoys for the Western forces in Afghanistan, and in stopping the Pakistani army, which is untrained in fighting terrorism and guerilla warfare. In fact, three mutually supportive terrorist efforts are operating in Pakistan: the struggle of the extreme Muslim movements against the government; the war of the Taliban and its allies against Western forces in Afghanistan and the Pakistani forces assisting the United States; and the anti-Indian activities as part of the struggle to bring Kashmir under Muslim control. An example of the interface between the three was the showcase terrorist attack in Mumbai in December 2008. When the possibility of responding militarily against Pakistan was under discussion in India, Pakistan warned that it would redirect its forces from the Afghani front in the west to the Indian front in the east. As if taking an orchestrated cue, the Pakistani Taliban offered to enter a ceasefire and join a united struggle against India.[6] Thus, the problem of the Taliban and its supporters, which until recent years was contained within Afghanistan, becomes linked to the conflict in Kashmir. This in fact is but one aspect of the Pakistani problem. From the point of view of the United States and the world, this is a country where all the ominous scenarios converge: three-pronged Islamic terrorism; a weak government rife with corruption in the midst of an economic crisis, overturned in the occasional military coup; a government that does not fully control its Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI), which partly supports terrorism aimed at Kashmir and Afghanistan; and nuclear capability, with components sold in the past, liable to fall into less responsible hands should the regime be further destabilized, and liable to come into play against the Indian nuclear enemy as part of another round of warfare.

In the United States, the Democrats have long claimed that the situation has deteriorated dangerously because the Bush administration focused on the wrong front – Iraq. As promised, the newly elected president has put

Afghanistan at the top of his list of priorities while implementing a new strategy based on a six-tier approach. One, Afghanistan is no longer to be considered by itself but rather as part of a greater Afghani-Pakistani complex. (In fact, in light of the accelerated deterioration of the situation in Pakistan, the reference to the "Af-Pak" arena that was born in January has changed and people now speak of "Pak-Af," or even about Pakistan as a critical problem in its own right.) This approach is evident in President Obama's appointment of Richard Holbrooke as special envoy to the region, as well as the summit President Obama held with the presidents of Pakistan and Afghanistan in early May. Two, the American objectives no longer specify democratization, rather aim to "disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda." The third tier is strengthening the 30,000 American troops already stationed in Afghanistan with about 20,000 soldiers. (There are also 38,000 NATO soldiers in Afghanistan, but the United States' allies are refusing to reinforce them or to cancel operational limitations on their service personnel there.) The fourth calls for increased investment in the civilian-economic-reconstruction side in order to earn public support in both countries for the governments rather than for opposition organizations. The fifth, an effort to expand the circle of support by means of an international regional conference held in March-April, raised billions of dollars to support the Afghani economy. The sixth is a change in military strategy and tactics evident also in the surprising decision made in mid-May 2009 to replace the American commander in Afghanistan. The Obama administration hopes that this new approach will spearhead a change in the central front in the war against terrorism.

However, there are three major difficulties on the American road to success, at least in the immediate future. At the military level, the surge in American forces will not be completed before the summer, and will not have its greatest impact in 2009. Because the Taliban forces understand this, one may assume that they will make supreme efforts during this year, so that in the very short term the situation is liable to deteriorate even further. Similarly, the American military intends to attempt the strategy of cooperating with tribes and former insurgents, a strategy that was successful in Iraq. However, it is not clear to what extent it can be implemented in Afghanistan, where the tribes are more divided and more supportive of

al-Qaeda.[7] To date, strengthening the forces and using tactics developed in Iraq have not had an impact.

