

MERIA

THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION AND THE MIDDLE EAST: A SYMPOSIUM *Symposium

Following Barack Obama's election, experts discuss the various foreign policy issues the new administration faces and the strategies the administration might follow.

Brief biographies can be found at the end of each section.

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THE ADMINISTRATION'S THEME: CONCILIATION WITH ENEMIES

Barry Rubin*

The Obama administration's clear theme and priority for Middle East policy can be described as conciliation with enemies. To a considerable extent, its participants and supporters think that his predecessor made unnecessary enemies and blocked, rather than furthered, progress toward peace and stability in the region. Building on the basis of Obama's perceived popularity and sincere good will, there is a hope, and belief, that it can make friends with Iran and Syria, soothe grievances that have caused Islamism and terrorism, and solve the Arab-Israeli conflict.

A key problem here is a miscalculation about the Middle East. As so often happens, by people with a surprisingly wide variety of backgrounds in the U.S. government and opinionmakers, it is seen in Western terms. Ironically, and even shockingly, Barack

Obama and George Bush share this characteristic. The latter thought the Middle East could be won over by democratization, proving that the United States was nice; the latter thinks that the Middle East can be won over by concessions and grievance-solving measures, proving that the United States is nice.

Yet there are sharp disparities between worldviews that can and often have led to frustration and even disaster:

--In the Middle East, it is not so useful to think yourself popular and show yourself to be friendly. You have to inspire fear in your enemies and confidence in your friends. If you don't inspire fear in your enemies--if you are too nice to them--then you will indeed foment fear among your friends.

--Not everyone thinks the same way. When America says "empathy," its enemies detect "fear" or conspiratorial mischief. When the United States speaks of change, they, too, want change. Unfortunately, the change they want means wiping other states off the map,

creating radical Islamist dictatorships, and kicking the United States out of the region.

This is no misunderstanding: It is a conflict.

At the end of the film, “Cool Hand Luke,” the noble convict (played by Paul Newman), jokes to the sadistic guards, “What we have here is a lack of communication.” Audiences laughed and applauded. What everyone has forgotten is that a moment later they shoot him dead. With the Obama administration, it might be another case of Harvard Law School meets the law of the jungle.

Among the Obama administration’s plans is to talk to Iran, negotiate with Syria, and try to buy the Palestinians or press Israel into making peace. Many Americans think that this has not been tried enough, forgetting so many previous efforts, their lessons, and their fates.

Repeating such efforts may or may not be very harmful depending on how the administration handles them. Among the critical factors are the following points:

1. How much will the United States offer others for cooperating with its goals and at whose expense are these carrots proffered? Too much is hazardous for the health of U.S. interests and regional stability.
2. How closely will the administration monitor whether or not they are keeping their commitments? Insufficient toughness and ignoring breached commitments, hostile actions, or aggressive intentions is dangerous.
3. At what point does the administration conclude that parties don't want to end existing conflicts or be America's friends? Waiting too long can lead to big problems.
4. What does the administration do when it figures out this doesn't work? Fear of admitting failure, blaming those responsible, and trying something else can lead to crises and defeats. Let us take Iraq for example. Obama wants to withdraw U.S. combat troops and turn the war over to the Iraqis. This concept makes sense, but the

question is how that would be implemented. What, for example, would the administration do if Iran escalates in order to make the withdrawal look like a defeat and fill the vacuum politically--subtly, of course, not too openly?

And what does the administration do as, despite U.S. negotiation efforts, Iran and Syria work to turn Iraq, Lebanon, and the Gaza Strip into their sphere of influence? They will pump in money, pump up hatred, and kill anyone who stands in the way. Making a good speech, apologizing for the past, or offering more concessions won't work as an antidote.

Westerners are eager to resolve conflicts; revolutionaries want to use conflicts to attain victory. There is a strong current in the thinking of Obama and those around him that grievances can be resolved. Yet their grievances are insatiable--including those of most Palestinian leaders--and block solutions. Make a concession, they ignore it and demand another. Withdraw from a territory, they occupy it and turn it into a base for the next advance. Explain that you feel their pain, and they add to your pain.

This is what it is like to deal with extremists and ideologues. Right now Obama and his time don't understand why Bill Clinton and George Bush couldn't solve a little thing like the Arab-Israeli conflict. They will probably learn better about this and other issues. Yet how long will that take and at what cost will it be achieved?

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OBAMA, THE GULF, AND IRAN

Patrick Clawson*

Following, the challenges facing the Obama administration in the Persian Gulf area--principally in Iraq and Iran--will be

examined.

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.

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IRAQ: THE CHIMERA OF THE 16-MONTH WITHDRAWAL

Norvell B. De Atkine*

President-elect Obama often expressed himself on Iraq during the campaign. Opposition to the Iraq invasion and his repeated assertion that he will bring all American troops home in 16 months have been a cornerstone of his presidential campaign, especially in the early stages.

However, the pronouncements of Barack Obama during the campaign have provided ample cover for significant modifications in that 16-month deadline. He has repeatedly

stated that "military experts" have agreed that withdrawing our remaining combat units in 16 months is feasible. But he has also injected three qualifiers for the withdrawal; that it will be phased and "responsible," be done in consultation with the Iraqi government, and carried out by the commanders on the ground. Presumably this means the actual timetable would be governed by tactical considerations.

Unfortunately, it appears that these modifications and qualifiers were not absorbed by the electorate. The 16-month mantra is all that was heard and believed. The tremendous level of expectations aroused not only in the United States, but apparently throughout the world--including the Arab world--will prove to be a hindrance as reality gradually sinks in.

Can withdrawal from Iraq be done "responsibly" in 16 months? The answer is technically, yes. The logistic capability of the U.S. Army has no peer. Given an ideal political situation in the Middle East, it can be done. But the idea rests on so many unrealistic assumptions that optimism is simply unfounded.

Of course, if we left most of our heavy equipment behind for the Iraqi forces, we could leave even earlier. There are two problems with that course of action.

First, it would take years, particularly in the economic and political era in which we live, to rebuild our armament. A fairly recent example of that is the amount of time it took for the U.S. army to replenish the ammunition and equipment provided to Israel in the 1973 war from our European pre-positioned stocks.

Second, our Arab allies would be very unhappy. The Kuwaitis already fear a resurgent Iraq and many of the other Gulf Arabs would simply see it as an indirect transfer to the new Persian Shi'a empire.

