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Between New Hopes and Old Realities –

The Obama Administration and the Middle East

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1. Introduction

Even though U.S. Middle East policies have long followed relatively predictable patterns (Quandt 2005; Little 2002), every new administration brings excited debate about the prospect of new directions. To some extent this is due to the fact that while regional political actors have a way of deflecting or even manipulating outside intervention (Brown 1984), the way Washington thinks about foreign policy in general and the Middle East in particular does from time to time profoundly influence the constellation of political forces in the region. One only has to think about President Jimmy Carter's role in the conclusion of a cold peace between Egypt and Israel, the Reagan administration's role in the Iran-Iraq war, the emergence of a direct U.S. military presence in the region under George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton's unsuccessful involvement in the failed Oslo peace process, and, most recently, George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq. This raises the question about the set of factors which will shape the way U.S. foreign policy under President Obama will react to or even seek to initiate political developments in the Middle East.

2. The Domestic Context

2.1. The Relationship between President and Congress

Given the nature of the underlying decision-making process, U.S. foreign policy must remain incomprehensible without due consideration of its domestic determinants (Mastanduno 2002). Here, the set-up and worldview of the executive, its relations with Congress, and the impact of public opinion have to be taken into consideration.

The most important determinants of the relationship between President and Congress are public expectations, the results of Presidential and Congressional elections, the president's popularity, the influence of media and interest groups, as well as the relative cohesion of executive and legislative branch (LeLoup/Shull 1999). As 'Commander-in-Chief', chief diplomat and chief executive, the president has ultimate authority over foreign policy. Congressional influence generally tends to increase the further away an issue is framed from the parameters of 'crisis policy' (i.e. war) and the more it falls into the realm of 'strategic policy' (i.e. long-term foreign policy objectives) and 'structural policy' (i.e. financial support for the various branches of the executive) (Dittgen 1998; Lindsay 1994).

Essential resources of presidential influence such as power and experience are heavily influenced by the electoral cycle. According to Quandt (1999), presidential influence is more limited at the beginning of a presidency and at the end of the first and, especially, a possible second term in office. At the beginning of a presidency, the political mandate provided through recent success at the polls traditionally goes along with lack of experience and interest in foreign policy matters. At later stages, the president and his team might have developed sufficient experience in dealing with other world leaders, yet, the electoral considerations of a re-election campaign and the 'lame duck' phenomenon at the end of a presidency turn the Congressional approval of ambitious foreign and domestic initiatives into an uphill battle. In the end, the most promising periods to launch major foreign policy initiatives are a president's third and fifth year in office when experience in dealing with allies and adversaries has significantly increased and electoral pressures are comparatively low (ibid).¹

With the sole exception of George W. H. Bush who had previous experience as U.S. envoy to China, CIA-director and director of the Council on Foreign Relations, all recent presidential newcomers lacked any profound foreign policy experience. In the case of Barack Obama, both his primary challenger Hillary Clinton and his Republican national election opponent, Senator John McCain, tried to benefit from lingering doubts about his ability to handle the 'three o'clock in the morning-call'.² Thus, Obama's political mandate (the best performance of a Democratic presidential candidate in terms of share of popular vote since Lyndon B. Johnson's re-election in 1964 and in terms of electoral college since Bill Clinton's re-election in 1996)³ could easily be of little relevance for the Middle East if, in theory, the new president lacked either the interest or expertise to execute a coherent policy.

A look at the issues that most likely determined most voters' election day-decision could provide another cause for caution. With the state of the American economy preoccupying many voters' minds (63%), issues like the war in Iraq (10%), terrorism (9%) and energy policy (7%) did not have a major impact (ABC News 2009). These numbers do not give much of an incentive to engage actively in foreign policy. For the foreseeable future President Obama will have to deal with the U.S. economy's meltdown. While withdrawal from Iraq fulfills a campaign pledge especially important to the Democratic party's left-leaning base and some movement on the Arab-Israeli track might create a couple of positive news cycles, the 2010 mid-term elections, which have the potential to seriously weaken the Obama

¹ Interestingly, the beginning of the Iraq war in 2003 fits the pattern described in Quandt's cycle.

² Exit polls conducted on election-day paint a mixed picture of the electoral implications of this perceived weakness. While 48% of respondents did not regard Obama as sufficiently experienced for the job of president (85% of them voted for McCain), he received overwhelming support (93%) among the 50% who did (ABC News 2008).

