

American Mideast Strategic Conundrums: Time for New Thinking

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A little over a year ago, Barack Hussein Obama beamed from the inaugural steps of the U.S. Capitol in Washington to announce the birth of a new world of dialogue and understanding and of a renewed effort to address the ills and injustices of the world he inherited from his predecessor. For the Middle East, change was at hand at last. Israelis and Palestinians were to resolve their differences and establish two adjacent states; Iran was to eagerly receive an extended American hand with unclenched fists; US-Muslim relations were to head in a new direction; and the entire region was to find its illusive peace. But after a year of attempting to address the complicated strategic environment in the Middle East, Obama finds himself limited to achieving the lowest common denominator that barely keeps the region from exploding and protects paramount, traditional American interests.

The Arab-Israeli conflict and its core issue of resolving the Palestinian debacle seem to have suffered a serious setback when the Obama Administration failed to follow through on its demand of a halt to Israeli settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian lands. After an initial push to freeze settlements and work toward a two-state solution for the Israelis and

Palestinians, the administration was confronted with a rightwing Israeli government that was willing to simply ignore Washington's wishes and count on pro-Israel sentiments in the American Congress to blunt possible pressures. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Middle East Special Envoy George Mitchell backpedalled to ask the Palestinians to return to negotiations without pre-conditions about freezing settlement activities, guaranteeing state borders, or final status timetables and issues. In the absence of meaningful Israeli concessions and of Palestinian acquiescence, the American agenda has now been reduced to mere *attempts* to find ways to make small changes in peripheral issues such as allowing more Palestinian movement and redesignating West Bank areas (A, B, or C).

In Iran, the Obama Administration is looking for traction with a militaristic and messianic regime that knows how to exploit the slightest hint of hesitation to its advantage. Obama's extended hand in January of 2009 was met by intransigence in the Islamic Republic, with the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad demanding that the world recognize Iran as a regional power that can pursue its nuclear agenda without regard to the international community's wishes. Indeed, Ahmadinejad feels confident enough to order the start of enriching Iran's existing pile of uranium to 20%. And as if on cue, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu exploited the impasse with Iran to demand that the United States and the world make Tehran's nuclear

program their priority and shift emphasis away from resolving the Palestinian question. A year after it was made, Obama's call for dialogue and understanding fell flat as Iran lies and cheats and as Israel continues its settlement activities and threatens to completely derail peace efforts.

In Iraq, the gradual withdrawal of American forces from cities slowly erodes American influence in Baghdad. Iraqi democracy seems to be in free fall as entrenched Shi'ite politicians borrow Saddam Hussein's old book of political machinations to keep rivals away from centres of power. Iraqi friends of Iran, from the Prime Minister's office on down, sheepishly ignore the serious repercussions of the short-lived Iranian forces' occupation of an oil well on the borders between the two countries. The city of Kirkuk sits on a powder keg as Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmen fight over who controls it. Corruption grips all aspects of Iraqi life as the country's oil sector lays bare for the picking by unscrupulous bureaucrats and power brokers interested in amassing wealth and influence. The administration is now merely working on assuring an orderly withdrawal of combat troops in preparation for full withdrawal by the end of 2011 with no guarantee of a positive outcome for a seven-year invasion.

In Yemen, the United States finds itself on the verge of opening yet another front against terror, just as 'al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula' consolidates its assets in the country that faces a challenge from a messianic Zaidi rebellion in the north, secession calls in the south, and rampant

corruption and ineptitude at the centre. The Obama Administration pledges military and economic support and urges all who would listen to help prevent the country from becoming a failed state that would parallel a no man's land in Somalia on the other side of the strategic Gulf of Aden. And if this were to happen, al-Qaeda and international terrorism would win the chess game near the artery that feeds the American and world economies.

In Lebanon, a tense peace holds between odd bedfellows some of whom like to pitch their tent in the American and western camp while others insist on belonging to a 'steadfast' front led by Iran and Syria to resist the West. Lebanese democracy has under Hizbullah's force of arms been whittled away to a collection of ad hoc arrangements and agreements that have almost made the already weak Lebanese state an empty slogan of nervous religious communities. What was a few years ago the Middle East's example of a United States-supported coloured revolution is being eroded daily by both Iran's interference in the form of Hizbullah and Israeli influence in the form of war and threats. Lebanon today walks a tightrope with no safety net as Iran, Syria, and Israel hold it hostage, all in the absence of a clear American policy of supporting a friend and a majority that in 2005 believed it could be the Arab world's beacon of hope and democratic and peaceful change.

No one can blame the trials and tribulations of American strategic calamities on the Obama Administration alone. The

legacy of President George W. Bush's policies in the region will be hard to overcome soon. Misconceptions, misperceptions, outright aggression against Iraq, and ignorance of the most basic tenets of a just foreign policy worked to muddy the waters for any successor administration. But what stands out after a year of Obama's presidency is the seeming lack of a foreign policy template that would serve America's strategic interests in the Middle East.

Obama's foreign policy initiatives in the Middle East have to begin with an emphasis on resolving the Palestinian question that remains at the heart of many others in the region; notwithstanding Israel's attempts to make Iran's nuclear program the essence of all evil. America's national security requires that the administration simply insist on being heard about the illegality of the settlements, the bi-national status of Jerusalem, and the importance of seriously discussing final status issues. Israel is an occupying power and must be treated as such. The United States should no longer morally and strategically accept that its surrogate in the Middle East be allowed to do what it may to the detriment of all others.

Resolving the sticky question of Iran's nuclear program could be diplomatically achieved after an honest effort is made to address all weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East, including Israel's nuclear program and arsenal. Yemen's troubles will not disappear quickly; but an international, US-led effort to address the deep challenges of its political, economic, and social development

may go a long way in aborting its slide into the abyss of state failure. Similarly, Lebanese democracy can be strengthened by more aid that would be directed at augmenting state institutions that would allow the country to weather the myriad domestic and regional challenges.

Few in the Middle East cast aspersions at President Obama's agenda of change when he campaigned on the platform in 2008. Indeed, the majority saw a glimmer of hope that they were more than ready and willing to help shine. After all, he privileged an Arab station, Dubai-based *al-Arabiyya*, with his first television interview in office and chose Cairo for his major speech to the Arab and Muslim worlds. Arabs and Middle Easterners at large deserve to have a firm, just, and reasoned approach that would both help solve their problems and protect American national interests.

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Obama image:

<http://nottooshaabi.files.wordpress.com/2009/06/obama-cairo-speech-photo-wave-preview2.jpg>

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