The second difficulty is that even the relatively focused objective of the Obama administration seems too ambitious. It is of course possible to "disrupt" the activity of al-Qaeda in a considerable way; it is not entirely clear how to "dismantle" it, never mind how to "defeat" a terrorist and guerilla organization in this part of the world. And third, there are serious doubts about the will and/or ability of the two local governments to lead the struggle effectively. In Afghanistan, President Karzai has not demonstrated any desire to root out the corruption endemic in his regime. In Pakistan, it is not yet clear whether the determined local military campaign against the radicals waged – surprisingly – by the government was a stand-alone event or the harbinger of an important change. In either case, doubts about both the ability of obtaining the goal and about the allies are causing practical reservations even on the part of President Obama's Democratic supporters. While the military budget was authorized without hesitation by Congress, the requests for military and civilian aid to Pakistan and Afghanistan were not. The relevant committees are demanding that the administration formulate parameters to measure the conduct of both countries. Even military spending for Pakistan, defined by the Pentagon as urgent, was not approved because of concerns that the money would be funneled towards conventional armament (against India) or towards the nuclear program, instead of towards training and means of warfare to combat the Taliban and al-Qaeda. In any case, some Democrats have already issued warnings to the effect that if within a year it is still not possible to see the light at the end of the tunnel, it will be necessary to change course and to leave the region.

Thus the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan will likely worsen before it can possibly start to improve. On the military level, the United States has internalized the severity of the problem and is taking a series of steps to ensure more effective responses; this is possible particularly because of an improvement in the situation in Iraq and the intention to withdraw troops from there. On the political level, the United States will need diplomatic sophistication to balance between maximum cooperation from the Pakistani government in battles against both the Taliban and anti-

Indian terrorism on the one hand, and retaining the two governments as effective allies on the other. The reinforced front against the Taliban and al-Qaeda is expected to become Obama's war, and it may be assumed that the Pak-Af issue will continue to head the American administration's agenda.

Iraq

The United States began to withdraw its troops from Iraq in 2008. The first stage involved withdrawal of some 30,000 soldiers who participated in the surge. The more significant stage was evident in the agreement reached at the end of the year between the two governments about the continued American military presence in Iraq. Based on this agreement, the withdrawal of American forces began in January 2009; by June, the fighting combat units are to have left the cities and villages; and by the end of 2011, the withdrawal from all of Iraq is to be completed.[8] In addition, limitations on the forces' activities will be imposed; such limitations are to strengthen the Iraqi government's control of security and are an expression of reconstituted Iraqi sovereignty.[9]

This process is possible because of the continuing improvement in the security situation. In 2008, the number of incidents dropped by about 80 percent; the average monthly toll of Iraqis killed went from 3,500 to 500; and the number of Americans killed in a month fell from 100 to 20. Similarly, there has also been a significant political improvement. While formally speaking only a single issue was resolved – the holding of local elections in January 2009 – a modus vivendi has been achieved even for the issues that have not yet been formally resolved in law. This modus vivendi is more or less acceptable to all sides (shared control of the energy sector, the inclusion of Sunnis in the public sector) or has led to the postponement of decision making in a way that has prevented flare-ups of hostilities (the status of Kirkuk, changes in the constitution). The successful integration of Sunnis in the political system, the surge, the implementation of the strategy of collaborating with Sunni tribes against al-Qaeda, and the surprising determination demonstrated by Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki in the struggle against Shiite militias have all generated American-Iraqi success in the security sphere.

As such, the Obama administration inherited a rather convenient situation. Obama the candidate pledged the withdrawal of the American forces from Iraq within sixteen months of taking office (i.e., by the spring of 2010), but later in the campaign spoke more about making the rate of withdrawal contingent on the military's recommendations and the conditions on the ground. In this spirit, the president announced in February that the forces would be out of Iraq within 18 months, i.e., the "battle mission in Iraq will conclude" in August 2010. Because the timetables are set on the basis of flexible mission descriptions, they are not carved in stone. Technically, the cities and the country as a whole have too much infrastructure and equipment and too many soldiers, and it will be impossible to withdraw them in an orderly fashion within six or eight-ten months, respectively. Operationally, the Iraqi forces will not be capable of carrying out the task of securing Iraq on its own within these timetables. It is already clear that in June 2009 more than 10,000 American soldiers will be left in the cities. Their function will undergo reformulation – from "combat fighters" to "instructors" or "advisors," even if they continue to carry out their original missions.[10]

The military exit from Iraq is very high on America's list of priorities and on Obama's political agenda. Nonetheless, once the president makes the decision in principle about the rate of the withdrawal, the issue will keep the Pentagon busy but will not overly concern the White House or the State Department unless there is an unforeseen deterioration in the situation. The issue will become acute once again in 2010-2011, when it is time to discuss leaving an American force in Iraq after withdrawal, and if so, what its tasks and scope would be. By contrast, the administration will be called upon to deal quite intensively with an aspect that today is not receiving enough attention: the implications of the American military exit on the political arena in Iraq, and as a result, on American diplomacy.

