

## Beyond the First 100 Days: Prospects for Obama Administration Middle East Strategy

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Nicholas Blanford, John Hannah, and David Makovsky addressed The Washington Institute's 2009 Soref Symposium to analyze prospects for early Obama administration Middle East initiatives, and how those policies affect critical issues such as Iran's nuclear program, Lebanon's upcoming elections, and U.S. relations with Israel.

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[SID=16&newActiveSubNav=Project%20on%20the%20Middle%20East%20Peace%20Process&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D16&newActiveNav=researchPrograms](#) at The Washington Institute.

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

John Hannah

Any administration approaching the Middle East today must understand the central dynamic at play in the region -- namely, the battle for power and influence between the United States and its regional friends on the one hand, and Iran and its allies/proxies on the other. This is the main prism through which key actors in the region -- and certainly the Iranians -- are judging events, weighing the balance of power, and making decisions on crucial policy matters.

Although it is too early to pass any definitive judgments on President Obama's foreign policy, there are some reasons for concern. The administration's current strategy -- which is heavily premised on engaging traditional enemies, apologizing for America's past misdeeds, and downplaying the fears of regional friends -- holds little promise of becoming a successful formula for advancing U.S. interests in the Middle East, regardless of its reception among allies in Europe. This is especially true when adversaries like Iran are quite successfully constructing a narrative that has tremendous resonance in the region. According to this narrative, Iran and its cohorts are winning the struggle for power and influence across the Middle East -- they are the ones who are ascendant, and America is in retreat. Even Obama's election and the end of the Bush era are claimed as fruits of Iran's confrontational policies and confirmation of its growing strength. From this perspective, President Obama's early efforts to engage Iran serve as affirmation of U.S. weakness. For evidence, one need only look at President Ahmadinezhad's May 6 press conference in Damascus, where he triumphantly declared that the United States had abandoned its past efforts to pressure Iran and Syria because it now needed them. "Circumstances are changing rapidly in our favor," he claimed. "We are on the road to victory."

Such statements, and the extent to which they have real currency in the region, offer little basis for effective negotiations that will advance vital U.S. interests. Accordingly, the new administration should be far more sensitive to how its statements and actions affect the prevailing regional narrative on the most pressing issues of the day, including the ongoing reorientation of America's strategic relationship with Iraq, the upcoming elections in Lebanon, the cold war being waged against Iran by Egypt and several other friendly Arab states (during which the Obama administration has largely sat on the sidelines), and the looming possibility of an Israeli military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities. In other words, the administration needs to do a better job of positioning its desire for engagement within the broader regional context and balance of power.

Nicholas Blanford

From Beirut, the Obama administration appears to be proceeding with extreme caution at present. A clearer idea of U.S. Middle East policy may form after key elections in the region, particularly in Lebanon and Iran. The great interest in the outcome of the upcoming Lebanese elections stems from the growing possibility that the pro-Syrian, Hizballah-led, Iran-backed "March 8 Alliance" will triumph over the current Western-backed parliamentary majority known as "March 14." In all probability, however, little will change in Lebanon regardless of which side wins. Chances are another dysfunctional national unity government will emerge and grant veto power to the losing party, much like the current system.

The main impact of an opposition victory at the polls would be one of perception, both regionally and internationally. Over the past five years, Lebanon has been the battlefield for Iran and its allies and the so-called moderate states like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan. Lebanon's return to the axis of resistance -- from which it broke in 2005 following the assassination of Rafiq Hariri -- would be a blow to the morale of the Saudis and their allies, and a boost for Iran and Syria. Egyptians and Saudis would voice further objections to Iranian penetration of the Arab Middle East, and the cold war between the Iranian contingent and the Arab-Israeli-U.S. alliance would likely deepen.

Despite these scenarios, the United States should continue to engage with Lebanon and refrain from overreacting to the prospect of a Hizballah electoral victory. The Obama administration should also maintain the ongoing U.S. military assistance program in order to boost the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and internal security services. A March 8 government would most likely not attempt to sever this relationship. Nor is there a real danger that weapons or military equipment sent to the LAF would fall into the hands of Hizballah. The group uses weapons that suit its own needs, which are not necessarily the same as those of the LAF. Furthermore, Hizballah officials have indicated since 2006 that the group is already well armed.

