

Middle East Policy Planning for a Second Obama Administration

Memo from a Fictional NSC Staffer

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Brief Analysis

On November 8, 2012, Washington Institute executive director Robert Satloff addressed a Policy Forum along with Dennis Ross and Jim Jeffrey. The following is an edited version of Dr. Satloff's comments; the full event can be viewed in the above video.

If President Obama tasked a courageous National Security Council staff member with drafting a Middle East policy planning memo for his second administration, it might look something like this:

FOUR LESSONS FROM THE FIRST TERM

- As much as we would like to wish it so, it is a mistake to think the United States can pivot away from the Middle East and toward Asia, as though we have a fixed amount of bandwidth and the luxury of reapportioning it based on our preference. For the foreseeable future, the United States cannot avoid dealing with threats and challenges emanating from this region.
- Middle East politics revolve around two threats: the ambitions of a hegemonic Iran and the spread of violent Sunni extremism. In this framework, other issues are secondary to U.S. interests. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for example, is profoundly important to Israelis and Palestinians (and, for those reasons, important to the United States), but its continuation or resolution will have little impact on the larger dynamics defined by these two threats.
- There are few "happily ever afters" in the Middle East; developments that begin with remarkable hope and inspiration rarely end that way. Look at the bloodless revolution in Tunisia, the spirit of Tahrir Square, and the amazing courage of the peaceful protestors in Deraa, and then look at where they are today. Of course, anyone who followed the Oslo process over the past nineteen years already knew this lesson, but every administration learns it for itself.
- As much as words matter -- whether they are the soaring words of the June 2009 Cairo speech to the Muslim world or the line-in-the-sand words of "prevention, not deterrence" regarding Iranian nuclear weapons -- actions matter more. It is a mistake to believe that the former can substitute for the latter.

THREE MOST URGENT ISSUES ON THE MIDDLE EAST

AGENDA

- Determining, once and for all, whether the strategy of diplomacy-plus-sanctions will produce a negotiated agreement to resolve the Iranian nuclear challenge, or whether alternative means of coercion, including military force, are necessary to prevent Iran from achieving a nuclear weapons capability.
- Bringing down Bashar al-Assad's regime as soon as possible in order to impose a strategic defeat on Iran, cut the axis of resistance that links Tehran to Damascus and Hizballah in Beirut, prevent regionalization of the Syrian conflict, end the suffering of the Syrian people, and prevent the worst outcomes (e.g., a jihadist takeover or a lengthy sectarian war-to-the-finish) from emerging out of the rubble of the uprising.
- Preventing the collapse of one or more of the pro-Western monarchies in Bahrain, Jordan, and Morocco. Rabat seems to have figured out a recipe for survival, and Manama has big brother Saudi Arabia looking out for it. The most vulnerable of the three is Jordan, a small, resource-poor buffer state -- a keynote of U.S. interests in the Mashreq -- that is facing severe domestic and regional challenges to its stability and survival.

THREE REGIONAL LEADERS WHO DESERVE SPECIAL ATTENTION

- *Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu.* If he leads his party to victory in the January Knesset elections and forms another coalition government, he is likely to be in office for the balance of the Obama presidency. Given this reality, there is no advantage in having the next four years resemble the first two of Obama's previous term -- a period marked by personal animosities between the two leaders that did not do justice to the depth of the bilateral strategic relationship. U.S. and Israeli interests are consonant and complementary, and the relationship between the leaders should reflect this fact. Of course, the United States is the Great Power and Israel the Lesser Power, so a major share of the responsibility for building sound personal relations falls on the shoulders of the Israeli prime minister. But President Obama has an important role to play in this process as well.
- *Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki.* Iraq is the third rail of U.S. Middle East diplomacy. In public, few policymakers want to mention the word "Iraq" because it conjures up such bad memories from the past decade. But if geography is destiny, then Iraq -- a functioning, if flawed, democracy located between Iran and Syria -- is critical to U.S. interests.
- *The next generation of Saudi princes.* As Washington Institute fellow Simon Henderson pointed out recently (see <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/saudi-resignation-prompts-fresh-succession-debate>), the leadership transition to the grandsons of Ibn Saud may already have begun, as evidenced by the appointment of a new interior minister. The remaining relevant sons of the kingdom's founder -- including King Abdullah, who is closing in on ninety years old -- are approaching their political and actuarial demise, which could unfold quickly in the period ahead. Accordingly, there is an urgent need now for U.S. leaders to build understandings on strategy and reform with the next generation.

THREE CALAMITIES WASHINGTON NEEDS TO PREVENT

- *The demise of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.* See above.
- *The collapse of the Palestinian Authority.* While circumstances are not ripe for the president to contemplate investing the time, capital, and energy needed to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he must make an urgent effort to prevent the PA from crumbling. Such a development would dash any hope for eventual return to serious diplomatic engagement and open dangerous opportunities for the spread of Hamas influence in the West Bank. Averting this requires strengthening and expanding Israeli-PA economic and security relationships and convincing donors to fulfill outstanding pledges for PA support.