Decreasing the number of American forces will reduce American influence on the intra-Iraqi scene. Even in the course of negotiations about an agreement, the Iraqi government proved its ability to stand up to the United States and forced significant concessions (especially with regard to limitations on American activities) on the Bush administration. To date, American influence has been highly instrumental in creating and

maintaining "fragile and reversible" cooperation between the three Iraqi sectors.[11] In the absence of this influence, the Shiites are liable to be tempted into aggression, the Sunnis to succumb to paranoia (justified or not), and the Kurds to overweening ambition. The risk exists, despite the fact that the manner in which the agreement with the United States was authorized arouses guarded optimism: instead of unilateral or violent moves, the issue was handled in political-legal-parliamentary steps that would not shame any democratic coalition government. Of notable mention is the Shiite majority, which heeded the directive of Ayatollah Sistani to approve the agreement with only a consensual majority. If this is a sign of things to come, it is possible that five years from now – as was the hope of President Bush – there will be a more or less functional democracy there. In any case, in the coming year or two, the administration will require highly sophisticated diplomacy to maneuver between the three sectors and the influences and interests of Iraq's neighbors in a balanced way. The United States will have to pressure the Shiite majority in order to protect the Sunni minority, at least enough so as to prevent a renewal of a Sunni locus of terrorism and pacify Iraq's Sunni neighbors, but not so much as to open the door to increased Iranian influence in Baghdad. Similarly, the United States will be required to support the Kurds' desire for autonomy and expand their geographical area just enough so as not to arouse retaliatory steps from within Iraq or from Iraq's neighbors.

In conclusion, it appears that the American military withdrawal from Iraq will proceed cautiously and will not encounter security difficulties. The United States will have to make a serious effort to ensure that this step does not result in intra-Iraqi or regional chaos, which would halt the withdrawal or show that it was fundamentally erroneous.

Iran

Efforts to stop the Iranian nuclear program during 2008 stagnated: Europe and the United States continued to declare Iranian military nuclear capability unacceptable and continued to offer negotiations should Iran decide to suspend (not stop) its uranium enrichment program. Iran continued to declare that it would never concede its right to independent nuclear capability and therefore it would not suspend the program. The

United States and Israel continued to announce that the military option was on the table. Iran continued to claim that it was not afraid. The Security Council did not even meet to discuss a fourth resolution on sanctions after the weak resolution that was adopted in March 2008.[12] When the United States tried to promote a significant move toward sanctions beyond the framework of the United Nations, Europe was unresponsive.[13] The engagement by the EU and IAEA director general Mohammed ElBaradei with Iran continued to not bear any fruit. By contrast, the Iranian nuclear program was far from stagnant.

The American carrot (incentives package) and stick (sanctions) strategy failed. The first stick – a military attack – was something Tehran was not worried about; the message from both the outgoing and incoming administrations in the last year was that "another war in the Middle East is the last thing the United States needs" and that "a war against Iran would be disastrous."[14] The second stick was not painful enough: the weak sanctions imposed do not cost Iran enough to make it change its policy; Russia and China are opposed to making the sanctions stricter; and Europe is not prepared to downgrade its economic ties with Iran beyond whatever is called for by the Security Council resolutions. The international community effectively blocked the United States.

