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Obama's Mideast Policy: An Unpromising Drive towards a Cost-Effective Pax Americana

President Barack Obama is continuing to reorient U.S. foreign policy in general, and in the Middle East in particular, along the lines of the internationalist/neo-realist approach pursued in the pre-9/11 years of Presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton. Obama's Tuesday's televised address marking the end of the U.S. combat mission in Iraq --coupled with his earlier decision to escalate U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan --- and this week's start of a new round of U.S. orchestrated Israeli-Palestinian talks in Washington fit very much into his effort to reducing the costs of - as opposed to doing away with a policy based on the assumption that Washington will continue setting the agenda and determining the policy outcomes in the Broader Middle East - in Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Israel-Palestine.

That should not have come as a major surprise to those of us who have been calling for long-term structural changes in American global strategy, starting with the necessary reassessment of the U.S. goal of maintaining a hegemonic position in the Middle East. After all, much of presidential candidate Obama's criticism of President George W. Bush's foreign policies as well as his proposals for changes in those policies sounded like the kind of the assessments that were being made by President Bush I's former national security advisor Brent Scowcroft who not unlike Obama was opposed to decision to invade Iraq and to oust Saddam Hussein and who was calling for a diplomatic engagement with Iran.

Indeed, contrary to the hopes raised by some of Obama's admirers in the anti-war movement -- or the fears stirred up in his neoconservative bashers -- Obama was not a closet peacenik, an isolationist, a "third wordlist" or an "Arabist;" and his positions on Arab-Israeli issues reflected a view shared by most of his predecessors in office. Moreover, compare Obama's phony "confrontation" with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu over the issue of the Jewish settlements with the Bush pèrway challenged former Israeli PM Yitzchak Shamir over the same question (threatening to withhold loan guarantees to Jerusalem, among other things), and the notion promoted by neoconservative pundits and others that Obama is the most "anti-Israeli" U.S. President seems laughable.

By trying to improve U.S. standing in the Arab and Muslim worlds, to engage Iran in the diplomatic arena, to begin a process of military disengagement from Iraq and to revive the Israeli-Palestinian peace process by emphasizing the U.S. role as an honest broker, Obama has not been attempting to transform traditional U.S. policy in the Middle East (or elsewhere). Instead Obama has been playing the role of a counter-revolutionary, turning back the radical foreign policy approach pursued by Bush the Second and his neoconservative advisors (the policy of preemption; regime change; diplomatic unilateralism; the Democracy Agenda while embracing the more realist strategies pursued by Clinton and Bush the First.

That Obama has discarded the Bush era's stand of treating Israel as Washington's sheriff in the Middle East may explain why after eight years of having uninterrupted access to a U.S. diplomatic blank cheque some Israelis and their American supporters may have reacted with so much animosity towards the new president. Similarly, by treating the threat of international terrorism as a manageable national security challenge -- as opposed to a part of a new global war against Islamofascism -- Obama has helped protect the moral and strategic principles of U.S. foreign policy. It is President Bush and his advisors who had been violating those same principles.

From that perspective, the prose of Obama's televised address on Iraq on Tuesday seemed to reflect his goal of "de-neoconizing" U.S. foreign policy. There was no talk about democratizing Iraq and the Middle East, confronting an Axis of Evil or defeating Islamofascism. "The United States has paid a huge price to put the future of Iraq in the hands of its people," Obama said in the address from the Oval Office. "Through this remarkable chapter in the history of the United States and Iraq, we have met our responsibility," he concludes. "Now, it is time to turn the page." Indeed.

At the same time, the decision by Obama Administration to invite President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Washington on September 2nd to resume direct negotiations to resolve all final status issues -- including Jerusalem, the Jewish settlements, and the Palestinian refugees, within a year -- seems to send a signal to Arabs and Israelis that unlike his predecessor, President Obama was placing the Israel-Palestine issue on the top of his foreign policy agenda and was preparing to invest more time and energy - and involves paying huge political costs -- in trying to resolve the Mideast conflict. Or so it seems.