When military experts say we can move our troops out of Iraq on this 16-month timetable, it reminds this author of my experience in the army as a strategic mobility planner. We fed data into computers which spit out timetables detailing how long it would take to deploy or redeploy U.S. forces to the Middle East. The results were always encouraging.

Of course the built-in assumptions were that the weather would cooperate, our allies would be enthusiastic in their support, granting over flight rights and bases, even personnel, and our intelligence estimates were impeccably correct. The required amount of personnel, fuel, and equipment would always be at the right place at the right time. No one became tired; equipment functioned smoothly at all times, and most of all, our enemies stood by passively while we transferred our forces. But no matter how much we strived for realism, the models were never accurate. The main reason is simply one cannot adequately assess human emotion and on-the-ground experience into a machine.

In Iraq the unknowns are overwhelming and our intelligence is often just best-educated guesses, particularly assessing Iranian intentions and policymaking. In the Middle Eastern world of shifting alliances and multiple identities, this week's intelligence is often unusable by next week. Capturing the mood of the Iraqi people and impact of the unexpected events certain to occur during our withdrawal process is near impossible to anticipate.

As the American forces dwindled, how would we protect the tail-end units redeploying? Could we depend on the Iraqi Army? How enthusiastic would Iraqi troops be in firing on their own people to protect U.S. "occupiers"? Would the Iranians be cooperative and allow our troops to deploy peacefully? Would the Iraqi Shi'a "special groups" currently training (cowering?) in Iran find this an opportune time to flow back across the border to attack the massive American convoys moving through the Shi'a south toward Kuwaiti ports?

Conventional knowledge, of course, would be that the proverbial "new page" in American-Iranian relations ushered in by Obama would result in a helpful, or at least neutral, Iran watching the primary bulwark against its expansionism leaving Iraq. This is a naïve assumption at best.

Allowing the United States to disengage from Iraq peacefully, thereby providing the United States with greater forces available for

Afghanistan (as advocated by Obama) or in the Gulf countries, or even Lebanon, is not in the Iranian government's best interests. They want to see the United States humiliated, not just because it would give a sense of personal satisfaction to the Pasdaran and al-Quds commanders itching to avenge imagined and real slights at the hands of American forces, but it would also diminish the image of the United States as a reliable guardian of the Gulf Arab states and the reputation of the American army.

This bears directly on the issue of the status, prestige, and effectiveness of American military advisors, presumably the residual force mentioned in the Obama plan, remaining in Iraq. An illustrative historical example is the French army, once described by Winston Churchill as the best in the world, becoming a joke after their humiliation at the hands of the German army in 1940.

How would the Iraqi Sunni Arab tribes react to a dwindling and weakened U.S. force, believing, as many would, that they were sold out? The same could be asked about the Kurds in the north. While we would expect no violence from the Kurds, it is not so clear that the Sunnis would let us depart in peace. With a still potent al-Qa'ida in the Anbar and Nineveh provinces, retribution and revenge (and looting of vacated military bases) should be expected to be taken on U.S. occupiers by glory-seeking tribes.

In a country that has known only war and domestic brutality, fanned by a xenophobic nationalist and religious fervor, weakness, or the perception of weakness, it is a sure invitation for attack. A weakened and diminishing American force would present a standing invitation for those Iraqi elements wishing to burnish their nationalistic or religious reputations.

The word "responsibly" brings a heavy burden to American policy in Iraq. It assumes U.S. troops withdrawing in an orderly manner, not under fire, heads held high and banners flying. It infers we would leave a stable, unified country, perhaps non-democratic, but not oppressive to its citizens. To leave with anything less would be seen by the majority of

the American public as a defeat and a betrayal of the Iraqi people. The image of the ignominious American exit from Vietnam in 1975 is still much too vivid for an American president to risk having it occur again on his watch.

Other courses of action once considered--such as Senator Joe Biden's federalist plan (fragmenting Iraq into three regions) or the "conditional engagement" plan put forth by the Center for New American Security--have been overcome by Iraqi events and trends. Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki no longer feels as dependent on U.S. assistance and his nationalistic appeal obviates any attempt to fragment Iraq (never a good idea).

For the same reasons, throwing out bits of enticements hoping for the Shi'a government to hew more closely to the U.S. design for Iraq as a central tenet in the "conditional engagement" plan no longer has efficacy. Similarly the idea that if we just began pulling troops out, the Iraqi government and sectarian leadership would feel threatened and search for a united consensus is directly in opposition to the historical record of the Arab world. When threatened, sectarian communities do not pull together; they revert to their sectarian base for support.

The word often used for the political situation in Iraq today is vastly improved but "fragile." One of the elements of fragility, never mentioned, is the health and presence of Maliki as Iraqi prime minister. Dismissed early on as a light-weight by legions of "Iraqi experts," he has become essential to continued progress toward stability in Iraq. Playing the card of Iraqi nationalism, he is now being touted as assuming the familiar ruling attributes of all the other Arab rulers. His abrupt removal or incapacitation would turn all predictions upside down.

Where does this leave the Obama plan for Iraq? Aside from nuances and rhetorical flourishes, it will not substantially change the direction or timetable as currently envisioned in the much debated Status of Forces Agreement.

Obama's most likely course of action would be to highlight the gradual reduction of

forces that is already taking place as a part of his policy, say the right things at the right time to placate leftist ideologues ascendant in his party, and count on the short attention span and memory of the American public to quietly put to bed the 16-month promise, much the same way as President Bill Clinton handled his promise of only one year for U.S. troops to be deployed in Kosovo.

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SYRIA, ISRAEL, AND LEBANON

David Schenker*

President Obama will essentially face the same challenges as President Bush but his campaign promises and general philosophical orientation appear to be dramatically different from the outgoing president. These differences can be seen in sharp relief, in the Levant, Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinian issue as well. President Obama provided a glimpse of his approach during the campaign through two positions. One was his pledge to appoint a Middle East coordinator and diplomatic envoy. The other was regarding his disposition to engage Iran but also Syria.

Obama has a profoundly different view of Syria's regime than Bush. I think that President Bush saw President Bashar al-Asad based on his behavior in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian arena basically as irredeemable, Obama appears to believe that Syria can play a more productive role in the region and that the Asad regime can be convinced to change. We have already seen a number of senior Obama Middle East advisors meet with Asad in recent months, including Dan Kurtzer and the former advisor Rob Malley. Dennis Ross, himself who is being mentioned as the possible Middle East

coordinator has written that Asad should be tested.