Obama the candidate agreed with President Bush, both about the goal of preventing Iran from achieving military nuclear capability, and about diplomacy as a preferred means to attain this goal. However, he was scathing in his criticism of Bush's failure, which he attributed to the decision to boycott Iran. At the beginning, Bush made any negotiations contingent on stopping the enrichment program; afterwards, he indirectly supported the efforts of the EU-3; and only in 2008 did he agree to mid-level meetings and only in a multilateral setting.[15] Obama promised to initiate direct bilateral talks with Tehran, both out of a hope that this may lead directly to a diplomatic solution, and as justification for applying painful sanctions or even engaging in a military move should the dialogue fail. At least to date, he is standing by this promise.

When formulating this new policy, the administration apparently decided very early on not to take major steps before the Iranian elections in June 2009, perhaps in order to prevent President Ahmadinejad from

scoring propaganda points. As such, Washington emitted a softer tone to affect the atmosphere. The president's reference to the nuclear threat came without the standard line that "all options are on the table." The president sent special New Year's greetings to the Iranian people in which he called for "a new beginning in the relations" based on "mutual respect," and in which for the first time he used the term "the Islamic Republic of Iran," implying there was no intention to generate a regime change in Tehran. Several steps were also taken on the diplomatic level. In March-April, Iran was invited to an international regional conference on Afghanistan, where representatives of Iran and the United States met face-to-face; American diplomats throughout the world have been given permission to talk with Iranian representatives without prior approval from the State Department; and in April the United States announced that it would join on a regular basis the groups of states conducting negotiations with Iran (President Bush sent a representative just once, and of a lower rank than the other representatives.) All signs, including those coming from Tehran, indicate that after the elections, a direct and significant dialogue will commence between the two nations.

Extending an invitation to direct talks will not be enough. The administration will have to infuse it with content, because Iran has already rejected a number of incentives packages offered by Europe and the United States. Several suggestions and ideas have been raised, beyond the familiar economic incentives: to refrain from efforts toward regime change in Tehran; to recognize Iran's status as a key player in the region; to give Iran American security guarantees; to offer Iran something in exchange that would justify conceding the security and prestige associated with nuclear capabilities; and/or to agree to uranium enrichment on Iranian soil and make do with tight controls and oversights that would prevent spillover into a military program.[16] The hope apparently is that if a comprehensive detailed package is offered publicly by the United States, and at a time of dramatic decreases in the price of oil that are weakening Iran, there is a chance that Tehran will respond positively.

The potential for direct dialogue between the United States and Iran will be determined by a number of key points. One, in order to begin negotiations it is necessary to overcome the conditionality barrier, because

Iran rejects every Western demand to suspend, even temporarily, the enrichment program as a precondition for dialogue. If Obama indeed intends to hold talks with no prerequisites, this would represent a major achievement for Iran that would undermine the US's common denominator with at least part of Europe. (It may be what French president Sarkozy had in mind when he described the stance of candidate Obama as "utterly immature" and "empty of all content."[17]) The United States may suggest a partial suspension or steps such as not adding any more centrifuges.

Second, it is already clear that the administration has no intention of advancing negotiations and sanctions at the same time, because the latter will be presented as contradicting the good intentions inherent in the former. On the other hand, it is hard to assume that Iran will agree to a more flexible stance without the potential of force hovering over the negotiations, especially as it is clear that Russia and China will prevent painful sanctions from being authorized in the Security Council, certainly within a reasonable amount of time.

Third, the technological clock is ticking, in particular from Israel's perspective. President Obama has avoided and will likely continue to avoid setting target dates for concluding the talks, but in the summary of his meeting with the Israeli prime minister he said that it would be possible to assess the situation by the end of 2009. It is hard to believe that this will actually happen. Tehran has demonstrated its expertise in foot-dragging, and the West has shown its capacity for endless patience. It is safe to assume that at any point in time, including the end of 2009, Iran will be able to present a stance that would prevent the door slamming shut on the dialogue. That would certainly keep Russia and China from joining in a new decision on sanctions.

