

# In Transition: The Obama Administration

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Nov 10, 2008

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



## Brief Analysis

On November 6, Robert Satloff, Patrick Clawson, and David Makovsky addressed a Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute. Dr. Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, Dr. Clawson is the Institute's deputy director for research, and Mr. Makovsky is the director of the Institute's Project on the Middle East Peace Process. The following is a rapporteur's summary of Dr. Satloff's remarks; a summary of Dr. Clawson and Mr. Makovsky's remarks on Iran and the Middle East peace process, respectively, was released as [PolicyWatch #1423 \(templateC05.php?CID=2957\)](#).

Presidential transitions, such as the one U.S. president-elect Barack Obama has just begun, are important in at least three respects.

First, through the first wave of the new president's appointments, the transition provides a sense of the direction of the administration's foreign policy. Casting, as in the film industry, is everything. Three models of foreign policymaking stand out in recent U.S. history: the "strong secretary of state" approach (for example, James Baker); the "special envoy" system (for example, Clinton's second administration); and the "White House-run" paradigm (for example, Nixon's first administration). With economics likely to dominate the early months of the presidency, the third model is unlikely.

Second, the transition sets the early tone for the administration: Is it chaotic? Organized? Centralized? Pragmatic? Ideological? On the last point, the transition will provide a chance to see whether that part of the Democratic Party that opposes the centrist, mainstream foreign policy Obama enunciated during his campaign -- the fringe that views America as the global villain, Israel as an albatross, and Muslims as universal victims -- begins to assert itself and demand a seat at the table.

Third, the transition offers the new president an interlude in which he can lower expectations ("Who knew the situation was so bad?") and gives foreign leaders -- both friends (such as Europe) and competitors (such as Russia) -- an opportunity to put down markers. In addition, the new team rarely has the luxury of starting with a clean slate because during transitions events occur that set the stage for the new administration. Sometimes events transpire abroad; in the Middle East context, for instance, the Clinton administration on its first day in 1993 was forced to

focus on finding a solution to the issue of hundreds of Hamas detainees deported by Israel to southern Lebanon. In other cases, new realities are bequeathed to the new team by the outgoing administration, as was the case with President Reagan's decision to open a political dialogue with the PLO in November 1988. In theory, there are at least three Middle Eastern actions that the Bush administration could take that would have lasting repercussions for Obama: a new statement of peace process "parameters" on final-status arrangements between Israel and the Palestinians; counterterrorism or military operations that have a political dimension, such as the recent U.S. attack against targets in Syria; and preventive military action against Iran's nuclear capabilities. As time passes, the last looks increasingly unlikely.

### 'Change' and Foreign Policy

The 2008 election was about "change." In 2007, for many Americans, change referred to adjusting course on the Iraq war. Today, for most Americans, change has come to mean a new direction on the U.S. economy. Given that shift, it is likely that the new administration will pursue its foreign policy objectives without stirring up unwanted problems, setting unlikely goals, or making huge commitments. One Obama advisor, former Navy secretary Richard Danzig, encapsulated this approach at the Weinberg Founders Conference by offering the phrase "sustainable security" to describe the likely Obama foreign policy -- a maxim that does not imply bold new initiatives, grand plans, or world-changing ideas. As the new team ranks its foreign policy priorities, top spots are likely to go to Iraq, Pakistan/Afghanistan, Russia, and international financial system reform. The Iranian nuclear issue may break into the top tier, but few are likely to argue that -- in terms of urgency -- the Middle East peace process deserves to be in that category.

But despite U.S. preferences, the Middle East will stake its claim on the new president's limited time. Some players in the region will do so in a positive way, hoarding concessions now so they can deliver them to Obama; others will seek to test him in destructive ways. Optimists place Syria in the first category; nearly all observers would put Iran, Hizballah, and Sunni jihadists in the second.

### General Comments about Obama and Middle East Policy ❖

Policy #1424

---

## RECOMMENDED

### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



## [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

### TOPICS

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)