The question remains about how exactly they will be tested. The goal of course is to engineer a strategic reorientation of the Asad regime, the idea that it can be somehow moved away from Tehran, that it would jettison Hizballah and Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist groups and move into the Western camp.

I do not think there is anybody who debates that success in this effort would be a great and very productive development in the Middle East. It would change the balance, it would undermine Tehran, and it would be a great advance in U.S. interests.

Actually if you look at what somebody like Robert Malley has written, this is not quite the argument. He doesn't really believe, as he has written, that Asad will undergo this type of strategic orientation but suggests rather that the United States can ferment a slow process of evolution.

Under Obama, I think, we are going to see very quickly a return of the U.S. ambassador to Damascus. Ambassador Scobey was withdrawn the same week that former premiere Rafiq Hariri was assassinated in Lebanon in February 2005.

We are also likely to see a U.S. willingness to get involved in the Israel-Syria track, in the talks. The question to be answered, of course, is how hard the Obama administration will push for progress. I imagine this will depend perhaps on who becomes Israel's next prime minister. Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni already articulated how she sees the framework for a deal with Syria. That is, the return of the Golan in exchange for full peace from Syria.

The Asad regime said "no" and immediately dispatched their minister of defense to Tehran to sign another memorandum of understanding just a day after the secret talks with Israel were made public. Of course, these negotiations make Tehran nervous and this, I think, is something good. But how does anyone--the United States or Israel--ensure that any potential pro quo for a deal is enforceable.

What does strategic reorientation mean?

What will it mean for the United States? How does Israel enforce Syrian compliance? There is not a great track record of Asad sticking to deals here. And how do you verify it? Can something potentially be written into a peace agreement that talks about Syrian relations with Iran?

The wider and most important question is whether Obama can build some sort of consensus in the Arab world that a peace agreement between Israel and Syria is not something that is contingent only on the return of the Golan, but rather on this strategic reorientation of Syria. Moderate Arab states like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan would all like to see Syria move away from Tehran, so I think this would gather some sort of support.

At the same time, the Obama administration, does not appear to be as inclined as the Bush administration was to employ pressure on Syria. What will happen to the international tribunal established to prosecute the murderers of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri? This is the one point of international leverage on the Syrian regime. It will be interesting to see what type of position the administration takes, for example, on the UN vote as to whether the tribunal moves ahead in the Security Council under chapter 7 authority, that is, enforceable militarily. The Bush administration has supported it.

What Obama does in this regard will have a profound effect on developments in Beirut. Is Obama less committed to the tribunal? I think the impact will be that March 14, pro-democracy, elected government of Lebanon will not fare well in the spring 2009 elections. We may be facing a Lebanese government in spring 2009 that is headed by Hizballah. That is certainly not in U.S. interests. What would the Obama administration do if there were another round of fighting between Hizballah and Israel?

Another question is how or whether the Obama administration would engage with Islamists. Some close to the campaign have suggested that the U.S. government should in fact engage with Hamas. Will the U.S. government change its view? I think this is

unlikely, particularly given the U.S. predisposition toward pushing for a Syria-Iran split. Nevertheless, we do not know where Obama is going to come down.

Regarding Israel-Palestinian issues, looking at developments on the ground, it is difficult to see this as being a good time for making any progress on the Palestinian track. Still, there will be a new Middle East coordinator in this administration, and there is, I think, a predisposition to push on this track. I have a hard time seeing this as an initial priority of the administration given other pressing issues.

Nevertheless, I think the Obama administration will have an ambitious agenda. Its focus on diplomacy and coalition-building will benefit from a tremendous amount of international goodwill, at least initially, as well as the belief he can bring “hope” and “change.” But I think that within a year, Obama, too, will have to deal with the realities of the Middle East.

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THE OBAMA PRESIDENCY, OIL, AND THE MIDDLE EAST

John S. Duffield*

During the presidential campaign, candidate Barack Obama described America’s dependence on oil as one of the greatest challenges that the country has ever faced. He said that high oil prices threatened to drag down the U.S. economy. The transfer of wealth to oil-producing countries, “many of them hostile to our interests,” was viewed as a threat to U.S. national security. And the combustion of oil, along with other fossil fuels, posed a serious threat to the

environment.¹

The campaign hinted that an Obama presidency would seek energy independence. But with regard to oil, it established and emphasized a much more specific and presumably achievable goal. Within 10 years, the United States would save more oil than it currently imports from the Middle East and Venezuela combined.

What would the achievement of this goal actually entail? According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, the United States consumed approximately 20.7 million barrels per day (mbd) of oil in 2007. That same year, it imported 2.17 mbd from the Persian Gulf (of which Saudi Arabia provided more than two-thirds) and 1.36 mbd from Venezuela. If North Africa is included in the Middle East--since Libya and Algeria provide another 0.7 to 0.8 mbd of petroleum--U.S. imports from the two regions combined amounted to some 5.0 mbd, or almost 25 percent of U.S. oil consumption.²

How would the Obama administration achieve this goal? The first thing to note is that it does not actually require reducing U.S. oil imports from the Middle East or Venezuela, just reducing consumption by an amount equal in the size to those imports. Thus, the goal could be achieved while imports from those regions remained constant or even increased. In that sense, the goal is a more realistic one than attempting to restrict imports from particular countries. Given the fungible nature of today’s oil market, it is difficult and sometimes economically inefficient to do so. But this reality also underscores the difficulty of achieving one of the avowed goals of an Obama energy policy: to reduce the transfer of wealth to hostile oil-producing countries. Unless the United States can engineer either a decline in those countries’ exports or in the world price of oil, then they will continue to

¹ “Barack Obama and Joe Biden: New Energy for America,”

[Uhttp://www.barackobama.com/pdf/factsheet_energy_speech_080308.pdf](http://www.barackobama.com/pdf/factsheet_energy_speech_080308.pdf)U (accessed November 10, 2008).

² Energy Information Agency (EIA), *Annual Energy Review 2007*, Report No. DOE/EIA-0384 (2007) (Washington, D.C.: EIA, 2008),

[Uhttp://www.eia.doe.gov/aer/pdf/aer.pdf](http://www.eia.doe.gov/aer/pdf/aer.pdf)U (accessed November 10, 2008).

enjoy large financial inflows.