Finally, the objective of the new administration is apparently more modest than that of its predecessor. While President Bush spoke about preventing the enrichment of uranium, President Obama speaks only about arms development. If these hints are significant, it may be that the United States would be prepared to settle for Iran becoming a "threshold state," i.e., a state with strong potential to develop nuclear arms, seemingly neutralized by international oversight and control. It is doubtful that Israel would agree to this. It is possible that because of these concerns, the

administration sent first Dennis Ross and later Secretary of Defense Gates to hold a round of talks with Arab allies. These four points – prerequisites for dialogue, the potential use of sanctions as a threat, a timetable, and defined objectives – will determine the American outline for action with regard to Iran.

In conclusion, in the second half of 2009 the Iranian nuclear program will be the focus of the major American diplomatic effort. The effort will be made not just vis-à-vis Iran but also – and perhaps primarily – vis-à-vis the international community, and will be a critical test of the new administration's approach of dialogue and multilateralism. In light of the American estimate that it will take Iran another two to three years to realize its military nuclear capability, one may assume that the administration will not concern itself with the military option during the coming year, and will continue to convey a message of restraint to Israel.

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

From the American and international community's perspective, 2008 was a year of non-success; in fact, in terms of the Annapolis process timetable – a shelf agreement by the end of the year – 2008 may even be called a failure. First of all, two visits by President Bush and six visits by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice did not manage to inject the parties to the negotiations with a sense of urgency regarding the track dealing with the permanent settlement.

Second, the situation is only slightly better with regard to the implementation of Stage 1 of the Roadmap. Israel has not evacuated the unauthorized outposts and has not frozen construction in the settlements, despite a certain harshening of the American tone of criticism on the issue.[18] From the perspective of the international community and in particular that of Tony Blair, the Quartet's envoy to the Middle East, Israel is far from doing enough to improve the fabric of Palestinian life, especially with regard to removing roadblocks and stimulating economic development. On the other hand, the Palestinian Authority has not done enough in terms of governmental-administrative reforms and in terms of centralizing various security mechanisms. Despite progress in this area, the PA is still far from demonstrating full commitment to the struggle against terrorism.

A significant improvement occurred in the realm of internal security, in the form of Palestinian police units that successfully took responsibility for Jenin and Hebron. These are the fruits of efforts by US Lieutenant General Keith Dayton; he has worked to build up the Palestinian security forces and estimates that years will pass before Palestinian abilities in this field will be able to back up a permanent settlement.[19]

Third, none of the parties involved has any substantive idea on how to overcome the Hamas obstacle. The international community has upheld the Quartet's stance from the spring of 2006: Hamas will be defined as a partner for talks only after recognizing Israel, renouncing terrorism, and honoring signed agreements. In the meantime, the organization has largely avoided fire towards Israel since Operation Cast Lead, and perhaps more scrupulously since Egypt stepped up its activities after the discovery of Hizbollah cells supporting Hamas in the Sinai Peninsula.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is near the top of the new administration's list of international priorities. Taking precedence are issues such as the economic crisis, Afghanistan-Pakistan, Iran, and relations with Russia. As promised, the issue is pursued with "active and aggressive involvement," to quote the president's comments on his second day in office when he appointed George Mitchell as his special envoy to the region. Obama views the conflict as an open wound poisoning American policy in the Middle East and interfering with the ability to enlist support for American policies among Arab governments (especially with regard to Iran), therefore pressuring Washington to invest more efforts into resolving the conflict.[20] The perception that the conflict is the major problem in the Middle East is evidently stronger in Obama's administration than in his predecessor's.

There is continuity in the balance (unusual on the American political landscape) shown by Obama as a candidate on the Palestinian issue, in the messages conveyed by the administration during the days leading up to the Israeli elections and the establishment of the new government, and the stance taken during the president's first meeting with the prime minister. One may assume that Netanyahu's political-ideological identity and particularly his avoidance of embracing the "two states for two peoples" formula have strengthened – and facilitated – Obama's tendency to show a relative distancing from Israel. Obama is still apparently committed

to Israel's security and prosperity, but in the widely covered summary of the meeting between the two leaders what stood out most was what was not said: there was no mention of the "friendship/longstanding and close alliance based on shared values and interests" and there was no mention that the Israeli prime minister is a friend and/or partner in the attempt to achieve peace. The issue placed squarely and bluntly in the center by President Obama, the need to freeze the settlements, is an Israeli commitment emphasized time and again by high ranking members of the administration, and accompanied by hardly any reference – certainly not of similar intensity – to Palestinian commitments. This approach correlates with reports in the Israeli media that the administration did not include/update/share with Israel its dispatch of high ranking personnel to the Middle East for consultations about the Iranian question. The signs thus are that Israel is not enjoying its favored status in the American administration in the sense of prior consultations and political consideration/patience.