³ In fact, one has to go back to Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1932 victory (57,41%) to find a successful Democratic first-time candidate who received a higher share of the popular vote than Obama (52,87%) (Leip 2008).

presidency at a rather early stage, will ultimately be decided on the question of whether the new administration has been able to provide the US electorate with new optimism and a sense that the country is moving in the right direction again.

On the other hand, Obama's coalition comprises a number of demographic groups which, based on long-term projections, will make up an increasing share of the American electorate such as single women, ethnic minorities, and highly educated professionals. It is thus not unlikely that America's friends and foes will deal with a Democratic Washington for some time to come. Given the fact that many of the Senate and House races in 2010 currently projected as competitive will take place in states and districts which Obama won,⁴ the next mid-term elections could see a break with the historical pattern that usually brings losses to the party occupying the White House. To some extent this will depend on how much the Bush administration policies have made the American public willing to embrace a new political frame of reference which differs fundamentally from the conservative Republican one dominating U.S. politics since President Reagan's victory in 1980. Traditionally, such historical markers in the cyclical pattern of U.S. politics have been occupied by presidents deemed extraordinarily successful (Skowronek 2008).

The currently two most reliable constituent groups of Obama's diverse winning coalition are Jewish and Muslim Americans. Both groups are relatively small in size, yet have the (in one case proven in the other still developing) capacity to exert substantial influence. For instance, recent analysis of Congressional roll-call votes on civil liberties' issues important to Muslim Americans has demonstrated that their presence is making an impact on the political strategies of both Republican and Democratic members of Congress (Martin 2009). While Jewish support for Democrats has a long history which is rooted, not the least, in the above-average liberalism of many U.S. Jews, their social conservatism and the perception of the Democratic party as being reliably pro-Israel has led many Muslim Americans to initially support President Bush (Berger 2009). In 2008, however, Muslim Americans were second only to American Jews (55%) in their self-identification as Democrats (49%) (Gallup 2009). At the same time, campaign attacks that questioned the sincerity of Barack Obama's pro-Israel stance did not prevent the new president from gathering 77 percent of the Jewish vote which is 3 percentage points higher than Senators John Kerry's in 2004 and only 2 percent less than Al Gore received with Jewish Senator Joe Lieberman on the ticket in 2000 (Haaretz 2008). It can be argued that one reason for this development is the broadening of the notion of what a 'pro-Israel' position entails as exemplified by the recent rise of 'pro-Israel, pro-peace' Jewish lobbying groups such as the J Street Project (Ben-Ami 2008).⁵

⁴ In the Senate, only two Democratic incumbents face reelection in 'McCain states', whereas six Republican seats are up in 'Obama states'.

⁵ The name is a pun on the K Street in Washington known for housing many lobbying firms' offices.

The group which has many prominent former politicians and current academics on its advisory council⁶ helped Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Cal.) gather the signatures of 33 Senators under a 27 February 2009 letter to Secretary Clinton that was noteworthy for noting both Israeli security concerns and Palestinian humanitarian needs as well as the explicit endorsement of former Senator George Mitchell's appointment as the U.S. government's special envoy for Middle East peace under the 'President's vision for Middle East peace' (Feinstein 2009).

In the House of Representatives, a non-binding 'sense of Congress' resolution (HRes 130) that expressed support for Senator Mitchell's mission gathered the support of 79 Democrats and Republicans in the first month after it was introduced in early February 2009. Pointing to Mitchell's achievements in Northern Ireland, where he helped to bring about the 'termination of an 800-year old sectarian and national conflict', the resolution's co-sponsors pledged to support the administration's attempts to broker a solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that ensures that the states of Israel and Palestine could live 'side by side in peace and security, within internationally recognized borders'.

These developments, while obviously more symbolic than substantial in nature, stand for the state of the relationship between the two ends of Pennsylvania Avenue at the dawn of the Obama administration. In his seminal study of Congressional influence on U.S. foreign policy, James Lindsay distinguished between content, procedural and diplomatic instruments (1994). The first instrument covers Senate consent to international treaties as well as financial appropriations to the foreign affairs budget and the funding of military operations by both houses. Whereas Congressional statements such as the ones mentioned above can signal broad domestic support for the president's diplomatic initiatives, Congress can also set up specific procedures that impinge the executive's flexibility in dealing with other countries. One case in point with regard to the Middle East would be Congressional support for additional arms sales to the region which some actors especially on the Arab peninsula might want to pursue in order to balance Iran's nuclear program and weapons acquisitions from Russia.