The Obama campaign emphasized two main approaches for reducing U.S. oil consumption: increasing the fuel efficiency of new vehicles and accelerating the use of alternative transportation fuels.

To raise fuel efficiency, the Obama campaign proposed a number of measures.

First, an Obama administration would increase U.S. fuel economy standards by four percent per year over a number of years. Indeed, as a senator, Obama sponsored legislation to that effect.

Second, the administration would offer \$7 billion in tax credits for the purchase of more fuel-efficient advanced-technology vehicles, and it would provide \$4 billion in loans and tax credits to domestic auto manufacturers so that they could retool factories in order to build more fuel-efficient cars.

Third, the government would invest directly in research and development in advanced vehicle technologies, especially batteries, and help to create a market for such cars by purchasing a large number of plug-in and all-electric vehicles. One overall goal would be to put one million highly fuel-efficient plug-in hybrids on the road by 2015.

To promote the use of alternative fuels, the Obama administration would mandate that all vehicles be manufactured with a flexible fuel capability by the end of its first term. It would also invest federal resources into developing the most promising sustainable alternative fuels and building the infrastructure to support them, with the goal of incorporating at least 60 billion gallons of advanced biofuels into the national fuel supply by 2030. A related measure would be to establish a low-carbon fuel standard to speed the introduction of non-petroleum fuels. Fuel suppliers would be required to reduce the carbon content of their fuel by 5 percent by 2015 and by 10 percent by 2020.

Several other proposed measures, while not directly aimed at reducing oil consumption, could nevertheless contribute to the achievement of that goal or at least to a reduction in U.S. oil imports. One is a proposed economy-wide cap-and-trade

program to reduce carbon emissions. If this came anywhere near to achieving the goal of an 80 percent reduction below 1990 levels by 2050, it would necessarily result in a substantial cut in oil use, since the combustion of oil accounts for roughly half of all U.S. carbon emissions. Another is the plan to invest \$150 billion over ten years in a clean energy economy. Much of this money would be targeted at measures that would result in lower oil consumption, such as accelerated commercialization of plug-in-hybrids and advancing the next generation of biofuels and fuel infrastructure.

Finally, the Obama administration would support increased U.S. domestic production of oil as a means of helping to prevent world prices from rising higher than they have. Although greater domestic production would not contribute to the goal of reducing oil consumption, it would reduce U.S. oil imports at least slightly. Nevertheless, the Obama campaign has been quick to emphasize that, given its small share of world oil reserves, the United States cannot drill its way to energy security.

Given the current state of the U.S. economy, however, the Obama administration is likely to put the goal of reducing oil consumption on the back burner in the short run. Indeed, policies designed to reduce oil consumption are likely to conflict with efforts to halt and reverse the recent economic downturn, and vice-versa. The Obama campaign previously proposed an emergency energy rebate of \$500 to \$1000, to be paid for by a tax on oil company profits. The rebate would offset the increased prices that Americans have been paying for gasoline and are likely to pay for heating oil this winter. But however necessary and well-intentioned, such a rebate would eliminate some of the incentive to cut oil consumption, and possibly reduce money available for investment by oil companies in exploration and new production capacity.

Even in the absence of the current economic crisis, moreover, one could question whether the policies proposed by the Obama campaign would be sufficient to achieve the

goal of reducing oil consumption by 3.5 mbd within 10 years. For example, the Obama plan provides no intermediate targets for the introduction of biofuels. But even the current renewable fuels standard, adopted in 2007, would reduce oil consumption by only about 2 mbd no earlier than 2022. And its full implementation will depend on the development of cost-effective methods for the production of cellulosic ethanol and other advanced biofuels on a large scale, which do not yet exist.

Likewise, the introduction of more fuel-efficient vehicles and those with a plug-in capability will certainly help to reduce oil consumption over time. But given that the higher standards will be achieved only incrementally and the relatively slow turnover of the automotive fleet, traditionally about six to seven percent of vehicles per year, the full effects will not be felt for more than a decade. Even the immediate introduction of a million electric vehicles would reduce gasoline consumption by only a fraction of a percent, given that there are already more than 200 million automobiles and light trucks on the road.

It is worth noting, moreover, that the Obama plan does not include one measure that would be particularly effective at reducing oil consumption: a tax or a price floor to ensure that oil and gasoline prices remain high enough to encourage conservation and investment in alternatives. As recent experience has confirmed, high oil prices can have a big effect on consumption patterns. Yet a tax or price floor need not raise the price of gasoline as high as \$4 per gallon in the short run in order to alter expectations sufficiently to induce sustained behavioral change.

Finally, it may be worth asking whether the goal of the Obama plan is sufficient or ambitious enough. Even a 17 percent reduction in oil use would leave U.S. consumption levels, whether measured in terms of GDP or population, well above those of most other advanced industrialized countries. At least in the longer term, the United States will probably have to reduce consumption by an even greater amount in

order to mitigate the negative economic, environmental, and national security consequences of its oil dependence.

What implications could the Obama plan have for U.S. policy toward the Middle East? With the principal exception of the domestic responses to the oil shocks of the 1970s, U.S. policy has traditionally emphasized the use of foreign policy tools to address the concerns raised by American oil dependence, especially high oil prices and potential supply disruptions. As articulated during the presidential campaign, however, the Obama energy plan contains no explicit external dimension.

In the short term at least, the implications are likely to be minimal for two reasons. First, as noted above, until the United States emerges from the current economic crisis, the new administration will emphasize saving jobs and promoting growth rather than reducing oil consumption. If anything, the ready availability of inexpensive oil will be seen as a means to that end, and the administration is likely to work as necessary with sympathetic producers like Saudi Arabia to keep the price of oil in the low to moderate range.

Second, long-term concerns about maintaining stability in the Middle East for the sake of energy security have been at least temporarily eclipsed by the immediate challenges posed by Iraq and Iran. Although the evolution of the political situation in Iraq and the outcome of Iran's alleged efforts to become a nuclear power will have potentially profound consequences for regional stability and thus the ability of the Persian Gulf to meet the world's oil needs, the new administration will have to address these pressing issues on their own terms and necessarily give less consideration to the longer-term implications for energy security.

