

The US, Israel, and the Greater Middle East

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In speaking about US policy towards the strategic challenges under discussion, I speak only for myself and I do not represent anybody in the administration or the Obama administration itself.

I think it is accurate to say that President Obama, when he came into office almost a year ago, identified three strategic challenges in this area, which has come in Washington parlance to be referred to as the central region, referring to the whole area from Marrakesh in the west to Bangladesh in the east. The first of the three strategic challenges that he identified was the threat from al-Qaeda and jihadist violent extremism, which came to manifest itself first of all in al-Qaeda in Iraq and the sectarian warfare that it spawned there in the wake of the American invasion to topple Saddam Hussein's regime. Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan has also created an ongoing threat, not just to the United States but to the West in general.

The second challenge was the challenge from Iran, with its nuclear ambition and its efforts to dominate the region and interfere in the Arab-Israeli heartland through its proxies Hizbollah and Hamas, using its ally Syria as a conduit.

The third challenge was the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict, and in particular the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. President Obama believes that time is not on the side of our ally Israel for resolving this conflict, but in addition, a failure to resolve the conflict will have a detrimental impact on America's national interest as well.

In order to deal with these three related challenges, the Obama administration developed an integrated strategy. The first was to draw down American forces in Iraq, where the war on al-Qaeda in Iraq was essentially won. However, the challenge was to ensure that a fragile

political process of reconciliation continued, and therefore the process of withdrawal from Iraq was to be done gradually. At the same time the president made an early decision to step up military efforts in Afghanistan, and argued to the American people that today, the real threat from al-Qaeda is in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Therefore, it was necessary to prosecute them more effectively in Afghanistan and have Pakistan cooperate in the war against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in the western parts of Pakistan. As a corollary to the first part of this strategy, the president sought to rebuild America's relations with the Arab and Muslim world. This was manifested most critically in his travels, first to Ankara and then to Cairo, and in his Cairo speech addressed to the Arab and Muslim world.

The second branch of the strategy was to try to engage Iran or, as he said in his inaugural address, to offer a hand to Iran and see whether it was willing to unclench its fist. But at the same time, while trying to engage Iran, he also sought to develop a second track of an international consensus against Iran's development of nuclear weapons, which he referred to as a game changer, particularly because of the danger it posed of sparking a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. He also argued effectively both to Russia and more recently to China that their interests as well would be adversely affected by a failure to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. His pressing of the reset button with Russia, as he referred to it, was an important part of that second track that was designed to put in place a kind of international phalanx against Iran's nuclear ambitions, such that if engagement failed there would be greater willingness to impose sanctions, crippling sanctions as Secretary of State Clinton referred to them, so as to impress on the Iranian regime more effectively the seriousness of the international community.

The third branch in the strategy was to try to achieve a comprehensive resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict by working with America's partners, that is to say Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, and also to see if it was possible to bring Syria into the American and Western-led peace camp. His efforts were focused on achieving breakthroughs on two fronts, the Palestinian and the Syrian fronts, if possible, simultaneously. It was based on an assumption that the threat from Iran, which was a threat that Israel and its Arab neighbors shared, could provide a motivating factor for helping to resolve this longstanding conflict.

In pursuing this three-pronged strategy, there was also an assumption that a symbiosis, a positive symbiosis, could be developed, such that progress in one area would benefit the efforts in the others. In particular there was an assumption in Washington that by making progress in resolving the Palestinian problem, it would help with the war on al-Qaeda; that by achieving a breakthrough on the Syrian track, it would help to pressure Iran; and that by engaging Iran it might be possible to ease tensions across the region.

Israel had a critical role in this strategy, and early on the administration opened a strategic dialogue with the Israeli government to try to concert policy towards Iran. It wished to be sure that Israel was comfortable with the policy of engagement so that it would continue to cooperate with it and exercise restraint while engagement was given a chance to work. The other critical role for Israel was of course to partner with the United States in the effort to achieve breakthroughs on the Palestinian and Syrian fronts.

There is, I think, very close cooperation on the first role, in terms of a coordinated effort between the United States and Israel to deal with the common threat from Iran. But in all candor one would have to say that there is a great deal of disappointment in Washington on the second front, when it comes to the effort to try to achieve breakthroughs on the Syrian and Palestinian fronts.