Here, President Obama might be able to hope for the support of a friendly Congress whose members tend to espouse foreign policy ideas more in line with public opinion than the Republican-led Congresses from 1995 to 2007. This is a major difference to the last time a Democratic president attempted to broker peace in the Middle East. The fact that Bill Clinton

⁶ These include amongst others former Clinton administration officials like Jeremy Ben-Ami, deputy assistant to the president for domestic policy, Morton H. Halperin, director of policy planning at the state department, Rob Malley, former special assistant to the president for Arab-Israeli affairs, Ambassador Robert Pelletreau, former assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs and former U.S. ambassador to Egypt, Tunisia and Bahrain, the former Republican Senator Lincoln Chafee for Rhode Island, as well as prominent academics like Stanley Hoffmann, Professor of Government and Social Studies, Harvard University, and Professor Robert Jervis, Professor of International Politics, Columbia University. The link with the Democratic grassroots efforts is made through Eli Pariser, the executive director of the influential MoveOn.org political action committee.

only enjoyed the benefit of a 'united government' only for his first two years in office made it easier for then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to enhance his bargaining position by appealing directly to the Republican Congressional majorities.

This reflected in many ways the increasing gap between Republican and Democratic voters on issues related to the Middle East. Whereas there is a broad general consensus in favor of not taking sides in the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, considerably more Democrats than Republican voters (80% to 58%) express such a view (World Public Opinion 2007). This partisan split was also apparent in the U.S. public's assessment of the December 2008 conflict between Israel and Hamas. Whereas Democratic voters would have preferred (55% to 31%) that Israel had sought a diplomatic solution before taking military action, Republicans overwhelmingly (52% to 27% percent) supported the decision of Israel's then-center-left government (Rasmussen 2008). Similarly, a December 2006 poll on U.S. policy toward Iran showed that Republican voters were more open to the idea of imposing sanctions (46%) vis-à-vis either continued diplomatic efforts (26%) or military action against nuclear installations (26%). Democrats, on the other hand, narrowly favored diplomatic efforts over economic sanctions (41-39%) while being rather cautious (13%) on the question of military action (World Public Opinion 2007).

2.2. The Bureaucratic politics of U.S. Middle East policy

In addition to his first speeches (see below), the appointments to President Obama's foreign policy leadership team serve as an important indicator of the kind of foreign and Middle East policy he wants his administration to pursue. Here, his decision to give the post of national security adviser to former NATO commander, General James L. Jones, is of particular importance. The task of the national security council is the coordination and, since Henry Kissinger's tenure, the leadership over the various involved branches of the executive as directed by the White House (Kemp 1999). The loyalty of its staff to the president is crucial in the not uncommon event of divergent points of view between the White House on the one hand and the CIA or the departments of defense and state on the other where career officers often disagree with political appointees (Rockman 1997). In a first sign of how he intends to run the national security council, General Jones indicated the need to prevent decision-making from taking place outside the formal patterns to ensure that decisions are transparent and to include, on a case by case basis, members of cabinet who present issues that normally fall outside of a narrow definition of national security (DeYoung 2009).

Jones' military credentials provide the necessary political cover for any possible attempt to emphasize non-military instruments of foreign policy. Denis McDonough, President Obama's

most-trusted foreign policy advisor during the presidential campaign who became deputy assistant to the president and director of strategic communications in the national security council, already spoke cautiously about the ‘need to strengthen and integrate other tools of national power to succeed against unconventional threats (quoted in Sanger 2008).’ Here, the Obama administration must balance the perceived need to deemphasize the use of military force with the prospect of a possible charge from conservative or Realist observers who would accuse him of mistaking foreign policy for ‘social work’, a charge levied against his Democratic predecessor Bill Clinton (Mandelbaum 1996).