Once these immediate domestic and international concerns have been addressed, however, the Obama administration will have to turn its attention to the question of what type of relationship it wants with the oil-producing countries of the Middle East and the degree to which U.S. policy should be shaped by concerns about maintaining reliable access

to adequate supplies of oil at reasonable prices. Even if the Obama administration is successful in reducing U.S. oil consumption by 17 percent or even more, the United States will continue to import oil from the Persian Gulf. More importantly, the rest of the world--and the health of the global economy--will remain heavily dependent on stable and perhaps even rising production levels in the region. Thus it will be difficult, if not impossible, for even an administration committed to change to break with the long-standing imperative to intervene in the region in order to ensure energy security.

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WHAT OBAMA SHOULD DO ABOUT RUSSIA IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Mark N. Katz*

Formulating an American foreign policy with regard to Russia in the Middle East will be complicated because some things Moscow is doing there are harmful to American interests while others are either not harmful or actually helpful.

Moscow's actions that are most harmful to American interests are its continued support for the Iranian nuclear program, and protecting it in the UN Security Council, as well as its arms sales to both Iran and Syria. Though less of an immediate threat, Russian cooperation with Middle East gas producers such as Iran, Qatar, and Algeria to form a "Gas OPEC" could have a negative economic and political impact on the West.

By contrast, Moscow's actions that are either not harmful or are actually helpful

include: cooperating to some extent with U.S. and European efforts to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, not providing Iran and Syria with the more advanced weapons systems that they want, and not supporting America's opponents in Iraq or Afghanistan. In addition, Moscow maintains good relations not just with Arab governments allied to the United States but also with Israel--a far cry from its behavior during the Cold War when the USSR actively sought to weaken or even overthrow these governments.

What the Obama administration obviously hopes for is that Moscow will cease those actions harmful to American interests while continuing those that are either helpful or not harmful. What it fears is that Moscow will continue or increase those actions that are harmful while ceasing those actions that are either helpful or not harmful.

Moscow, though, is not likely to do what Washington either hopes or fears, but continue its current policy instead. Among other reasons, supporting Iran and Syria is valued by Russia because America opposes it. Supporting them in defiance of the United States makes Russia appear to be a great power--not least in its own eyes. By contrast, ceasing to do so, especially at America's behest, would make Russia look weak and subservient at least in its leaders' own self-perception.

On the other hand, even if Russian-American relations deteriorate further than they already have, Moscow is unlikely to pursue policies that undermine America's Arab allies or Israel. For while Moscow sees America as an opponent, it also sees radical Sunni Islamism as one. The more powerful the latter grows in the Middle East, the more it can do to undermine Moscow's rule in the Muslim regions of Russia (including the northern Caucasus and Tatarstan). Pro-American Arab governments, Israel, and even the American presence in Iraq and Afghanistan (so long as this continues) serve to keep these forces at bay. Despite its resentment toward the United States, the Kremlin has no interest in weakening their ability to perform this function.

So what should the Obama administration's policy be toward Russia in the Middle East?

First and foremost, Washington should work with its allies both in the region and elsewhere to persuade Moscow not to increase its nuclear assistance to Iran and military assistance to Iran and Syria. The prospect of losing trade and investment opportunities in Saudi Arabia and other petroleum-rich Arab states may prove more effective a deterrent for Moscow than anything else.

Second, Washington should not worry too much about the prospect of a "Gas OPEC." Russia's unwillingness to cooperate with OPEC on oil production limits and its general inability to cooperate make the achievement of this highly unlikely anyway.

Third, Washington should not worry too much about Russia's cooperation with America's traditional Arab allies and Israel. America's Middle East allies are unlikely to abandon their alliances with the U.S. in exchange for ones with Russia. They know full well that Russia is far less willing or able to defend them than the United States.

Something that the Obama administration should not do--but probably will--is succumb to the notion that, "the U.S. needs good relations with Russia so that Moscow will help us with Iran and Syria." Moscow can certainly act to increase the extent to which Iran and Syria are a problem for the United States and its allies. But Moscow cannot get either to stop doing those things that the United States and its allies don't want them to do. Indeed, the attempt by Moscow to do so might well lead Iran and/or Syria to repudiate Russia.

Both the Syrian and Iranian governments appear to have convinced themselves that Russia needs them far more than vice-versa. And indeed, both would undoubtedly be able to find other countries willing to replace Russia as an arms supplier. And Iran may now be at the point where it no longer needs Russian help with its nuclear program.

Moscow, of course, has a strong incentive for letting Washington think that Russia can deliver Tehran and Damascus--if only the United States would make certain concessions

to Moscow. This approach is unlikely to provide much benefit and, at any rate, the United States could deal with Iran and Syria directly without having to do so indirectly through Russia.

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THE REGION'S DILEMMA: HOW TO DEAL WITH OBAMA

Barry Rubin*

Everybody in the Middle East faces the challenge of how to deal with President Barack Obama, a decision with huge implications for the next four years.

The radicals praised Obama during the campaign, and some even tried to help him. On the eve of the vote, however, they reconsidered their enthusiasm for three reasons:

First, the radical regimes and revolutionary movements need anti-Americanism to maintain their popular support and distract from their failures.

Second, they are starting to distrust Obama. The closer he comes to the White House, the more he dons the institutional mantle of America rather than the personal clothes of an individual. Won't he, then, be like all the rest? Pushed by criticism, Obama took a stance more in favor of Israel, toughness against America's enemies, and the preservation of U.S. interests. His sincerity is irrelevant; what is important is whether he and his team calculate such positions are vital now to avoid political problems, embarrassing mistakes, or a reelection defeat.

Third, the radicals believe that Obama was weak--which may well be true--and aggressiveness for them is a no-lose policy. They can advance and get more American concessions simultaneously. Indeed, the nastier they sound, the more Obama will be scared.

The alternative is to welcome Obama, negotiate with him, and get concessions from an American president eager to please. Getting

others to like us is important, Obama said. Fine, they will now present their bill for smiling at America.

This technique of pretending to be conciliatory and moaning, "I'm a poor misunderstood moderate" was developed brilliantly by Yasir Arafat. Indeed, if he had not received the Nobel Prize for Peace, Arafat should have received one for acting.

Even Hamas is catching on, though its performance is probably too little, too late. When nine European members of parliament sailed into Gaza to express their opposition to anti-Hamas sanctions--as opposed to any opposition to Hamas terrorism, rockets, teaching little children to blow themselves up, or anti-Semitic diatribes--here is what Isma'il Haniya, the Hamas leader, said: "Our ties with Iran are like those with other Muslim states. Does a besieged people that is waiting breathlessly for a ship to come from the sea want to throw the Jews into the ocean? Our conflict is not with the Jews, our problem is with the occupation."

