

# Challenges Facing the New President in the Broader Middle East

*A Symposium*

Muslim Studies Program  
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On November 12, 2008, students, scholars, and interested citizens convened in East Lansing to hear perspectives from an array of experts on the greater Middle East. This symposium, "Challenges Facing the Next President in the Middle East," was hosted by Michigan State University's (MSU) Muslim Studies Program with generous co-sponsorship by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) and the Association of Muslim Social Scientists of North America (AMSS). These challenges were discussed in relation to a variety of countries and issues, including the Taliban's rejuvenation and its impact on Pakistan and Afghanistan, Iranian aspirations for pre-eminence in the Gulf, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and political Islam. Speakers also highlighted the timeliness of such topics, given American leadership around the world and the contemporary global political climate. While participants had varying feelings on whether Obama would usher in considerable changes in foreign policy, a general consensus was reached that the nuance surrounding Middle Eastern issues demands more critical analyses if the usual oversimplifications are to be countered. By heeding the complexity of these challenges and analyzing them in their proper contexts, the potential for a positive transformation of American policy in the region can be achieved.

### *Why the Middle East?*

The conference began with Dr. Ian Gray (vice president for Research and Graduate Studies, Michigan State University), who emphasized the importance of scholarship on this topic by noting that "issues of the Muslim tradition are important ones at this time." He also stated that the time is quite appropriate for promoting intellectual coherence in Muslim studies. Professor Mohammed Ayoob (director, Muslim Studies Program) articulated five reasons why the Middle East, as a region, is significant: (1) given its singular role as the Muslim world's spiritual and political heartland (albeit not its demographic center), understanding its politics is essential to understanding politics throughout the Muslim world and (2) being the home of more than 60% of the world's proven oil reserves and 40% of its natural gas, it is strategically importance.

After identifying nuclear proliferation, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the phenomenon of political Islam as the remaining three reasons, Ayoob concluded by reviewing America's historical presence there to provide a backdrop to the following discussion on contemporary American policy in the region. This involvement rose in significance after World War II, when America assumed Britain's managerial role. This historical background and general overview contextualized the remarks on the challenges facing the Obama administration in relation to three regional issues (viz., political Islam, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the Iraq War) and to four states with differing yet somewhat tenuous relations with America (viz., Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia).

## *State-based Analyses*

Christine Fair (the RAND Corporation) followed this introduction with an analysis of what America faces in Pakistan and Afghanistan. First, she posited that Pakistan has a greater long-term importance and more relevance to American interests. However, the greatest problem of the American-Pakistani relationship, she noted, is that America has seemed unable to determine its interests in Pakistan with any clarity. For example, it went from reviling General Pervez Musharraf in 1999 to perceiving him as a vital agent in fighting the “war on terror” after 9/11. Fair criticized America’s ongoing aid to Pakistan, specifically the \$13 billion allocated to its military, because the desired results have not been forthcoming. Contrary to modernizing and developing a more pro-American opinion, the Pakistani military continues to rely on the Islamist factions to perform their work and remains a hotbed of anti-Americanism. Therefore, she maintained, much of the aid has not contributed to creating a more effective security apparatus, but has been squandered on a corrupt military. She also criticized American support for the military as precluding efforts to engage with Pakistani civilians directly, which she considers crucial to fostering more mutually beneficial relations between the two countries. In addition to advocating serious engagement with Pakistani civilians in order to promote democratization and American interests, Fair held that priority must be given to transforming America’s relations with the Pakistani military, given its role in breeding anti-American animosity.

Fair made a similar argument for a greater engagement with Afghans in order to improve American-Afghan relations. More specifically, she identified the Afghan Parliament as a critical actor that America has continued to neglect. Instead of engaging solely with people who do not have much credibility with the Afghan people (like President Hamid Karzai), engaging with more legitimate institutions could be far more effective. Finally, when hypothesizing about the level of American involvement in Afghanistan, Fair posited that it is an absolute certitude that more American troops will be sent to Afghanistan sometime in the future.

Dr. Ali Ansari (University of St. Andrews) began his analysis of Iran and American-Iranian relations by stating that the thirty-year history of mutual antagonism has allowed existing problems to fester. Underpinning his remarks was the argument that despite their political differences, both countries share a cultural affinity. He identified three factors behind these political tensions: (1) there has not been enough serious engagement on core issues; (2) America has not made adequate attempts to understand the perspectives of ordinary Iranians. For example, Americans tend to see nuclear proliferation as a legal issue, while many Iranians view it as an issue of legitimate national rights and pride; and (3) there has been a tragic mismatch in terms of one side being willing to engage while the other refuses.