President Obama’s decision to retain Robert Gates, a Republican and former director of CIA under George H.W. Bush, as secretary of defense might help create and maintain bipartisan support for a policy that will put greater emphasis on ‘soft power’ (see below). While still working for the outgoing Bush administration, Gates began to publicly bemoan the fact that since the 1990s, U.S. foreign policy witnessed ‘the gutting of America’s ability to engage, assist, and communicate with other parts of the world – the “soft power,” which had been so important throughout the Cold War’ by reducing the number of staff at the department of state and the United States Agency for International Development as well as the abolishment of the U.S. Information Agency as an independent entity (Gates 2007). In that context, he frequently mentioned the fact that the department of defense was employing more people as musicians in its marching bands than there are U.S. diplomats (Sanger 2008).⁷

On the Middle East, Gates and Jones share an understanding that is very much in line with the foreign policy consensus expressed in the Iraq Study Group report of 2006. Its authors stressed that ‘(t)he United States cannot achieve its goals in the Middle East unless it deals directly with the Arab-Israeli conflict and regional instability (Iraq Study Group 2006, 7)’. In October 2008, General Jones told the department of defense newsletter ‘Inside the Pentagon’ that ‘nothing is more important’ to regional security than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (quoted in Lake 2008). As Condoleeza Rice’s special envoy for Middle East security (Berger 2009), he prepared a report which the Bush administration then deemed to be too critical of Israel’s insufficient engagement with the Palestinian authority’s security services that it chose not to publish the report (Lake 2008).

Similarly, Robert Gates’ views reflect the non-ideological, pragmatic Middle East policies employed by the administration of President George H. W. Bush. In the context of the 1990s debate about the emerging threat of al Qaeda he publicly recommended complementing the continuing focus on state sponsors with a broader support for democratization and attempts to peacefully solve the Arab-Israeli conflict.⁸ In 2004, he was co-chair, together with Zbigniew Brzezinski, of a Council on Foreign Relations independent task force on Iran which

⁷ For the original calculation see Kilcullen (2007).

⁸ Gates was particularly critical of then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu: ‘We can pursue a peace in the Middle East that does not kowtow to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s obstructionism and betrayal of Yitzhak Rabin’s legacy (Gates 1998).’

concluded its report with a call for a policy of 'selective engagement' with Tehran (Council on Foreign Relations 2004). With regard to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, he publicly acknowledged that 'military success is not sufficient to win (Gates 2007).'

The decision of retired navy admiral Dennis Blair, the new director of national intelligence, to offer Chas Freeman the chance to head the national intelligence council (NIC), the intelligence community's center for medium- to long-term thinking and prognosis, immediately stirred a wide debate over Freeman's strong criticism of Israeli policies (Luce/Dombey 2009). Freeman, who had previously served as U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia in 1991 and was President Nixon's translator on his trip to China, accepted, as president of the Middle East Policy council, a \$1 million dollar donation from Prince Alwaleed bin Talal bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, whose reformist and pro-Nasserist father Talal had unsuccessfully demanded the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in Saudi Arabia in the 1960s. In his work for the Middle East Policy council he has long been advocating a U.S. foreign policy that pays closer attention to the interests of pro-Western Arab governments⁹ and vocally criticized U.S. Middle East policies under the Bush administration:

'In retrospect, Al Qaeda has played us with the finesse of a matador exhausting a great bull by guiding it into unproductive lunges at the void behind his cape. By invading Iraq, we transformed an intervention in Afghanistan most Muslims had supported into what looks to them like a wider war against Islam (...) Meanwhile, we embraced Israel's enemies as our own; they responded by equating Americans with Israelis as their enemies. We abandoned the role of Middle East peacemaker to back Israel's efforts to pacify its captive and increasingly ghettoized Arab populations (Freeman 2007).'

In light of such views, all Republican members of the Senate intelligence committee send a joint letter to Dennis Blair in which they questioned Freeman's 'experience' and 'objectivity' (Pincus 2009). A number of Democratic and Republican members of Congress including House Minority leader John A. Boehner (Ohio) and Minority Whip Eric Cantor (Va.) asked the inspector general at the office of the director of national intelligence to 'fully investigate' Freeman's 'past and current relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia' (Luce/Dombey 2009). In addition, Representatives Steve Israel (D-N.Y.) and Steven Kirk (R-Ill.), both members of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, sent a letter urging an investigation into whether Freeman's previous position on the board of directors of the Chinese National Offshore Oil Company (CNOOC) which has investments in Iran could constitute a conflict of interest in light of the national intelligence council's task of producing national intelligence estimates on Iran and China (Israel/Kirk 2009). When Senator Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.), a close supporter of the new

⁹ Author interview Chas Freeman, Washington, DC, 13 October 2005.

administration, also began lobbying the White House to reconsider the nomination, Chas Freeman officially withdrew his acceptance of the offer to chair the NIC (Sargent 2009).