Of course Israel wasn't the only one to disappoint Barack Obama. Saudi Arabia refused to play at all, notwithstanding its profession of interest in trying to lead the Arab world to peace with Israel. When President Obama traveled to Saudi Arabia to try to enlist King Abdullah in this effort in an overt way, he ran into a brick wall. At least as far as Riyadh is concerned, the virtual alliance that from Washington's perspective we thought existed turned out to be a mirage in the Saudi desert. Abu Mazen of course stepped back instead of stepping forward, and left it to the United States to "deliver" Israel, particularly on the promise of a complete settlement freeze, including natural growth. The Iranian regime, instead of unclenching its fist, used its fist against its own people, first of all by stealing the election, and then by suppressing the dramatic protest from millions of Iranians, who objected to the fraud that was put and traded in their name.

As a result of all of this, the Obama administration does not have much to show for its efforts and its strategy. Iraq is still in a fragile state, but the

efforts to withdraw and leave a functioning political entity in the wake of the American forces is more or less on track.

Afghanistan – in the words of General McChrystal, now in charge of the NATO forces and responsible for prosecuting the war there – is not going well. In fact, he reported to the president that we are losing that war. In Pakistan the Obama administration did succeed in getting the Pakistani army to act against the Pakistani Taliban. However, we have not succeeded in getting them to act against the Afghani Taliban, or for that matter in any effective way acting against al-Qaeda.

In the case of Iran, the centrifuges are still spinning, but the regime is in trouble. There is a crack both within the regime and a split between the regime and its people. One cannot claim this as an achievement of the policy of engagement. However, it benefits the overall strategy of the Obama administration, in the sense that the Iranian regime is very much on the defensive internally, because of the ongoing problems it faces with its own people and within the regime itself. In addition, some progress has been made on the Iranian front by bringing Russia around to join more seriously in the efforts to curb Iran's nuclear program and in the potential now of bringing China on board as well.

When it comes to the Arab-Israeli efforts, we have a situation where not only has it been impossible to so far resume final status negotiations, but the parties seem to be further away from the negotiating table than when the Obama administration started. Furthermore, the Arab states are for the most part essentially watching from the sidelines, instead of joining us in this effort.

I think it's important to understand that Barack Obama has inherited a barren landscape with very few opportunities and many challenges. He tried to fly high and fast and has become mugged by Middle Eastern realities. He isn't the first president to experience that; that's why I titled my book about President Clinton's efforts in the Middle East *Innocent Abroad*, but as President Obama painted in very clear terms in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, he continues to believe in his vision of a multilateral world order that is more peaceful, more stable, and more respectful of international norms and of human dignity. That hasn't changed in the first year, and even though it's been a steep learning curve, it's only been one year and I see every reason to believe that he intends to press on.

The Afghanistan decision is emblematic in that regard of his intention to double-down rather than to give up, but it's emblematic in another way as well; he is in effect going in to get out, and that reflects not only an ambivalence about the war in Afghanistan itself and the difficulties involved there, but a very real recognition that America has problems at home that it also needs to address.

We are no longer the dominant superpower, and we have no choice but to work with others to try to reach our objectives. That means that in the Middle East we can only achieve our objectives if we have partners to work with. So even though I think President Obama will redouble his efforts to try to achieve an end to Iran's nuclear program – or the curbing of it – and an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict, he cannot succeed in that unless the region's leaders are willing to cooperate.

That leaves us with a series of questions: Will pressures on Prime Minister Netanyahu lead him to accept a formula for beginning final status negotiations that will acknowledge that the Palestinian state that he has now embraced will be based on the 1967 lines? I think the formula that Shaul Mofaz laid out, if Prime Minister Netanyahu were willing to accept it, could form the basis for beginning final status negotiations. That is to say that the territory that the Palestinian state will be based on will be similar to the territory that Israel occupied in 1967. Will Abu Mazen come to see that his responsibility to the Palestinian people requires him to return to those final status negotiations? Will Saudi Arabia's need for a process – if not an outcome – lead it to step forward and try to help resume the negotiations and bring them to a successful conclusion? Will the external and internal pressures on Iran produce developments there that may in effect help either in the effort to curb the nuclear program or to so destabilize the regime that other alternatives become possible?

I know it's unsatisfying to end with a series of questions rather than a series of conclusions, but that is the state that we are in at the moment. For the Obama administration it is very much a work in progress with little to show for the time being, but the hope that if you try sometimes, in the words of the Rolling Stones, you just might get what you need.