Before presenting his recommendations on how to bridge the political divide, Ansari stated that overcoming this political impasse is essential because Iran is the region’s

linchpin (particularly in terms of the “war on terror”) and has an abundance of natural resources. He recommended that America wean itself off its dependence on hard power to accomplish its political objectives, and instead utilize a broader range of tools at its disposal, particularly soft power. In addition, he noted that engagement with Iran has become a domestic American political issue. Therefore, he argued for re-educating Americans about Iran so that they can see beyond the current essentialized view based on the 1979 Islamic revolution. The opposite should also be done to further develop the Iranians’ perception of America, to move beyond an oversimplification based upon the 1953 CIA-instigated overthrow of the democratically elected leader Mossadegh. Furthermore, he noted that greater awareness about Iran is essential among American policymakers, who often neglect to consider the country on its own merits and instead tend to perceive it solely based upon its involvement in tangential issues (such as Iranian support of Shia insurgencies in Iraq and elsewhere). Ansari concluded that the prevalence of jingoistic American policymakers have impeded efforts to foster meaningful engagement and that this must be overcome if ongoing political tensions are to be addressed in a serious manner.

In addition to Iran, Saudi Arabia is the region’s only other self-proclaimed Islamic state. And yet America’s relationship with Saudi Arabia contrasts starkly with its tense relationship with Iran. Joseph Kechichian (adjunct scholar, Middle East Institute) explained this American-Saudi relationship by means of concentrating on the role of terrorism and internal Saudi concerns. This long-standing alliance, predicated on the exchange of oil for the provision of security, has been challenged since 9/11. Looking to the Obama administration, he recommended that more engagement protocols be created to allow American intelligence agencies to benefit from the Saudi intelligence services, which have had to reckon with terrorism for a longer period of time. Kechichian concluded by stating that although an anti-Saudi industry is thriving in Washington, the necessity of Saudi Arabia and America accepting each other and proceeding with a more consequential engagement has perhaps never been greater.

## *Issues with Regional Implications: Regional Issues*

One issue of particular relevance to Saudi Arabia and most (if not all) other countries in the region is political Islam, which was the focus of the panel chaired by Dr. Farid Senzai (director of research, ISPU) with remarks made by Geneive Abdo (Century Foundation). Abdo reviewed different perspectives on the question of whether or not America should engage with proponents of political Islam, and if so, to what extent. She provided a rationale for the importance of this question by stressing the widespread ignorance on this topic found among laypeople and policymakers alike. Earlier in the conference, Ayoob had noted that political Islam's complexity and varied manifestations could be overshadowed by the current trend to essentialize this phenomenon and consider it to be the sole cause of the region's many challenges. Both experts also indicated that viewing political Islam as antithetical to American interests is a relatively recent phenomenon, given that American policymakers viewed Islamists positively during the height of the Cold war because they could counter the Soviet-leaning trend of Arab nationalism. Ayoob's remarks in support of debunking the myth of a monolithic political Islam lent an even greater urgency to Abdo's detailed analysis of America's relations with the many strands of political Islam.

One reason why America has been reluctant to engage with many Islamists is the continuing uncertainty about their objectives. While nascent efforts to engage appeared even during the Bush administration (which was marked by some informal talks with Islamists), America still hesitates to engage them fully, given various actions taken by some Islamists. For example, the Muslim Brotherhood, perhaps the quintessential Islamist movement, renounced violence to achieve its political objectives, indicated its support for democratization in Egypt, and has stated its willingness to participate in a more open political system if given the opportunity. This willingness was clearly demonstrated in 2007, when it released an extensive party platform, detailing for the first time its position on a variety of issues and the objectives it would seek if it were allowed to operate as a legitimate party. Yet this platform contained two highly controversial assertions: no woman or non-Muslim would be allowed to become president if the organization came to power, and a religious advisory board would be created to approve legislative measures. Abdo used this example to illustrate why America still questions the objectives of some Islamist organizations despite their renunciation of violence and self-proclaimed democratic leanings.

She also outlined three basic policy options available to the Obama administration: (1) no direct engagement whatsoever, (2) avoid direct engagement with Islamists and instead rely on the region's supposed moderate Muslim majority, and (3) support local NGOs to fortify democratic and economic development efforts. The latter two approaches, particularly the second strategy, were utilized during the Bush administration. Abdo, however, criticized that approach, which was embodied by public diplomacy efforts, as inherently flawed. Instead of fostering meaningful engagement or substantial policy change, Abdo deemed public diplomacy efforts as merely cosmetic attempts to address

deeper problems, which thus rendered them ineffective. In his opening remarks, Mohammed Ayoub also favored substantial policy change over superficial efforts.

Daniel Levy (Century Foundation) addressed a second regional issue: the seemingly ubiquitous Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Although he dealt with it in great detail, nearly all other speakers at least alluded to how this enduring conflict has had many widespread implications. Levy echoed the sentiment shared by many other experts that this conflict's importance is so great that it cannot be neglected. He identified several reasons for this fact, including the tremendous spillover effect produced by the conflict since its inception and the situation's continued deterioration. Levy also associated a particular sense of urgency with this problem by arguing that the possibility of realizing the two-state solution will disappear if it does not occur during the next administration, and that a two-state solution is the only durable outcome.