Following his meetings with Presidents Abbas and Mubarak, President Obama delivered an important speech intended for the Muslim world. The administration may next present a detailed political plan for dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict. On the basis of ideas raised to date and George Mitchell's record, it is possible to estimate that this plan will include three principles: first, adherence to the framework of Stage 1 of the Roadmap as a channel for confidence building measures. Alongside the usual demands of the Palestinians (reforms, fighting terrorism), the main burden of proof will be on Israel. It will be required to evacuate the outposts and freeze construction in the settlements, decrease significantly the number of roadblocks in the West Bank, and open border crossings to the Gaza Strip. This time, the framework will be accompanied by a detailed timetable for implementation and/or a control and response mechanism. In contrast to the original Roadmap and in accordance with the Annapolis process, realizing these steps will not necessarily be a precondition for renewing the negotiations over a permanent settlement. Second, the political process will likely be expanded to a regional circle by an almost complete adoption of the Arab peace initiative (except for the question of the refugees), and a call will go out to the Arab states to implement normalization steps toward Israel in the course of the process and not only at its end, and to express their

willingness to involve the United States in some way in the negotiations between Israel and Syria. Regional involvement is important to the United States, both as part of its regional coalition building against Iran and in order to encourage Israeli flexibility and concessions. Third, this plan will include a significant emphasis on strengthening the Palestinian economy, administration, and security services, in part based on Prime Minister Netanyahu's stress on "building the Palestinian state from the bottom up." The administration will also presumably be interested in including a significant step regarding the Gaza Strip, but this is contingent on the ability of Hamas and the PA to reach some sort of working relationship.

This American plan or a similar one will be received warmly by the Palestinians and the Arabs, who will make every step of their own contingent on Israel's fulfilling its commitments, especially regarding the settlements. The Netanyahu government will not want and will not be able to freeze Israeli construction in the West Bank totally. The future of the political process will be determined to a large extent by the stances of Netanyahu and Obama on this question. The Israeli prime minister will have to decide if he prefers conducting long and exhausting negotiations leading to a commitment he has no intention of honoring, or rejecting outright the demand for a total freeze. The American president will have to decide if this issue, both inherently and as a symbol of its determination with regard to Israel and responsiveness to the way the winds are blowing in the Arab-Muslim world, is in fact the key to progress. The strong support of Israel's friends in Congress for the administration's stance on the settlements during Netanyahu's visit to Washington, as well as the sympathetic responses of AIPAC to Vice President Biden's reference to the issue demonstrate that the president will have no domestic political problem in case he decides to insist on a freeze of settlement construction.

Regarding the other interlocutor, the problem will not be disagreement with the Palestinians but rather the intra-Palestinian conflict. In the past, Obama has referred to the vital need for solving that conflict so that Israel will have a negotiating partner.[21] Considering his basic bent for dialogue with adversaries, it may be that there is a hint here of a preference for a Palestinian unity government (contrary to the stance of Bush and Israel). Mitchell too has dropped the same hint. However, it is mainly up to

Hamas and Fatah, and Hamas' position regarding Israel is not the major impediment to an arrangement between the organizations. Furthermore, any American attempt to impose flexibility here will be rejected by Israel and may feed a confrontation between Israel and the administration.

