

Obama and the Middle East:

An Early Assessment

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On October 16, 2009, Jackson Diehl, Mortimer Zuckerman, and Michael Mandelbaum participated in a keynote debate at The Washington Institute's annual Weinberg Founders Conference.

Jackson Diehl is deputy editorial page editor of the Washington Post. Mortimer Zuckerman, a member of The Washington Institute's Board of Advisors, is editor in chief of U.S. News & World Report and publisher of the New York Daily News. Michael Mandelbaum, a member of The Washington Institute's board of advisors, is the Christian A. Herter professor of American foreign policy at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies and director of the school's American Foreign Policy Program.

The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Jackson Diehl

The expectations that President Obama set during his campaign have already been challenged within the first nine months of his presidency. The issue that most people overlook is Iraq. The United States has seen some success there, but the possibility that the Obama administration will neglect the issue is dangerous. If Iraq were to turn out badly, the repercussions would reverberate throughout the region.

Regarding Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, the Obama administration seems to be of the opinion that effort is sufficient for success. The administration also seems to believe that a total Israeli settlement freeze is the key to a diplomatic breakthrough. The reality, however, is that governments in the Middle East are more interested in the challenges emanating from Iran than they are in advancing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Washington's interest in the peace process is not unlimited; if Israelis and Palestinians do not take advantage of the help being offered by the United States, the administration could easily divert its attention elsewhere. Moreover, Washington must work to change the attitude among many Middle Eastern nations that the United States will do the heavy lifting

necessary for progress. The administration was not able to elicit from Saudi Arabia a major gesture on normalization, which would have been a substantial contribution to the peace process. In the current environment, President Obama's best bet is to use an incremental approach to negotiations and not look for a comprehensive resolution of the peace impasse.

The prospect of a nuclear Iran poses significant challenges to the Obama administration as well. The best chance to stop the nuclear program is through domestic political change, not diplomacy or military action. Unfortunately, the Obama administration has not adequately factored into its calculus the emergence of a serious opposition to the Tehran regime, largely because we know so little about it. This fear of the unknown is a handicap for President Obama. The administration likely fears war with Iran more than it fears an Iran with a nuclear weapon; any policy the United States pursues in response to Iranian nuclear capabilities is more likely to resemble containment than prevention.

In Afghanistan, a failure in decisionmaking with regard to the U.S. role would ruin any credibility or respect the United States possesses in the wider region. Although Gen. Stanley McChrystal requested an increase of 40,000 troops, President Obama will likely choose to add a much smaller number -- 5,000 to 10,000 -- which will ultimately undermine U.S. momentum in the country.

Despite this critique, it is much too early to say that the Obama administration's Middle East policy needs an emergency rescue plan. Nine months is still within the learning period necessary for a new administration to gain its footing. If President Obama prioritizes correctly and does not prematurely neglect certain issues (such as Iraq), his administration may be able to meet its expectations in the coming years.

Mortimer Zuckerman

The Obama administration doesn't seem to know how to "play the game" in the Middle East -- how to strike the right balance between public statements, private dialogue, shows of force and determination, and exercises of influence and pressure. The administration's orientation toward campaignlike concerns rather than policy, along with its weaknesses in public diplomacy, is causing serious setbacks. Washington's respect and credibility are waning, and it will take a revision of U.S. "game" strategy to restore them.

One of the biggest challenges for the Obama administration is gaining respect. Arabs and Israelis may like Obama, but they do not fear him. As the administration extends its policies with a handshake, it must realize that a clenched fist is also an option. In light of Iran's efforts to develop nuclear capabilities, it is regrettably likely that Obama will push forward with a policy of containment rather than prevention.

U.S. progress on Israeli-Palestinian negotiations is not where President Obama expected it to be. The president's approval rating in Israel is extremely low, and Israelis do not have much faith that the administration will act entirely in their interests. Washington is doing too much in public (through statements by the president and secretary of state) and not enough in private.

President Obama's lengthy review of U.S. policy in Afghanistan is another factor diminishing U.S. credibility in the region. A few thousand extra troops are not enough to ensure success, but the chance that the White House will agree to the larger number requested by the military is not high.

Given the many hits that the new administration has suffered in its first nine months, the only way to ensure that U.S. efforts in the Middle East succeed is to discuss critical issues off-the-record. President Obama must also surround himself with a team of individuals who are better able to understand the region's nuances and the most effective means of operating in the Middle Eastern political environment.

Michael Mandelbaum

Nine months is a short time in which to judge the performance of a presidency, but it is also an appropriate time to decide how to move forward. Faced with a large number of policy challenges in the Middle East, President Obama seems to have decided that he prefers to be liked rather than respected. In the Middle East, as elsewhere, this is a mistake.

The U.S. response to political developments in Iran is indicative of the new administration's approach to Iran generally. Of course, the administration was surprised by both the protests that occurred after June 12 and the Iranian government's response. Many criticize Washington's lack of action following June 12, but it is clear that the administration was persuaded by the popular conviction that anti-U.S. sentiment is pervasive in Iran. Moreover, Washington believed that any U.S. action in support of the opposition would likely have interrupted nuclear negotiations. At the same time, no resolution to the nuclear issue is likely without regime change. The U.S. administration needs to exert more leverage -- currently, it either lacks such leverage or is unwilling to use it. For this reason, it makes sense for the administration to do much more to support the Green Movement in Iran.

Regarding Afghanistan, the biggest mistake made thus far was to immediately make it "Obama's war." Afghanistan was a domestic and political crusade during the presidential campaign, but we must now look at the issue from a policymaking perspective. An escalation in Afghanistan is unpromising; counterinsurgency tactics will prove difficult given the country's open and largely unguarded border with Pakistan. Moreover, General McChrystal's anticorruption goals are unrealistic, and the overall U.S. effort is weak. President Obama is not a war president, the Democratic Party is not a war party, and the American people, in general, are not in a mood to wage war interminably. To persist in Afghanistan and subsequently fail would harm the United States more than cutting its losses and disengaging.

To be successful in the Middle East, the administration must remedy its respect deficit. The most effective way to do so is through the use of force. Still, it is early going, and with the injection of more realism and sound analysis into policymaking, the administration should be able to reprioritize its policies and effectively implement them. ❖

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