

POLICY BRIEF

Policy Brief #



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omy weighed down by recession. In addition, he is desperate to find savings in other areas to finance his big economic recovery projects and pay for increased spending on the Afghan-Pakistan conflict.

It was not surprising, therefore, that Obama has already decided to withdraw the bulk of American troops from Iraq by 2010 and end the military mission by 2011. But ending this mission will neither dramatically alter the regional landscape nor resolve America's security predicament in the Islamic world.

Similarly, political returns from a more active military engagement in Afghanistan and Pakistan will be limited and fraught with risks. As former great powers belatedly discovered, Afghanistan is a death trap that wrecked their imperial designs and bled them into decline. America must ultimately reduce its military involvement and rely on a region-wide formula to stabilize Afghanistan and help Pakistan achieve political and social stability.

The Obama national security team's recent pronouncements and actions show a recognition that America must court Iran and Pakistan to resolve the Afghan conflict and that there is no military solution in either Afghanistan or Pakistan, as Pentagon chiefs now publicly acknowledge. Given this reality, it is no wonder that the Obama administration has invited Iran to participate in a March conference designed to stabilize Afghanistan, a dramatic departure from his predecessor.

Although Obama still plans to send three or four additional brigades to Afghanistan, the newly emerging strategy stresses the need for active political engagement with the country's neighbors and internal opposition. Going much further than his national security team acknowledges, Obama said recently that the decision to deploy an additional 17,000 troops was one of the most difficult decisions of his presidency so far, and that America must have an exit strategy from that war-torn country, an explicit admission of America's costly mission and the limits of its power.

Obama's options in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan are sharply constrained by realities on the ground. Thus, it is perhaps unlikely that his vision, direction, and charisma will make a difference as regards accelerating the resolution of these difficult situations. But he is not likely to make them any worse, as his predecessor did.

The Game Changer: An Arab-Israeli Peace Settlement?

The Arab-Israeli peace process is where Obama's vision could make a pivotal difference in restoring America's power and prestige. But will Obama go for the game changer, helping to broker a comprehensive Arab-Israeli settlement and breaking the psychological barrier between Muslims and Jews and Muslims and Westerners? This is not to say that success is assured and risk is minimal. Led by Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel and its allies in America will resist fiercely any effort to create a viable Palestinian state.

Seeking to broker an Arab-Israeli peace is not wishful thinking or an academic exercise. Obama's senior informal advisers, particularly Daniel Kurtzer (a former American ambassador to Israel and Egypt) and Zbigniew Brzezinski (a former national security adviser) have reportedly told him that the time is ripe to broker an ambitious peace settlement between Arabs and Israelis in the first six to twelve months of his administration, while he enjoys maximum goodwill.

According to published reports, one of Kurtzer's policy papers argues that two new promising factors have changed the geostrategic regional landscape: (1) Sunni-based Arab states fear that as long as the Arab-Israeli conflict remains unresolved, Iran will tap into deepening popular grievances among their citizens and (2) the rise of militant

Islamism represents a threat to the stability of pro-Western Arab rulers.

Of course, these factors were pointed out before the recent Israeli elections, in which a right-wing collation won a majority of parliamentary seats. Netanyahu's election to the office of prime minister does not bode well for the peace process, because he opposes the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. This does not mean, however, that the Obama administration, if it musters the political will and capital, cannot exert pressure on Netanyahu and bring about a lasting solution to the festering Arab-Israeli conflict.

In a press conference at the end of March, Obama conceded that Netanyahu's rise to power complicates American efforts to help both camps reach a peace settlement. But he quickly added that resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict is more urgent than ever and that ending the suffering requires a vision based on a two-state solution.

Obama and Israel's Assault on Gaza

The bloodbath in Gaza seems to have reinforced Obama's conviction that time is of essence and that there is an urgent need to actively manage the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, if not help to resolve it immediately. He has made it clear that he will tackle the Middle East crisis and be actively involved in peacemaking.

Israel's blunder in Gaza might create a real opportunity for a breakthrough in century-long Middle East crisis. When the dust finally settled over Gaza, one would have hoped that once again Israeli leaders would have learned that there is no military solution to Israel's security dilemma. Although the Jewish state possesses military superiority over all its Arab neighbors and has often unleashed its American-made arsenal against them, it has neither broken the political will of its adversaries nor achieved long-term peace and stability.

In fact, Israel's brutal and disproportionate use of force in Lebanon (2006) and Gaza (2009) revealed the failure of its deterrence and the damage to its moral standing in the world. Killing large numbers of Palestinians and Arabs will not bring Israel security and will only deepen hatred for it among Arabs and Muslims.

Obama might have to save Israel despite itself.