Levy and others reviewed the challenges facing the Obama administration vis-à-vis this essential issue. For example, Joseph Kechichian noted that general progress on the foreign policy front (including addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) may be impeded by more immediate concerns regarding the economy. From Levy's perspective, difficulties unique to addressing this conflict stem from the Annapolis peace process. According to him, the Obama administration will likely adhere to and attempt to implement it, acting under the impression that it could become newly effective if different personalities are involved. He argued that such an approach would be detrimental due to fundamental problems with Annapolis: namely, it relies on bi-lateral negotiations (as opposed to utilizing a third-party arbiter), the Palestinian representatives being engaged with have little legitimacy among the Palestinian people, and it provides no immediate solution to the ongoing occupations of Gaza and the West Bank.

In recommending a different approach, Levy identified four characteristics necessary to achieving a final resolution: the proposed solution would have to be comprehensive, utilize the Arab peace initiative, promote more American involvement, and encourage internal Palestinian reconciliation. Despite the myriad challenges to resolving this seemingly eternal conflict, Levy finished on a hopeful note: notwithstanding the great amount of hatemongering during this election cycle, American Jews voted overwhelmingly for Obama, thereby demonstrating their refusal to succumb to underhanded tactics. Therefore, Levy argued that a great potential exists to further tap this community and utilize it to produce a much-needed permanent resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Given this issue's centrality, such a solution could have positive effects on many other issues, including the situation in Iraq.

Iraq, the final regional issue discussed, was the focus of remarks made by Stephen Negus (Woodrow Wilson Center). According to him, the greatest challenge facing the Obama administration with respect to this issue is how to withdraw American troops without compromising, diminishing, or reversing the notable political and security-related progress that has been made. He then gave an overview of the current state of the Sunni insurgency and described the two trends within this broader movement: Al-Qaeda

proponents and their affiliates, and the rejectionists who oppose any post-invasion political reconciliation. Negus stated that the popularity of the Sunni insurgency among Iraqis is dwindling, thus providing an opportunity for a potential solution. This opportunity must be recognized and seized, for the insurgency is largely responsible for the ongoing attacks on civilians and political instability. Negus also articulated some positive results of the presence of American troops in Iraq, among them the curtailment of human rights violations and a decrease in violence in some respects. Still, he stated that this same presence often inflames nationalist sentiment and remains a powerful recruiting tool for the insurgents who perpetuate the violence. He also questioned the feasibility of maintaining the American military in Iraq for much longer, given its currently overstretched resources and the widespread support among both Americans and Iraqis for an immediate withdrawal.

Shibley Telhami (professor, University of Maryland and affiliated with the Brookings Institution) concluded the conference by highlighting the role of public opinion in the region and how it impacts America's ability to tackle regional issues and improve its image. He emphasized that anti-Americanism is more prevalent in the Middle East than anywhere else, but also stated that a distinction can be made between American credibility and favorability. Furthermore, he echoed the sentiments of previous speakers by highlighting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the region's core issue, followed by American-Iranian relations and the war in Iraq. His presentation explained how public opinion in the region can hinder or foster America's ability not only to address regional concerns, but also to improve its relations with particular regional states.

In conclusion, many speakers asserted that more meaningful engagement with several regional actors is necessary to establish a more effective American policy. Of particular importance is engagement with actors who have obtained a significant amount of credibility in the eyes of the people they are supposed to represent. The necessity of acknowledging public opinion to a greater extent, and considering it when forming policy toward the Middle East, was also emphasized. Furthermore, experts reiterated that substantial policy modifications, as opposed to merely surface-level attempts to do so, are needed to promote change. These general recommendations complemented the detailed discussions of regional issues and state-based relations and provided an overall strategy to help the Obama administration improve America's status in the Middle East.

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## About the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding

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The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) is an independent nonprofit think tank committed to education, research, and analysis of U.S. domestic and foreign policies issues, with an emphasis on topics related to the American Muslim community.

Since our inception in 2002, ISPU has built a solid reputation as an organization committed to objective, empirical research and continues to be a valuable source of information for policy makers, scholars, journalists and the general public. Our research aims to increase understanding of Muslims in the United States while also tackling the many policy issues facing all Americans. We provide cutting-edge analysis and policy recommendations through publications, conferences, government briefings and media commentary. ISPU firmly believes that optimal analysis and treatment of social issues mandates a comprehensive study from several different and diverse backgrounds. As social challenges become more complex and interwoven, ISPU is unique in its ability to bring this new approach to the human and social problems facing our country. Our multidisciplinary approach, in partnership with universities, think tanks and other research organizations serves to build understanding and effect lasting social change.

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