In conclusion, the United States is trying to manage a diplomatic process in which the Palestinian side largely cannot make progress and the Israeli side largely does not want to. With the Palestinians, it is unclear whether there will be anybody to talk to before and after January 2010, the scheduled date of the PA elections. With the Israelis, there is a risk that relations will develop into the Clinton-Netanyahu model or even the Bush-Shamir one. The future portends a vigorous and exceptional American effort, but it is hard to be optimistic about its outcome.

Syria

America's boycott of Syria failed in 2008 after Israel began indirect negotiations with Damascus and France freed it from international isolation. The boycott policy was an outgrowth of the United States' many grievances against Damascus: support for the insurgents in Iraq; help for jihadist terrorism;[22] destructive interference in Lebanon's affairs (support for Hizbollah, almost certain involvement in the murder of Hariri and others, the long delay in choosing the new president); hosting Hamas and other Palestinian rejectionist organizations; an attempt to develop a covert nuclear program; and tight coordination with Iran. While Syria has made some effort to close its border with Iraq to infiltrators and its representatives have participated in regional conferences on the subject, this was too little from the Bush administration's perspective. This was reflected by the lack of continuation of high level contacts between the nations (there was one meeting between the Syrian foreign minister and David Walsh, the American representative); the American attack in eastern Syria in October 2008 (which seems not to have been the first of its kind);[23] America's avoidance of supporting Israeli-Syrian negotiations despite the public appeal of Syrian president Bashar al-Asad; and the continuing American sanctions against Syria because of its definition as a terrorist sponsoring state. This policy, however, failed: Syria did not conform to American expectation, yet it managed to escape its isolation.

Former prime minister Ehud Olmert did not convince President Bush to invest in severing Syria from the radical Iran-Hizbollah-Hamas axis.[24] Netanyahu will apparently not try to follow suit, but Obama does not need to be convinced: he and his advisors seem to be aware of Syria's importance in terms of regional spoiler value. The new president, who believes in dialogue with adversaries, argued before taking office that the United States must support Syrian-Israeli negotiations, both to weaken the radical axis and to help Israel after it decided that this was in its own best interests. Even before the American elections, Obama's associates told the Syrian ambassador in Washington that Obama would work towards bringing Syria closer to the international community and that he would support negotiations between Israel and Syria.[25] And indeed, the new administration did initiate upgraded talks, and twice in his first three months in office Obama sent two senior officials to Damascus. Yet while the talks were described as having constructive potential, in mid May, according to procedures anchored in law, President Obama renewed the sanctions against Syria, seemingly because of dissatisfaction with Syrian conduct concerning Iraq and Lebanon. Likewise, Syria was not mentioned at all by President Obama in the remarks concluding Netanyahu's visit to the White House.

As is the case with Iran, it is very possible that the United States will strive to reach a grand bargain with Syria that would cover all the issues on the table between the two countries: Syria would stop its support for terrorism on all fronts (Iraq, Hizbollah, Hamas, global jihad), would sever itself from the axis with Iran, and would stop interfering in Lebanese affairs; and the United States would rescind the isolation and the sanctions (and agree to Syria joining the World Trade Organization), and actively support Syrian-Israeli negotiations, including a full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights. In such a scenario, the main problem might actually be on the less important front – Lebanon. Syrian interests in Lebanon are vital to Damascus, possibly more so even than the recovery of the Golan. By contrast, the new administration has already shown its interest in a Lebanon free of foreign interference by means of visits by Secretary of State Clinton and Vice President Biden to Beirut. Washington apparently has no intention of selling Lebanon out to the Syrians.[26]

At this stage the Obama administration has rejected the advice to start with Syria, in the sense of focusing on it as a regional key with regard to Iran and the Arab-Israeli conflict.[27] There is no doubt that the United States will make an effort to include Syria in the regional mosaic it is constructing. However, Damascus must prove its willingness to change direction through action before Washington takes concrete steps that are in Syria's interest.

