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From Gaza to Tehran: Looking toward the Obama Administration and the Middle East

by [Robert Satloff](#)

Jan 12, 2009

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Brief Analysis

On January 9, 2009, David Brooks, Peter Beinart, and Robert Satloff addressed a Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute to discuss the Obama administration and its likely approach to the Middle East. Dr. Satloff is executive director of the Washington Institute; the following is a summary of his remarks. [Read a summary](#) of Mr. Brooks and Beinart's remarks. [Listen](#) to complete audio of their conversation.

Timing of a Gaza Conclusion

The Gaza Strip crisis will be the first issue addressed by the Obama-Clinton foreign policy team. The necessary elements for a cessation of hostilities are well known: an effective system to curtail arms smuggling into Gaza, a total halt to rocket attacks emanating from the Strip, and a mechanism to secure border crossings that expands the humanitarian supplies into Gaza while denying Hamas any claim to sovereignty or legitimacy. Most observers believe this should come into being before January 20 so the new team has a clean slate on which to define U.S. foreign policy. In fact, it would be far better for this to occur after January 20. Only then would the Obama-Clinton team own the endgame, rather than just inherit it. If they own it, chances are much better that they would take full responsibility for ensuring the execution and implementation of its terms.

The Centrality of Egypt

Lost in the fog of war is the "Gaza Great Game" -- and it is all about Egypt. This conflict is, in reality, a fight for the soul of the waning days of the Hosni Mubarak presidency and the direction of Egypt in the early post-Mubarak era. Hamas and its allies are whipping up public pressure on Egypt to open the border crossings and to give Hamas an outlet to the world, much like Hizballah has via Syria. Israel is using military pressure on Hamas to pressure Egypt to finally take the issue of smuggling with appropriate seriousness. Israel's strategy seemingly is to raise fears in Cairo of an all-out offensive against Gazan cities that could trigger a wave of Palestinian refugees surpassing the hundreds

of thousands of Palestinians who came streaming into northern Sinai a year ago. So far, Mubarak has hedged; he has kept the borders closed to keep the Hamas virus from infecting his own country, thumbing his nose at Arab popular criticism in the process, but still has not begun to do what is necessary about the smuggling. Which way will he turn? Or will Egypt remain firmly on the fence until it is too late?

It bears noting that this is a moment of great opportunity for Egypt. After years of being eclipsed by Saudi Arabia and even Qatar for leadership of moderate Arab states, as well as years of strained relations with Washington, Egypt could use the current crisis to change the regional calculus firmly in its favor. Cairo could reassert its role as the leading moderate force in the region, strike a severe blow against an agent of Iran, prevent the spread of radical Islamism on its border, and in the process turn a new page with Washington with the arrival of a new U.S. president. And given that Mubarak is facing the most important issue of his presidency -- succession -- restoring health and vibrancy to the U.S.-Egyptian relationship is critical. The Gaza crisis presents an opportunity that Egypt should not miss, and if Egypt pursues a wise course in this crisis, it is a win-win for Cairo, Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Washington.

When the Gaza Dust Settles

Once the immediate crisis comes to an end, the Obama-Clinton team will face a choice in how to fulfill the new president's commitment to invest heavily and early in the Arab-Israeli peace process. Although there are glimmers of hope on the Israel-Syria front, given current events, the peace process refers -- for all intents and purposes -- specifically to the Israeli-Palestinian track. On this track, there are two principal schools of thought, reflected in two sets of studies produced in Washington in the last few weeks: The Washington Institute studies *Prevent Breakdown, Prepare for Breakthrough: How President Obama Can Promote Israeli-Palestinian Peace* and *Security First: U.S. Priorities in Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking* on the one hand and, on the other, an impressive report produced jointly by the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and the Brookings Institution *Restoring the Balance*. On Israeli-Palestinian issues, the difference is clear: the Washington Institute studies call for a combined top-down/bottom up approach toward strengthening the Palestinian Authority (PA) and enhancing prospects for Israeli-PA negotiations; the relevant chapter in the CFR/Brookings study calls for findings ways the United States can engage Hamas.

Each approach has a certain logic, but it is important to recognize that these are "either/or" options. It is not possible to engage Hamas and build up the PA at the same time. Engaging Hamas would undermine whatever popular support remains for the Mahmoud Abbas-Salam Fayad government, bring an abrupt end to the Dayton (U.S. security coordinator, Lt. Gen. Keith Dayton) effort to "train and equip" PA security forces, compel Egypt and Jordan to change course in terms of their own approach toward the PA, and buoy radical actors from Gaza to Beirut to Tehran.

Given both personnel choices and strategic imperatives, it is unlikely that the Obama-Clinton team will choose to engage Hamas. Indeed, even tactically, if the new administration is committed to a wholly new approach toward Iran, it makes little sense to waste capital and credibility -- both here and abroad -- on an early tilting at Hamas's windmills.

Iran: the Bigger Picture

If Gaza is a fight for the soul of Egypt, the Obama team cannot let Gaza distract from the even bigger test confronting them: the challenge of Iran. On Iran, the new administration faces a near-term policy decision of when to launch an international initiative to build leverage vis-a-vis Iran and open a direct engagement with Tehran. Some argue that Washington should wait several months, lest U.S. diplomacy itself become an issue in Iran's June presidential election and somehow help the incumbent win a second term by letting him boast that his hardline policies compelled America to talk on his terms. Even Israeli president Shimon Peres has reportedly made this case. But in view of key players in the new administration, this argument is unlikely to carry the day. The reason is simple: as

Washington dithers, centrifuges spin. If Washington waits until after Iran's election to launch an engagement strategy with Iran, the Iranians will be close to -- if not already at -- the point where they have amassed enough low-enriched uranium to convert into weapons-grade material. So, timing is at the top of the agenda.

Expecting the Unexpected

Middle East officials in the Bush administration expected to coast to a quiet end, but because of Gaza, they will now be burning the midnight oil until inauguration day. The unexpected could very well occur in the early days of the Obama presidency, too. There are many possibilities: the passing of a key regional leader like Egypt's Mubarak or Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah; a spectacular Hamas terrorist attack inside Israel or against the PA, changing the dynamics of the current conflict; a decision by Hizballah and its Iranian patron to truly open a second front; terrorism against U.S. interests or installations; an unexpected outcome to the Israeli election; or a declaration by Iran that it had passed a nuclear threshold months before U.S. intelligence thought it was possible. The list goes on. These are just a few of the "what ifs" that, in the Middle East, are more often "whens" than "whethers." ❖

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