In order to balance the impression the appointment of former military officials Jones and Blair to prominent national security posts might create Obama's advisers chose to offer important foreign policy posts to seasoned diplomats. Richard Holbrooke, under President Clinton U.S. ambassador to Germany, assistant secretary for European and Canadian affairs and U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, became the U.S. special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Holbrooke's appointment is noteworthy insofar as his loyal involvement in Hillary Clinton's campaign would have made him a top contender for the post of secretary of state in a Clinton White House.¹⁰

The impact of Holbrooke's involvement in the appointment of other diplomats provides a lesson in the internal dynamics of U.S. foreign-policy making. Firstly, General Zinni, a long-time friend of new national security advisor Jones, former commander of Centcom and U.S. special envoy to the Middle East known for his fierce criticism of the Iraq war, had to face the humiliation of having the offer to serve as ambassador to Iraq withdrawn with Washington insiders pointing either to a potential conflict of interest regarding Zinni's investment in a company with business interests in Iraq or Holbrooke's successful attempt to have his long-time friend Christopher Hill installed as the ambassador instead (Kamen 2009b). Secondly, Holbrooke vetoed the attempt of Dennis Ross, newly appointed 'special adviser' for the rather uniquely phrased region of 'Gulf and Southwest Asia', to have his authority extended to include Pakistan and Afghanistan (Kamen 2009a).¹¹

Dennis Ross's appointment brings another former Clinton official back to Washington. His involvement with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy which provides think-tank analysis generally considered as open to Israeli security interests balances Obama's other national security picks. After Obama's successful nomination, Anthony Lake, national security advisor during President Clinton's first term who closely advised candidate Obama on foreign policy, successfully persuaded Ross to officially join the campaign (Calabresi 2008). Ross whose detailed account of his experience as President Clinton's Middle East envoy is particularly critical of both Yassir Arafat and Benjamin Netanyahu (Ross 2004) stressed in a pre-election interview with the Israeli newspaper Haaertz that '(t)here is no guarantee that if you talk you'll succeed, but if you don't talk you will fail (US picks Ross 2009).' He also endorsed an earlier draft of a Washington Institute's report that in its final

¹⁰ President Clinton explained Holbrooke's success in convincing Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic into accepting the Dayton peace deal of 1995 with the fact that 'he has the same character as Milosevic' (quoted in Crowley 2009).

¹¹ Washington offers different definitions of where the eastern border of the Middle East lies. For the state department, Afghanistan and Pakistan should be grouped together with India as South Asia. The Pentagon, however, does consider Pakistan and Afghanistan to be part of its Central Command which covers (the) all of the Middle East.

version warned of the negative regional consequences of a nuclear armed Iran before stepping down to serve in Obama’s transition team (Washington Institute 2009). The report praises Washington’s multilateral approach but warns against ‘incremental improvements’ which could give Iran the impression that holding out might bring greater concessions (ibid, 5). Its recommendations resemble the ‘red lines’ formulated by Prime Minister Olmert, foreign minister Livni and defense minister Barak which the outgoing Israeli government presented to Secretary Clinton on her first visit to the Middle East. These included a combination of dialogue and harsher sanctions, an action plan for the event of a breakdown in talks as well as a time limit (Ravid 2009).

3. Foreign Policy Implications – Realism with a Liberal Twist?

3.1. Grand Strategy

The president’s ability to gather sufficient public support for his foreign policies rests on his ability to present the underlying interests and choice of instruments in line with the broader perceptions of the U.S. public. At this stage, Barack Obama can count on the fact that the public shares his analysis of the international challenge facing the country. A 2008 survey conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs (see table 1) puts ‘improving America’s standing in the world’ at the top of a list of ‘very important’ U.S. foreign policy goals. It is immediately followed by ‘protecting the jobs of American workers’ and ‘securing adequate supplies of energy’ (Chicago Council 2008).