Although Hizballah has embarked on a vast military buildup since the 2006 war with Israel -- including weapons acquisition, training, and recruitment -- it has remained relatively quiet along the Blue Line, the boundary with Israel and the occupied Shebaa Farms. The situation that existed between the May 2000 Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon and the 2006 war has been restored to a certain extent -- a mild balance of terror, so to speak. Although both parties are necessarily gearing up for another war, it is a conflict that neither side wishes to see anytime soon.

At this juncture, the United States can take a number of steps to help maintain stability in the Israeli-Lebanese arena. First, it should finalize the Israeli troop withdrawal from Ghajar, a divided village on the border between Lebanon and the Golan Heights. Attempts should be made to resolve the Shebaa Farms issue as well; although the Obama administration seems to

have some reasonable ideas about how to proceed on this front, it remains to be seen how these ideas would play out on the ground. Washington should also work to curb Israeli overflights in Lebanese airspace. Although I appreciate Israel's argument that these are necessary reconnaissance missions, they have also helped to reinforce Hizballah's claim of defending Lebanon from Israeli aggression. Finally, the United States should keep a close eye on the economic situation in Lebanon because it may influence security developments in the near future. Although Lebanon has been largely unscathed by the global financial crisis, it could yet suffer a trickle-down effect in the form of dwindling remittances from expatriates.

Ultimately, the United States should provide continued support to whatever government takes shape in Lebanon, regardless of the electoral outcome. Along the Blue Line, the goal should be containment -- a holding action to prevent another outbreak of hostilities between Hizballah and Israel, rather than an unrealistic effort to definitively resolve the conflict between the two parties.

David Makovsky

The Obama administration is currently laying the groundwork for U.S. policy on two issues -- Iran and the Arab-Israeli arena. Regarding the former, there is a certain logic to engagement given that nearly a decade of isolating Iran has failed to halt the regime's march toward nuclear weapons. It must be engagement without illusions, however. Dialogue may not work unless the United States exerts strong leverage, such as making clear to Iran the profound consequences of failure. Therefore, Washington will need to obtain broad international support beforehand, in order to articulate and galvanize leverage ahead of any substantive dialogue. The administration seems committed to aligning Europe, Russia, China, and countries throughout the Middle East behind this approach.

Yet, is engagement a workable strategy or simply a short-term tactic? Regardless of Washington's intent, Iran's response will effectively determine the answer to this question. U.S. efforts may well fail -- the Iranian regime could decide that its self-definition is so rooted in hostility toward America that maintaining this stance is central to its survival. Yet, if Washington offers to open a dialogue, establishes a well-defined timeframe for an Iranian response, and is then spurned by Tehran, all remaining U.S. policy options would gain some degree of international and regional credibility. Tehran would have a harder time demonizing Obama compared to his predecessor, and his willingness to make certain offers would help make other moves more palatable if engagement falters.

The importance of public perceptions in this situation cannot be underestimated. Ironically, the potential fallout of failure can be used to help improve the prospects of successful engagement, convincing Iran that rejecting Obama's outreach would be too costly. In light of this possibility, it is unfortunate that senior U.S. officials have chosen to publicly -- as opposed to privately -- warn Israel against unilateral strikes in the short term. Whatever one's views on the advisability of such strikes, it may yet be useful to make Iran believe that Washington could support their use in the event of failed engagement.

On the Arab-Israeli front, a combination of approaches is necessary in order to move forward. From the bottom-up perspective, there are some signs of improvement. Law and order have emerged in the West Bank where there was chaos not long ago. We are seeing the best security cooperation in a decade between Israel and the Palestinians. The economy, though not ideal, has improved, and tourism in Bethlehem has increased.

Taking a top-down perspective, however, it is clear that institutions cannot be sustained without the proper political framework. Lasting stability will require clear, definable goals to work toward. It is unreasonable to tell the Palestinian Authority to focus on building institutions and postpone statehood at a time when Israel does not face comparable constraints on settlement expansion. Although the parties' differences on Jerusalem, refugees, and security do not seem bridgeable at present, the gaps between them on larger territorial issues remain rather narrow. An agreement demarcating the main contours of an Israeli-Palestinian border therefore seems reasonable. Without such an agreement, the parties will lose focus, and the Fayad government will lose support. The Obama administration has an interest in ensuring that the Palestinian Authority's focus on negotiations is vindicated instead of Hamas terrorism. In the days ahead, Washington must give the parties incentives to cooperate, helping them focus on what can be done rather than on what cannot. ❖

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