As President Abraham Lincoln famously remarked, you can fool all of the people some of the time, and some of the people all of the time, but not all of the people all of the time. Fortunately, Western gullibility does have its limits, and besides, perhaps more important, misplaced humanitarian impulses can be directed at Fatah and the Palestinian Authority (PA) it runs on the West Bank. At any rate, given its own ideology and internal politics, Hamas will take the tough route, not giving much opening for Obama.

The Iranian government now seems to have decided on an anti-Obama line. It really does believe most of its own rhetoric. Tehran could have insisted that it was eager for conciliation. Of course, this would have been hypocritical, a strategy to lure Obama into massive concessions. But if Obama is going to withdraw from Iraq anyway and will be less tough than his predecessor regarding Iran's nuclear program, why give up anything?

In contrast, Syria has a different approach, though one not jeopardizing its close alliance with Iran. It offers a deal: We will restrain Hizballah and "allow" America to withdraw

from Iraq if you grant us hegemony over Lebanon (as U.S. governments did in the past), stop the sanctions, and give Damascus various economic goodies. Peace with Israel? Well, no, not interested. But if you really want--and are willing to pay us for it--we will talk indirectly with Israel and pretend to be seeking a deal.

What of the PA? The first thing it needs, and will get, is U.S. support for "President" Mahmud Abbas unilaterally extending his own term in office. If Hamas names its own "president" that action gives the West still another incentive to sustain sanctions against it. The PA is also doing a better job of policing--though not governing--the West Bank, which ensures continued Israeli support and the flow of Western aid money.

With an administration in Washington more eager for a successful peace process than the PA itself, Abbas should have an easy time getting along with Obama. To what extent he can get Obama to pressure Israel for more concessions, in response to which he would supposedly make peace but never will, is an open question. He probably won't get too much. But hotels in the Holy Land should start raising their rates because large numbers of American envoys will be arriving on futile missions.

The biggest dilemma is faced by the more moderate Arab states that will have the horrible experience of getting what they said they wanted. Or, to paraphrase William Shakespeare's great opening speech for "Richard III," you won and now's the time to be discontented. Jordanian Foreign Minister Salah Bashir told a November 2008 meeting called to convey Arab states' fears about Iran to Western governments, "For us the Iranian surge for hegemony has become a crisis."

This situation is ironic, with Arab states caught between their private security concerns and their public professions of Muslim solidarity and criticism of the West. Are you unhappy with the American presence in Iraq? "Good news," the Americans are leaving. Publicly proclaiming you don't see Iran's nuclear weapons drive as a threat? No worries, the United States will ease up. Angry at the

previous president's "saber-rattling"? Great, Obama doesn't want ever to use force, even to protect you.

While Washington emphasizes Obama's popularity, this is not the focal point for Middle Eastern governments. Of course, only actions and experience will show how successful the new administration is and whether it has to--and is able to--adjust its ideas and strategies to reality.

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OBAMA AND EGYPT'S COMING SUCCESSION CRISIS

Jeffrey Azarva*

While President-elect Barack Obama has expounded on how he would deal with many of the region's challenges, his record on Egypt is a blank slate. This will not remain the case for long. Egypt may not be a priority for Obama today, but his administration will soon need to plan for a leadership change there that will do much to determine the country's long-term stability.

Today, Egypt is entering a period of flux and a changing of the guard is bound to happen on Obama's watch. Egypt's octogenarian president, Hosni Mubarak, whose reign has now spanned five U.S. presidencies, will soon depart the scene either of his own volition--his current term ends in 2011--or following his inevitable death or disability.

That much is certain. But what remains a matter of conjecture among Egyptians is who exactly will follow in his footsteps. Indeed, the question of succession has dogged Mubarak for years because of his refusal to anoint an heir or appoint a vice president--the office through which both he and predecessor Anwar Sadat ascended to the presidency. Since 2000, that vacancy, coupled with the meteoric rising

of his son's political star, has fueled talk of a dynasty in the Arab world's most populous country.

Mubarak has disavowed such talk, but his actions have done little to scotch the rumors. Since acquiescing to Egypt's first competitive presidential election in 2005, he has consolidated power and worked to orchestrate a hereditary inheritance. In 2007, his ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) railroaded constitutional amendments through parliament that curbed political competition and reinforced the high threshold needed for presidential candidacy. The fact that today Mubarak's son, Gamal, is one of only a select few who meet this criteria is no accident.

However, Gamal's coronation is not inevitable. While the former investment banker has cultivated an image as a Westernized, pro-market reformer, he lacks a military pedigree. In a country where every president since the 1952 revolution has risen from the armed forces' ranks, this is no small shortcoming. Given Gamal's civilian background, it is a good bet that Egypt's generals not only view him as unseasoned, but as somebody who is loath to safeguard their considerable economic perquisites. Whether they would take his succession lying down is thus very much open to question.

Why should any of this concern Obama's incoming administration? It is not because succession will unhinge Egypt from its Western moorings--few believe Egypt's Islamists would seize power in the event of a leadership struggle. Rather, it is because post-Mubarak Egypt could begin a long descent into instability and even Islamist revolution over a number of years.

With few peaceful outlets for dissent, more than 40 percent of the population living below the poverty line, and a government increasingly unresponsive to its citizens' most basic needs, Egypt is sinking into turmoil. It is not hyperbole to suggest that the regime's obsession with succession is mortgaging the country's future. Should Mubarak's successor eschew reform or not manage crises well, Egypt's long-term stability will be at stake, a situation which could have a bigger effect on

the Arab world's direction since the Iraq War or any other current issue.

What can the next White House do about succession? As of now, the short answer is not much: In both Cairo and Washington, Gamal appears to have cemented his front-runner status. Despite holding no government portfolio, he has spoken with senior Bush administration officials since 2003 in meetings interpreted as a tacit endorsement for his candidacy. Given Egyptians' protestations about U.S. "interference" in their affairs, the Obama administration should be wary of wading any further into this debate.

Unfortunately, should Gamal end up succeeding his father, such an approach would leave U.S. options between a rock and a hard place. The Obama administration would be left in the unenviable position of either backing Gamal's succession or standing aside as it occurs--responses that will both be construed as a failure of U.S. democracy promotion in Egypt and simultaneously a sizeable part of the aggrieved population blaming the United States as the regime's sponsor. However, the options are not equally bad: because Arab leaders will be taking a cue from Egypt's succession, Obama's administration would be better staying silent lest it convey the wrong message.