Table 1 The U.S. public’s view of selected ‘very important’ U.S. foreign policy goals

	1998	2002	2004	2006	2008
Improving America's standing in the world	NA	NA	NA	NA	83
Securing adequate supplies of energy	64	75	69	72	80
Preventing the spread of nuclear weapons	82	90	73	74	73
Combating international terrorism	79	91	71	72	67
Helping to bring a democratic form of governance to other nations	29	34	14	17	17

The foreign policy priorities listed in table 1 will form a yardstick against which the U.S. public will measure the success or failure of President Obama’s Middle East policies. In terms of Grand Strategy, with a unilateralist policy of primacy thoroughly discredited and increasingly unaffordable, there seems to be a broad consensus in favor a mix of Realist ‘selective engagement’ and Liberal ‘cooperative security’ as outlined by Posen and Ross (1996/97). While neo-isolationist commentators argue that ‘unrealistic expectations’ about U.S. ‘moral authority and power’ to broker peace would only end up stirring ‘anti-American backlash’ in the event of failure (Hadar 2008), the broader public is open to arguments in favor of U.S.

involvement in the region. In fact, for the last couple of years narrow, yet consistent majorities of the U.S. public (2004: 52%, 2006: 51%, 2008: 52%) would even favor the presence of U.S.-led NATO troops to ensure the consolidation of Palestinian authority in security matters as part of a peace deal (Chicago Council 2008). The interaction of concerns about global energy and the spread of weapons of mass destruction will also focus attention on the Arab-Persian Gulf area. As Secretary Clinton remarked in her confirmation hearing, securing U.S. interests in the face of this trifecta of challenges requires a:

‘strategy of smart power (...) that addresses the security needs of Israel and the legitimate political and economic aspirations of the Palestinians; that effectively challenges Iran to end its nuclear weapons program and sponsorship of terror, and persuades both Iran and Syria to abandon their dangerous behavior and become constructive regional actors; that strengthens our relationships with Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, other Arab states, with Turkey, and with our partners in the Gulf to involve them in securing a lasting peace in the region (Clinton 2009).’

By defining ‘smart power’ as ‘the full range of tools at our disposal — diplomatic, economic, military, political, legal, and cultural — picking the right tool, or combination of tools, for each situation’ with diplomacy as ‘the vanguard of foreign policy’ (ibid), Clinton presents an arsenal of foreign policy instruments that is agreeable both to supporters of a more narrow Realist interpretation of national interests and foreign policy and those who, in the Liberal tradition, argue in favor of strengthening international institutions, organizations and norms (Posen/Ross 1996/97, 24-26). The latter aspect, in particular, seems suited to help Washington achieve the improvement in international standing the U.S. public currently considers the most pressing foreign policy goal. In doing so, the new administration can make use of what Anne-Marie Slaughter, dean of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, which was chosen as the first woman to lead the state department’s office for strategic planning, described ‘United States’ unique ability to capitalize on connectivity.’ In a Foreign Affairs article published shortly before joining Hillary Clinton’s foreign policy team Slaughter thus declared ‘relative power’ as no longer important. Instead it is the United States’ ‘centrality in an increasingly dense global web’ which would ‘make the twenty-first century an American century (Slaughter 2009).’ Clinton’s phrase of ‘smart strategy’ and Slaughter’s praise of U.S. ‘connectivity’ nicely fall in line with the previous work of Joseph Nye who originally coined the term ‘soft power’. This he understood to be the capacity of an actor to influence the preferences of other actors through the ‘attractiveness of his ideas’ (Nye 1990). Interestingly, while admitting to prefer a President Hillary Clinton to deal with a ‘crisis with Iran’, Nye declared in November 2007 that an Obama victory ‘would

do more for America's soft power around the world than anything else we could do (quoted in Traub 2007).'

3.2. Middle East Policies

3.2.1. Israel

By granting his first interview as a sitting president to the Saudi owned pan-Arab satellite TV station Al-Arabiyya President Obama already indicated that the Middle East will feature prominently on his foreign policy agenda. Such signals are important insofar as the president's chances of having his policies implemented by Washington's vast foreign policy bureaucracy rest on his ability to clearly articulate his interests and priorities (Rockman 1997). In the interview, Obama praised the peace plan which then-Crown Prince Abdullah had launched in 2002. The explicit emphasis on the interconnectedness of the various conflicts in the Middle East constitutes a break with the Bush administration which has always rejected this view (Al Arabiya 2009).

A second major topic to emerge is summed up in Obama's stated intention to 'communicate the fact that the United States has a stake in the well-being of the Muslim world' and was willing to 'listen' (ibid). These words are following a theme established in Obama's inauguration speech in which he offered 'a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect' to the Muslim World (Obama 2009b). This attempt to speak directly to the Arab world is noteworthy as recent polls indicate that overwhelming majorities in Egypt (87%), Jordan (80%), the Palestinian territories (87%), and Morocco (78%) agree with the statement that the U.S. seeks 'to weaken and divide the Islamic world (World Public Opinion 2009).'