On one level, Obama may be trying to recapture some of the elements of the strategic status-quo that had existed in the Middle East before 9/11 and the ensuing invasion of Iraq -- and in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War and Gulf War I -- during which the U.S. could maintain a relatively cost-free hegemony in the region. It could do so by pursuing a strategy of offshore balancing, by keeping U.S. military forces "over the horizon," through the "dual containment" of Iraq and Iran (and by playing the one against the other), and by sustaining the momentum of a perpetual Arab-Israeli peace process. While Bush and his advisors have contended that their radical foreign policy agenda - including the invasion of Iraq -- was the proper U.S. response to 9/11, a realist strategy aimed at preserving U.S. status in the Middle East at weakening Arab and Muslim radicals would have been to topple the Taliban, destroy Al Qaeda and its satellites and reviving the Israeli-Arab peace process (and not to oust Saddam Hussein and transform the Middle East). So it is not surprising that that is exactly what the Obama Administration is trying to do now by trying to close the Iraq chapter, getting the peace process moving and "finishing the job" in Afghanistan.

The reason why this strategy is probably not going to work now is that the Bush Administration's policies may have already changed the balance of power in the Middle East as well as the political balance of power at home in a way that makes it difficult - if not impossible - to "de-neoconize" U.S. foreign policy and turn back the strategic clock and re-establish the pre-9/11 status-quo.

Indeed, announcing the end of the U.S. combat mission in Iraq and convening an Israeli-Palestinian summit in Washington do not change the depressing realities on the ground. They amount to not a lot more than media events. Iraq's Pandora Box of ethnic and religious rivalries remains wide open and a more powerful and assertive Iran and its Shiite allies there (and in Lebanon) are perceived as posing a major threat to the interests of the mostly unstable Arab-Sunni regimes in the region (Saudi Arabia; Jordan; Egypt). At the same time, Turkey is very concerned about the objectives of the Kurds in the North of Iraq and is ready to take action to protect its interests there. A huge powder keg is ready to blow up.

In the Holy Land, the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships are divided and the national consensus on both sides has been radicalized since the second Intifadah, 9/11, and the continuing Israeli

occupation and settlements buildup, making it less likely that the Israelis and the Palestinians could resolve any of the major final status issues within a year. They could not achieve that goal in 2000 when Yasser Arafat was ruling over a unified Palestinian camp, when a relatively moderate political figure was serving as Israel's PM -- and at a time when the U.S. was at the peak of its so-called unipolar moment and Iran, Hizbollah and Hamas were having great difficulties in trying to exert their influence. So why exactly will the peace process lead to the promised land of peace now?

Hence even if one presupposes a best-case scenario under which the issue of Iran's nuclear ambitions are resolved or being placed on the policy backburner in a way that averts a military conflagration involving Israel, the U.S. and Iran, it is still very difficult to envision a state of affairs that could bring about peace and stability in Iraq and in Israel/Palestine in the near future. To paraphrase what Oscar Wilde has said about marriage and second marriage, pursuing policies based on these assumptions would mark the triumph of intelligence and hope over intelligence and experience. But then many marriages and second marriages do work.

It is possible to imagine an alternate universe in which the U.S. has not endured the triple blows of 9/11, the war in Iraq and the Great Recession and was ready to use its enormous military and economic power to make peace and bring stability into the Middle East. But one does not have to be a great geo-strategic thinker to conclude that in the real universe of post-Iraq war and the current economic mess coupled with the mood of the American public, the U.S. not going to have the needed economic and military resources and the political will to use them in order prevent the likely explosions in Mesopotamia and the Levant and to impose its own agenda there as it also tries to fight Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia and elsewhere and when, as Obama put it on Tuesday, "Our most urgent task is to restore our economy and put the millions of Americans who have lost their jobs back to work." Something gotta give, and it will probably be Obama's Mideast policy that will be the first to lose ground.

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