Yet, that does not mean it should stay on the sidelines all together. The Obama administration should use the post-transition period to reprioritize the need for reform. Here, U.S. pressure will be critical; whoever succeeds Mubarak is unlikely to make a significant break with the past. It will thus be imperative that Obama prod Egypt on several fronts to help lift it out of its paralysis.

There are two major areas where the United States should push for change: the reinstatement of presidential term limits and the licensing of political parties. A lot has been made of Mubarak's 2005 amendment of the constitution to allow for popular, multi-candidate presidential elections, but the continued absence of presidential term limits still leaves much to be desired. Mubarak has now presided atop Egypt for more than a quarter-century, longer than almost any

pharaoh in ancient times. Reinstating the two-term cap abolished by Anwar Sadat would not only allow for the peaceful rotation of power, but it would also help to undo today's perception of the president as a God-like figure.

The regime's monopolization over the party approval process must also be addressed. Today, an NDP-stacked parliamentary committee exercises de facto veto power over the formation of new parties and uses its authority to meddle in the affairs of--and effectively neuter--those it has legalized. The regime's recent implementation of a mixed electoral system that favors party-slate voting will exacerbate matters by all but guaranteeing that viable alternatives to the NDP remain stillborn. The Obama administration should thus urge that any licensing process be depoliticized.

But will the Obama administration actually pursue such change? During his campaign, Obama vowed to mend Washington's alliances. Although the United States and Egypt have often been described as locked in a close alliance, relations have soured in past years, in large part due to disagreements over the pace and scope of reform.

It is hard to envisage that the Obama administration will want to rock the boat even more by pushing for reform, particularly with the uncertainty of succession looming on the horizon.

Yet, even if Obama does prioritize political reform, he will be constrained by the realities of a tense relationship. Few issues have put more stress on bilateral ties than the U.S. annual aid program, through which Egypt has pocketed \$60 billion in economic and military assistance since its 1979 peace agreement with Israel. In recent years, members of Congress have sought to condition aid as a way of expressing disapproval over Egypt's about-face on democracy. In 2007, Congress succeeded in tying \$100 million in military aid to Egypt's adoption of reform and prevention of weapons smuggling into Gaza. Despite the fact that the legislation included a proviso allowing Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to release the funds for "national security

reasons"--a waiver she later exercised--Egyptian officials were incensed. The bill marked the first time Congress had attached strings to the aid they consider sacrosanct.

It is unlikely to be the last time either: The debate over conditionality has since quieted down, but it will soon return. The 1998 U.S.-Egyptian joint agreement to restructure the aid program over a ten-year period--an agreement that slashed economic aid by \$40 million annually but left the \$1.3 billion in military grants untouched--has expired and has yet to be replaced. At present, Egypt is only guaranteed to receive \$200 million in economic aid in 2009, its smallest allocation ever. After that, the future of such assistance is uncertain.

Will Obama fight to keep economic aid alive? Presumably. Given his emphasis on diplomacy and pledge to play a more hands-on role in the Palestinian-Israeli arena, where Egypt has traditionally helped mediate, he would appear reluctant to raise any more hackles in Cairo. Yet, in June 2008, Obama wrote a letter to President Bush urging him to "press Egypt" to combat Hamas' weapons smuggling across the Gaza-Egypt border. As to how Bush should exert pressure, Obama did not elaborate.

In the end, however, other considerations will likely dictate whether such aid is continued. As former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Scott Carpenter has noted, the Bush administration has long viewed the economic aid program as a buffer for the more robust military package--aid seen today, in part, as vital to maintaining Egypt's strategic cooperation in the war on terrorism. Obama will probably take a similar view, believing that without the cover of economic aid, military assistance will be subjected to greater stipulations.

But the reality of the matter is that regardless of whether economic aid is shelved, Egypt's continued backsliding will likely see the next Congress become more assertive--and successful--in placing restrictions on military assistance. The irony then is that while many Egyptians believe Obama's election will herald a less confrontational relationship,

bilateral ties may worsen under his administration.

Of course, if Egypt's future leadership charts a path of reform, this need not be the case. The post-Mubarak era will offer a critical opportunity for Egypt's next president to thrust his country into the 21st century and reverse decades of stagnation. Succession, however, could be the beginning of a series of crises in Egypt and regarding U.S.-Egypt relations for the Obama administration. If the policies of Obama's predecessors are any indication, the reform agenda in Egypt will likely remain subordinated to other strategic interests.

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SYRIA SETS ITS TRAPS FOR THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

Tony Badran*

In approaching Syria, the new administration will have to navigate carefully amidst myths, fantasies, and traps laid not just by the Syrians, but also by credulous experts here in the United States. The best way to do so is to assess soberly the Syrian regime's nature, interests, priorities, and instruments as well as the history of diplomatic engagement with it.

Syria wants the United States to adopt its own grossly inflated self-image as a major regional power without which "nothing can be done" in the Middle East. Despite a concept of its role far outweighing its capabilities, Syria is, in fact, a weak Third World country with few resources. As such, in order to project an influence well above its weight, the Syrian regime has chronically relied on violence, terrorist proxies, acting as a spoiler, and Iran, with whom it has had an enduring 30-year old strategic alliance.

The problem is that Syria's priorities are basically at odds with those of the United States. These main goals including preserving a strong relationship with Iran--which many in the West think they can break--controlling

Lebanon, projecting influence into Iraq, locking Israel in a proxy war of attrition, dominating the Palestinian question, and undermining Jordan. Since Iran shares and furthers these goals, the common denominator to which is undermining American interests and allies in the Middle East, the alliance between Damascus and Tehran is strong and durable.

Regarding Lebanon, Syria is the main factor subverting that country's independence and stability. This strategy includes ongoing armament of Hizballah and other Lebanese and Palestinian militias; facilitating the crossing of radical terrorists and their equipment, including the Fatah al-Islam terror group; refusal to fully demarcate and monitor the common borders; and constant subversive interference in Lebanese domestic affairs in an attempt to restore full Syrian hegemony.

At the same time, Syria is trying to dismantle the two main challenges to its domination of Lebanon: the Chapter VII International Tribunal into the assassinations of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri plus others and UN Security Council resolutions--including 1559, 1680, and 1701--designed to end chronic Syrian subversion of Lebanese independence and sovereignty and to limit Hizballah's freedom of action there.