Conclusion

American policy in the Middle East underwent a change in 2009, from neo-ideological rhetoric and unilateral contrarianism to emphasis on pragmatic bi/multilateral dialogue. This is not to say that the Bush administration abstained from dialogue, as evidenced by the work with the Sunnis in Iraq, the start and maintenance of the Annapolis process, support for the European effort to engage with Iran, and the patience demonstrated in the Security Council with regard to sanctions against Iran. However, the basic approach, certainly until 2005, comprised "you're either with us or against us" and an unusual reliance on force to effect political change. The Bush administration was revisionist in the sense of aspiring to change the status quo, even at the expense of tensions and confrontations, on the assumption that change, while perhaps chaotic at the outset, would eventually bear fruit.

By contrast, the Obama administration is spreading an aura of calm through virtually all of the Middle East: a noteworthy attempt at direct negotiations with Iran; accelerated withdrawal of the American forces from Iraq; dialogue with Syria; and extensive and intensive American involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Even in Afghanistan-Pakistan, where the intention is actually to expand the military effort, the United States will apparently also expand its effort at dialogue with some of the problematic tribal factions.[28] The international community of course will be pleased to find a more attentive ear in Washington. The big question is whether this approach will prove itself in the mid and long term. As of mid 2009, Obama may have effected a change in the international atmosphere toward the United States, but Europe has nonetheless not agreed to send reinforcements for the troops in Afghanistan, Russia has

not changed its conduct in Eastern Europe or with regard to Iran, and the Security Council is impotent regarding the escalation in North Korea (a phenomenon to which Iran is surely not blind).

At this stage it seems that the administration will attempt to join policy principles with respective issues so as to form a comprehensive regional strategy. The keystone of this strategy will be Iran, because it is seen as the most important issue and impacts on all the others. By the end of the year the administration will have to decide if there is a serious chance of arriving at an understanding with Tehran. Such an understanding would have a calming effect on other sectors, but its price will be recognizing Iran's regional status and its interests in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon. To weaken Iran and enlist support against it, whether in the form of support for dialogue or in the form of an alternative to its failure, the United States will try to tempt Syria and make major progress in the Israeli-Palestinian process. In the comprehensive package, President Obama is putting great efforts into drawing closer to the Muslim-Arab world, as indicated in his first interview as president, which he granted to al-Arabiya, and his speeches in Istanbul and Cairo.

An integrated regional strategy should derive from a comprehensive worldview. In the last sixty years, there were two periods in which American foreign policy was based on a comprehensive serious worldview: the architecture constructed by Harry Truman's administration after World War II (reconstruction and inclusion), and the careful Metternich-style balance of power embraced by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger. The organizing principle of Bush in the post-9/11 world was war on terrorism and efforts to democratize nations, as two sides of the same coin. It is not yet clear whether Obama and his team have an organizing principle or a bent towards formulating one. If there is, clearly it will not be the same as Bush's. In the meantime, it seems that the administration is trying to construct an international agenda based on pragmatic dialogue, one that recognizes that the United States is not capable of coping with all the challenges on its own, and not even together with only its traditional allies.[29] (It would be somewhat ironic, historically speaking, were Obama to implement the promise made by candidate Bush in 2000 for a more

modest foreign policy.) This line is clearly expressed in the American policy in the Middle East.

In any case, changes in American policy have two major implications for Israel. First, Israel has a permanent interest in seeing American policy succeed: the stronger the status of Israel's only ally, the better. Furthermore, it is important to Israel that Pakistan stabilize rather than deteriorate, lest nuclear capabilities fall into destructive hands; it is important to Israel that the efforts in Afghanistan against the Taliban and al-Qaeda succeed; and it is important to Israel that Iranian influence not grow in Iraq and/or that part of Iraq not become a safe haven for Sunni jihadists. Above all, it is important to Israel that the United States succeed in somehow stopping the Iranian nuclear program. Second, Israel must draw the right conclusions from the fact that the Bush era is over. Boycotting Yasir Arafat, unilateral withdrawal, a continued embargo on the Gaza Strip, and long military campaigns against Hizbollah and Hamas – all of these were comparable with the previous administration's unilateral, confrontational approach. This is no longer so. In a world of engagement, Israel will have to be careful that it is not called on to pay the price. More important, Israel must contribute its share to the stabilization of the Middle East.

Notes

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