Given the fact that such sentiments represent an important recruitment tool to al Qaeda and other radical groups, Obama himself noted that after the election of someone with his background and personal style al Qaeda's leaders 'seem nervous' (Al Arabiya 2009).

On the specific issue of the Arab-Israeli conflict, President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton have both stressed their commitment to the security needs of the state of Israel (Clinton 2009). In fact, in a June 2008 speech given to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, Barack Obama criticized the Bush administration for having ignored the Israeli government's warnings about allowing Hamas to contest the 2006 Palestinian legislative council elections before it had renounced the use of violence and accepted existing agreements (Obama 2008b). In the same speech he committed himself not only to safeguarding Israel's security and Jewish identity, but also to a 'contiguous and cohesive' Palestinian state. He later qualified his controversial statement that 'Jerusalem must remain undivided (ibid).'

The 2009 Knesset elections constitute a setback for the Obama administration's efforts to more seriously engage in diplomatic efforts. Former U.S. ambassador to Israel and Obama campaign adviser, Daniel Kurtzer, publicly acknowledged that a unity government led by Likud and Kadima would have been much preferred from a U.S. administration's point of view (Mosgovaya 2009). In contrast to the ideological proximity between President Bush and Israeli Prime Minister Sharon, the Obama administration's efforts could easily resemble President Clinton's attempts to nudge the peace process forward against the reluctant Benjamin Netanyahu. Under these conditions, a rapprochement with Syria could constitute the smallest common denominator between the two governments. A peace deal with Syria that significantly improves Israel's strategic position would also be easier for Netanyahu to 'sell' domestically than any deal with a Palestinian side that is currently perceived even by long time 'Palestine first' proponents as unable to enter or even execute a comprehensive peace deal with Israel (Miller 2008). Hoping for the limiting effects such an agreement would have on Iran's capability to project power in the wider region, the Obama administration decided to send Daniel B. Shapiro, senior director at the National Security Council, and Jeffrey D. Feltman, acting assistant secretary for Near Eastern affairs, to Damascus (Landler 2009). Feltman's role is particularly interesting as his close involvement in the anti-Syrian 'Cedar revolution' as President Bush's U.S. ambassador to Lebanon is rumored to be linked to a 2005 terrorist attack on a U.S. embassy convoy which killed three civilian bystanders (Kessler 2009).

The one Middle Eastern issue where the Obama administration might be least dependent on regional actors is the withdrawal of combat troops from Iraq. The deadline which the president set for 31 August 2010 is just in time for the up-coming mid-term elections (Obama 2009a). Whereas Obama's Iraq plan is rather specific on the timeline for down-drawing the US military presence, some observers have criticized the lack of details about the political progress Iraq still has to make. In fact, neither human rights nor democracy are mentioned a single time in Obama's Iraq speech. Instead he made clear that:

'What we will not do is let the pursuit of the perfect stand in the way of achievable goals. We cannot rid Iraq of all who oppose America or sympathize with our adversaries. We cannot police Iraq's streets until they are completely safe, nor stay until Iraq's union is perfected. We cannot sustain indefinitely a commitment that has put a strain on our military, and will cost the American people nearly a trillion dollars (Obama 2009a).'

Reidar Visser thus sees in Obama's speech 'potentially a cover for US withdrawal from a damaged land that has been repaired much too shoddily (Visser 2009).'

When Barack Obama's election night offer of support to 'those who seek peace and security' did not mention those who might seek democratic reform (Obama 2008a) human rights activists in the Arab world and beyond who became worried that the Bush administration's policies might have discredited any attempt to bolster political reform in the Middle East (Diehl 2008). The concerns grew further when Secretary Clinton also failed to mention democracy and human rights as goals for U.S. Middle East policy in her confirmation hearing (Clinton 2009). In fact, as table 1 shows, the war in Iraq has led the U.S. public to be even more skeptical towards a foreign policy goal that has never really achieved much broad support anyway. This has led long time U.S. proponents of support for democratization to argue that

'(a) broad realist corrective (...) is not necessary. (...) Beyond the post-Bush cleanup, the forward direction for Obama on democracy support will be more about changing how his administration goes about supporting democracy abroad than about what emphasis to place on democracy relative to other interests (Carothers 2009, 6).'