Syria has also been a particularly malign and destabilizing force in Iraq, sponsoring terrorists who target and kill Americans and Iraqis there. In 2003, Syria's foreign minister declared that it was his country's interest that the "invaders be defeated" in Iraq. The Syrian regime has been pursuing an effective war by proxy in Iraq, supporting, harboring, and facilitating movement for the insurgency, including al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI).

The Syrians' five-year-long proxy war in Iraq has included a revolving door policy for the likes of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi and his network; open sponsorship of recruiters and liaisons with AQI, such as Abu al-Qa'qa'.

Recently, Major General John Kelly described it thusly: "Al-Qa'ida operatives and others operate, live pretty openly on the Syrian side." For instance, despite several appeals by

the Iraqi government and the United States to the Syrians, a senior al-Qa'ida figure, Abu Ghadiyya, was afforded safe haven in Syria, where he was a major logistical supplier of AQI, transferring money and fighters across the border until a U.S. cross-border raid in October 2008 either killed or abducted him.

Aside from Iraq, Syria has also been an active sponsor of terrorism against Jordan, Lebanon, and Israel. For example, the Jordanians had alerted Syria when the terrorist Muhammad al-Darsi arrived from Libya at the Damascus Airport only to catch him crossing through Syria into Jordan. In Lebanon, such Syrian clients as Abu Khalid al-Amla, who oversaw the transfer across the border into Lebanon of Shagr al-Absi's Fatah al-Islam, came from that neighboring country. The Syrians were also caught harboring one of the most wanted terrorist masterminds in the world, Imad Mughniya, when his car exploded killing him. Syria's longstanding support for Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Hizballah remains in full swing.

A new feature in Syria's aggressive role was the clandestine nuclear site destroyed in a September 2007, presumably an Israeli air strike. According to the official IAEA report, sampling from the site showed significant amounts of uranium. It is looking increasingly as though Syria was concealing a plutonium reactor of North Korean design, meant for building bombs.

Rather than show any willingness to change such policies, Syria has taken the offensive by demanding unilateral concessions from the United States. These include insistence that the United States appoint a new ambassador to Syria, restore normal diplomatic ties (originally cut to protest Syrian sponsorship of terrorism and subversion in Lebanon), end "anti-Syrian rhetoric," lift sanctions, repeal the Syria Accountability Act, renew intelligence cooperation, endorse Israel-Syria talks, to terminate effectively the International Tribunal, and show gratitude for alleged Syrian cooperation in blocking the flow of terrorists into Iraq. Following close behind is insistence that the United States accept Syrian hegemony over Lebanon on the

pretext of its “combating” radical Islamist groups there, when the only such groups have been dispatched from Syria and fought by the Lebanese Army.

After these concessions are granted, Syria hints in English that it might reconsider its alliance with Iran. On top of it all, Syrian leaders and their mouthpieces make it clear that the alliance with Iran is non-negotiable and any request to sever it constitutes a “non-starter.” Regarding Iraq, Damascus, currently laying another trap, has expressed itself as willing to accept intelligence cooperation in order to facilitate an “honorable U.S. exit,” but on the condition that the United States reassigns an ambassador to Damascus, under the pretext of “starting with a clean slate.” Also hidden in there is what the Syrians euphemistically called a “package deal” in 2006-2007, when the United States did approach Syria over Iraq’s security. “Package deal” was simply code for giving Syria a free hand in Lebanon.

The problem is that the Syrian slate is not clean. As noted above, Bashar al-Asad has piled up an astonishing record of brazen and overt belligerence towards the United States and its allies and violation of international law. Wiping that slate clean through unconditional engagement would send all the wrong signals to both enemies and allies in the region.

During the 1990s, the United States gave a great deal in exchange for the belief that Damascus would make peace with Israel. After spinning out the advantages for almost a decade, Syria rejected a peace agreement in 2000. Then, as now, as a *Financial Times* editorial put it, “For the Assad regime,” reopening peace talks with Israel “looks like a get-out-of-jail-free card. Syria has not changed its regional behavior.”

That is exactly how the regime itself is portraying it: as a “win-win” strategy. If the talks were to succeed, Syria would get back the Golan Heights on its own terms. If they fail, Syria would have broken out of isolation, destroyed Western leverage against itself, and regained hegemony in Lebanon while giving little or nothing in exchange.

This is why the key point for U.S. policy is to demand equal benefits for anything it gives Syria, and given simultaneously not as vague promises of future actions. Merely to give up tangible positions in order to build “good will” with Syria would be disastrous. Already, the French and British have tried such methods and failed completely to win any beneficial change.

To make matters worse, allowing a resurgence of Syria’s international position would undermine several U.S. allies--Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia--who are threatened by Damascus and favored the tougher U.S. policy of recent years.

The long-established pattern of Syrian policy has been to resist stubbornly any concessions, even at a high material cost to itself; then pocket any concessions by the other side followed by insistence on more of the same. Clever maneuvers and stalling tactics are used to undermine and splinter any effort at multilateral pressure on Damascus.

Those promoting engagement with Syria become trapped in this process. To continue they must give more; otherwise the process is ended, with the Western politicians and diplomats appearing to have “failed.” By such judo tactics, Syria reverses the leverage against its stronger enemies, making them dependent on its favors.

The most attractive bait is the alleged prize of splitting Syria from Iran. Yet given the crucial strategic depth Tehran provides for Damascus, allowing it to intimidate opponents and play out its over-inflated role conception, it makes no sense from Syria’s perspective to change its strategy. Strengthening this position is the belief that its side is winning, a view only reinforced by the very Western policy of engagement, which is presented by the Syrians as capitulation.

The Syrians currently believe that there has been a fundamental shift in the region’s balance of power in favor of the Iran-Syria axis, what they call the “front of rejectionism and resistance” to U.S. interests in the region. The way they see it, Iran is on the threshold of becoming a nuclear state, with a subsequent nuclear umbrella for Syria and the non-state

actors it cosponsors with Tehran. As such, to think that Syria will abandon this network for the sake of the Golan Heights is to misunderstand fundamentally the Syrian regime's interest and worldview.

Thus, Syria poses a dangerous problem for the Obama administration. By trying to strengthen regional stability and weaken radical forces, an ill-conceived policy could end by doing the precise opposite result.

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