- *The emergence of a jihadist enclave in Sinai.* This desert wilderness was once a buffer that made peace possible; today it exports instability and terrorism to both Israel and "mainland" Egypt. Washington should help Egypt and promote cooperation between Cairo and Israel so that adequate military and civilian assets are invested in preventing the peninsula from becoming an ungoverned space in which radicals and terrorists could threaten U.S. allies and interests.

THREE POLICY INITIATIVES FOR THE SECOND TERM

- *Rethinking relations with Islamist-ruled Egypt.* The current U.S. approach to Cairo is a holdover from the Mubarak era plastered with a few band-aids -- Washington has not given sufficient long-term thought to the strategy, policy, tools, and implementation of a new relationship with the Islamist-governed country. This applies to all bilateral issues: economic assistance, military ties, civil society outreach, support for democratic transition, and so forth.
- *Striking a U.S.-Egypt-Israel trade deal.* Given America's ongoing financial problems, there is little money available for new U.S. aid to a near-bankrupt Egypt, and virtually no chance of a U.S. free-trade agreement with Cairo in the near future, despite the boost such a move would give to Egypt's economy. But if Cairo is serious about seeking sound, responsible solutions to its economic crisis, it could reap many of the benefits of an FTA through a massive expansion of its Qualifying Industrial Zone system with Israel, which would be more palatable in the United States. Israel would do the deal in a heartbeat as a way to build relations with post-Mubarak Egypt, even agreeing to lower the amount of Israeli content in Egyptian exports to the United States. But brokering the deal would require Egypt's president to embrace the concept of economic cooperation with Israel -- and, along the way, actually utter the word "Israel."
- *Repairing Turkish-Israeli ties.* Nearly two-and-a-half years after the *Mavi Marmara* incident, reconciliation between these two U.S. allies is long overdue. Repairing the relationship is certainly in the U.S. interest; many Turks and Israelis believe it is in their interest too. Although bilateral ties may never return to the days of intimacy and friendship that preceded Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's rise to power, there is still much the two countries can do together to further common interests. Despite Washington's previous failed reconciliation efforts, times have changed -- Erdogan is weaker, Netanyahu (if reelected) will be stronger, and the Syria crisis has underscored the common dangers Turkey and Israel face. It is time to try again.

SIX GAME-CHANGERS THAT COULD TRANSFORM THE REGION

- *"Arab Spring, the Sequel."* The next wave of Arab uprisings could turn on the region's monarchies, possibly including Saudi Arabia.
- *Terrorism, again.* After a lull in major strikes against U.S. targets and the killing of Usama bin Laden, the United States could suffer one or more spectacular terrorist attacks, using either known methods (e.g., cataclysmic plots against homeland targets; efforts to down civilian planes; attacks on U.S. embassies, assets, and personnel) or tactics we have not yet seen.
- *Sinai clash on steroids.* The Egypt-Israel peace treaty, the bedrock of U.S. interests in the Levant and Eastern Mediterranean, nearly crumbled in August-September 2011, when terrorists in Sinai triggered Israeli action that sparked an Egyptian response, culminating in a mob attack on the Israeli embassy and the near-lynching of Israeli diplomats. Today, under Islamist-ruled Egypt, the peace may lack the resilience to withstand another, perhaps more lethal, Sinai-based escalation.
- *Weapons of mass destruction in Syria.* The actual or threatened use of WMD in the Syria conflict could trigger a speedy deployment of foreign (including American) troops, thereby realizing a U.S. foreign policy nightmare -- thousands more American "boots on the ground" in a Muslim-majority country.

- *Green Movement revisited.* One potential opportunity for the United States would be a rejuvenated political protest movement in Iran, perhaps triggered by another rigged election. This time, Washington should find ways to embrace, encourage, and support the protestors. At the very least, this would add a new dimension to the pressure on Iran's rulers to reach a negotiated solution on the nuclear crisis. It could also spur an internally driven political transformation of the regime itself.
- *Iranian nuclear breakout.* This nightmare scenario must be averted at all costs, for all the reasons President Obama outlined in advocating the policy of "prevention." There is an added political dimension that deserves mention. So far, this memo has avoided using the term "legacy," so common to memos on second-term foreign policy. But it is important to remember the following: there are many potential Middle East initiatives whose failure would have no lasting repercussions and may not even be remembered at all. If, for example, the president tries and fails to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he will be the sixth president to have hit that wall in the past thirty years. But if Iran develops a nuclear weapon during his term, in the face of unambiguous U.S. commitment to prevent such an outcome, that failure will become the president's legacy in the Middle East. Indeed, despite all his other successes and achievements, his foreign policy epitaph will read "Barack Obama: On his watch, Iran got the bomb."

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