In fact, Barack Obama's election posed a unique challenge to the Arab world's authoritarian regimes insofar as it highlighted the problematic topic of 'change'. In Egypt, 150,000 copies of an earlier version of a daily edition of the leading pro-government newspaper al-Ahram were withdrawn over objections to a cartoon that depicted an Egyptian woman congratulating Obama while adding 'Uqbal inna' ('May the same happen to us') (Kuttab 2008). Arab liberals could finally feel encouraged by Obama's statement in his inaugural address:

'To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist (Obama 2009b).'

These sentences feature in a letter to President Obama, jointly authored by members of various U.S. think tanks and academic institutions in which they argued that promoting 'democrats and democracy in the Middle East is not only in the region's interests, but in the United States' as well (Masmoudi/Hamid 2009).' Amongst the long list of signatories is also Neil Hicks of New York-based Human Rights First whose president, Michael Posner, was picked by Secretary Clinton to be the new assistant secretary for human rights, democracy and labour. Since this position has traditionally been involved in some infighting with the Near East bureau which tended to be more receptive to the wishes of pro-Western authoritarian Arab governments (Berger 2007) it remains an open question which bureau manages to convince the new secretary of state.

In order to preempt this debate from overshadowing the relationship between the old ruler in Cairo and the new president in Washington, the Mubarak regime decided in February 2009

to release Ayman Nour, his onetime challenger in the 2005 presidential elections who had been imprisoned on what are widely considered to be politically motivated charges (Berger 2007). In the context of Obama's nomination as the Democratic candidate for president in the summer of 2008, Nour had written an open letter from his prison cell in Cairo in which he appealed for his help: 'The writer of these lines is a human being, about your age, who was – and still is – dreaming like you of change and reform in this country. However, in our countries legitimate dreams turn into horrifying nightmares (Nour 2008).' It remains to be seen whether the Obama administration intends to raise the issue of fellow Egyptian human rights advocate Saad Eddin Ibrahim who had been sentenced by an Egyptian judge to two years in prison for 'harming Egypt's reputation' through writings in the 'foreign press' in August 2008. One particular cause of irritation for the Mubarak regime was an opinion article Ibrahim had published in the Washington Post in August 2007 in which he demanded that the United States should condition its military aid to Egypt on the improvement of Cairo's worsening human rights record (Knickmeyer 2008).

4. Conclusion

The Obama administration has already made clear through various public statements as well as the appointment of a string of high profile emissaries that it intends to invest considerable energy into diplomatic efforts in the broader Middle East. The widely acknowledged expertise of many principal players could help overcome the 'experience gap' previous administrations have suffered from in their early stages. However, the strong personalities that often go hand in hand with impressive diplomatic resumes significantly increase the potential for bureaucratic infighting. Here, much will depend on the ability of national security adviser James Jones to effectively channel and coordinate U.S. foreign and Middle East policies. Also, the experience of President Carter has shown that helping forge a peace agreement in the Middle East far from guarantees the reelection of an incumbent if overshadowed by a deteriorating U.S. economy and images of U.S. humiliation abroad.

The Obama administration has already made it clear that it offers a break with the unilateral, militarized strategic overreach of its predecessor. On the level of regional policies, the broad bipartisan consensus on the essential U.S. interests in the secure existence of the state of Israel and the free flow of reasonably priced oil to the global economy will continue to set the parameters of U.S. policy for the years to come. Yet, the fact that the White House has started off with a number of high-level executives in its foreign policy apparatus who are described as or accused of, depending on one's viewpoint, being rather open to the concerns

of the Palestinians and Arab countries could theoretically create more tensions with a Likud-led government than would have been the case under George W. Bush. Since these appointments are balanced out by others that went to those considered more open to Israeli concerns it seems hard to predict how close the relationship between the two new governments will ultimately be.

The ultimate irony of contemporary Middle East politics could be that the moment the U.S. returns to a pattern of more vigorous diplomatic engagement, the regional political landscape, in both Israel and Palestine, is shifting in such a way as to severely limit the chances of success. It remains to be seen whether the often invoked 'Syria option' might offer a way out of this predicament. On the one hand, a broader rapprochement with the West could undermine the stability of the minority Alawite regime in Damascus which has based its survival on a strong security apparatus legitimized by the conflict with Israel. On the other hand, both Jordan and Egypt provide 'role models' in how peace with Israel and a pro-Western foreign policy orientation can go hand in hand with strident domestic authoritarianism.

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