

Obama, the Gulf, and Iran

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Articles & Testimony

Regarding Iraq, President Obama will face how to turn his campaign rhetoric into reality. During the campaign, a great deal of what Obama and his advisors had to say is that they thought the current strategy in Iraq was not addressing the principal problem facing Iraq and U.S.-Iraqi relations, namely how to get Iraqi politicians to take a more active role in shaping their country's politics and in reaching a compromise with each other.

When Obama made this argument with respect to the 2007 U.S. military "surge," circumstances were different, and indeed the surge proved necessary to achieve security. His position, however, regarding the current problem of slow political progress may well be on target. Obama has argued that the high-profile, large U.S. presence in Iraq was in fact enabling Iraqi politicians to postpone making the difficult discussions because they felt the United States would provide the security guarantees and political framework. Thus, Iraqi politicians could engage in irresponsible posturing. Indeed, Iraqi politicians have taken far too long to make important decisions about the budget, provincial elections, the oil law, the future of Kirkuk, and the status-of-forces agreement with the United States. Obama's approach has been to threaten with a stick, declaring that unless the Iraqis do more, the United States will draw down its forces and withdraw.

Yet he also offered a carrot; namely that if Iraqi politicians do more to address the country's problems by working together, the United States will do more to assist them. It would be quite consistent with his statements and the advice he is likely to receive from foreign policy and defense specialists if Obama were to follow that kind of carrot and stick approach focusing on how to get Iraqi politicians to take a more active role in shaping their country's future.

It would not surprise me if we see something of a transition from the emphasis on how quickly U.S. forces are going to be drawn down to an emphasis on what is happening for political progress in Iraq. The great hope here is that Obama's approach will kick-start progress and that we will see Iraqi politicians make a lot of difficult decisions they have been postponing.

Certainly it is true that inside Iraq there is a strong popular mood, in parliament -- and among politicians -- that these difficult decisions need to be made. Something has got to give; we must reach a decision on many things, such as implementation of the budget, whose weakness has been a real problem in creating the jobs and support the government needed in order to bring political progress.

Perhaps we will see faster progress on all these fronts. The great risk, however, is that if it turns out that Iraqi politicians are not yet ready to take over these responsibilities, the country starts slipping backward into instability, and Iran turns out to be more effective at manipulating the political scene than some might expect, the situation could require the United States to make difficult decisions about either sustaining or even increasing its presence, or just cutting its losses.

Iraq is going to be a very major and inescapable issue for this new administration.

Then there is Iran. The Obama administration is going to engage Iran, not only because that is what candidate

Obama talked about a lot, but also because it would serve the interest of the United States well if we can persuade the world and Americans that the problem in the nuclear negotiations is the Iranians, not the Americans. The United States must reverse the common perception -- in the United States and around the world -- that Washington is at fault for the lack of progress on the Iran front. The United States is going to have to make a major effort to show that it is prepared to walk the extra mile for compromise. Washington has not been able to secure support for greater sticks against Iran; it can only gather such support if it is seen as also offering carrots. In other words, on the Iran nuclear issue, carrots are the only way to get to sticks. So we are going to see an engagement, initially.

The challenge is going to be to do that right and, unfortunately, the United States has a track record of engaging with Iran badly, in ways that are bad for U.S. national interests and bad for U.S.-Iranian relations. On November 1, 1979, then National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski met with Iran's prime minister, defense minister, and foreign minister in Algiers. He offered to ship to Iran all the weapons Iran had purchased under the shah and a lot more to the Iranians, who weren't interested. They demanded the return of the shah.

Yet the meeting took place in any case, pictures of Brzezinski shaking hands with the three Iranians appeared in the Iranian newspapers the next day, and the radical hardliners were worried that moderates like the prime minister were plotting with the U.S. government to overthrow the revolution. And so, three days later, they seized the U.S. embassy. They told us at the time, and have since told us in their memoirs that the principal factor that led them to seize the U.S. embassy was that meeting in Algiers. I would just suggest that the seizure of the U.S. embassy was not good for U.S. interests and not good for U.S.-Iranian relations.

The next time the U.S. national security advisor engaged with the Iranians came a mere five years later, when Bud McFarlane showed up in Tehran carrying with him a cake, a Bible, and a bunch of missiles in what was known as the Iran Contra Affair. I would just suggest that the Iran Contra Affair was also not a triumph for U.S. foreign policy or for U.S.-Iranian relations.

My point here is that engagement done badly can hurt. If there are unrealistic expectations about what can come from this engagement, this can cause problems. We have a real difficulty with suspicion in Tehran about engagements. Ali Khamene'i, the most important political figure in Iran, is firmly persuaded that the greatest risk facing his country is the regime's overthrow by foreign cultural and intellectual influences, as happened to the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe.

Moreover, Khamene'i thinks that that comes from the cultural invasion, from the support of the West for non-governmental organizations. That is why he threw in jail for months a 68-year-old grandmother who was running a program at the Wilson Center about Iran. That is why he had Iran's television put on an hour-long show explaining why George Soros's representative in Iran had been arrested, and the explanation was that George Soros and George Bush meet each week in the White House to develop their current plan for the overthrow of Khamene'i's regime.

So, Khamene'i is going to be extraordinarily suspicious about engagement and this is going to be a real challenge. I have not even gotten to the problems that our European allies highlight to us, namely that if the United States engages with Iran, it could encourage hardliners in Iran who will say, "See we told you that being tough pays" and that "eventually the Americans come around." They will add that if you just sit, wait, and act toughly every six months, the West gives you a better offer and so there is no incentive to compromise.

Furthermore, U.S. engagement with Iran will lead the Iranians to run around the world and say to everyone, "We told you that this nuclear issue was actually a byproduct of the U.S.-Iranian bilateral dispute and it shouldn't concern the rest of the world; it is just between the two of us, and we'll settle it."

Attempts to engage Iran may also promote grave doubts among U.S. friends and allies. Consider three cases: Europe, Gulf Arabs, and Israel. U.S. engagement, if done without full partnership with the other five countries involved to date

on the nuclear issue (Britain, France, Germany, China, and Russia), could undercut international efforts and lead those countries to feel that their diplomatic efforts are being sidelined. European diplomats in particular could worry that the United States is acting as a lone cowboy, preempting what had been a European-led negotiating process. As for the Gulf monarchies, they may think Washington is making a strategic deal with Tehran at their expense, leading them to either seek accommodation with Iran or develop their own weapons capabilities. A number of Arab countries are nervous that what the United States is tempted to do another deal with the Iranians, similar to the arrangement that the United States had with the shah, which they saw as being at their expense. Some of these Arab countries may feel that they need to seek their own independent compromise with Iran, perhaps some special weapons programs of their own, perhaps both. Finally, Israel could worry that U.S.-Iranian engagement may signal America's willingness to live with a nuclear Iran, in the hope that Tehran can be deterred and contained.

And so it is going to be tough, really tough to engage with Iran. Necessary, but tough. That is going to be a great challenge for this administration.

Finally, a word of warning. The "buzz around town" from the intelligence community, State Department professionals, the Defense Department, or the generals is that the most urgent and important foreign policy problem for the new president to address is in fact Afghanistan and Pakistan. Not anything in the more narrowly defined Middle East. And so it may well be that the Afghanistan and Pakistan problems are at the top of the Obama administration agenda.

Patrick Clawson is deputy director for research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He is the author or editor of 25 books and monographs, including **[The Last Resort: Consequences of Preventive Military Action Against Iran](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=292)** (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=292>) (2008, with Michael Eisenstadt). ❖

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