After being initially quiet about Israel's assault on Gaza, the then president-elect Obama vowed to press immediately for peace in the Middle East and pursue a clear policy of engagement with Iran. Defending his reluctance to speak out on Israel's brutal offensive before his inauguration on 20 January, he said he was building a diplomatic team so that "on day one, we [will] have the best possible people who are going to be immediately engaged in the Middle East peace process as a whole." The team would "be engaging with all of the actors there" so that "both Israelis and Palestinians can meet their aspirations."

Pressed to elaborate further on his vision, he hinted at a peace settlement based on a two-state solution and whose broad contours - security for Israel and a viable state for the Palestinians - are widely accepted internationally: "I think that if you look not just at the Bush administration, but also what happened under the (Bill) Clinton administration, you are seeing the general outlines of an approach."

Three points are worth highlighting about Obama's "new approach." First, he confirmed that his administration will be actively engaged in trying to broker an Arab-Israeli peace settlement that meets the national aspirations of both people, not only of the Israelis.

Second, he stressed the need for political engagement “with all of the actors there,” including Iran, as opposed to exclusion and threats. He promised “a new emphasis on respect and a new emphasis on being willing to talk, but also clarity about what our bottom lines are.” Obama has systematically sought to reach out to Muslims, including friends and foes. His new constructive approach to Iran attests to that.

Finally, Obama's “belief that engagement is the place to start” suggests a clear departure from the Bush administration's hyper-militaristic stance and criminal neglect of the Arab-Israeli peace process. In terms of rhetoric, if not yet of substance, the Obama presidency represents a break with its predecessor.

Israel's assault on Gaza is a case in point. While Bush and his foreign policy team blindly and vocally supported Israel and egged it on against Hamas, Obama was more nuanced and viewed the crisis in broader terms. Although the president-elect said then that Israel had a clear right of self-defense, he qualified that statement by saying that he regrets the loss of civilian life and will take swift action to bring peace to the Middle East.

Of course, Obama should have criticized Israel's brutal and disproportionate use of force against noncombatants in Gaza and its violation of the laws of war. But his failure to do so must not obscure the fact he did not join the chorus of Senators and Congressmen who backed Israel's war unequivocally. While Obama did not publicly condemn Israel's brutalities in Gaza, neither did he voice any vocal support for it. This reluctance speaks volumes about his balanced sensibility in a political system that allows no dissent or criticism of the Jewish state, whether it is right or wrong.

As a seasoned politician, Obama must walk a fine line between his message of change and belief in political engagement and his support for Israel, which he has reiterated time and again. If the new president musters the political will to push a comprehensive peace settlement, he will find a lot of allies among Arabs and Israelis.

A sea change has occurred in the Arab world regarding peacemaking with the Jewish state. A consensus exists among Arab rulers that the solution lies in the land-for-peace-formula, which means that Israel must withdraw from the 1967 occupied Arab territories, including East Jerusalem, in return for diplomatic recognition by all Arab countries.

Interestingly, leading Israeli leaders have finally come to see the merits and benefits of the Arab peace plan advanced by Saudi Arabia at the 2002 Arab summit in Beirut. Although senior Labor and Kadima leaders have recently supported this plan, however, these very leaders waged a war to the bitter end against Hamas in Gaza. Obama's intervention will make a critical difference in swaying Israeli public opinion toward a settlement that gives Israelis security and Palestinians self-determination.

Will Obama Exert Pressure on Israel?

The truth is that without American presidential pressure, Israel, regardless of whether it is governed by the center or right or ultra-right, as seems likely, will not make the painful concessions (e.g., withdrawal of occupied Arab territories and dismantling most settlements) that are the prerequisites of a breakthrough.

Thus, the foreign policy team in charge of the Arab-Israeli portfolio is critical. With the exception of George Mitchell (Obama's special envoy to the Arab-Israeli theater) and James Jones (White House national security councilor), the lineup is not promising. The team is neither even-handed nor farsighted; in addition, it backs Israel blindly.

One would hope that Obama and Clinton will bring more balanced voices into the decision-making process. The fear is that the historically dominant Israeli narrative in American decision-making will continue to hinder Washington's ability to pursue an effective and balanced approach to the Arab-Israeli peace process. As long as Israel can veto American Middle East policy, no progress will occur on the peace front. So far, the Obama presidency has not shown a willingness to challenge the hegemonic Israeli policy narrative in Washington.

To achieve a breakthrough, Obama must maintain an independence of judgment, be willing to place considerable pressure upon Israel, and engage the pro-peace camp inside Israel and America. Israel is in the throes of an important debate about its relations with the Arab world. A few months ago, 500 former Israeli generals, diplomats, and senior security officials launched a campaign to "sell" the Arab peace plan to the Israeli public. In a full-page advertisement in the Israeli press, these senior officials, led by Major-General (ret) Danny Rothschild, urged their fellow Israelis not to "ignore a historic opportunity which a moderate Arab world presents us with." American presidential leadership would go a long way in fueling the debate in Israel and sustaining the pro-peace forces against the warmongers.

In its first seven years in office, the Bush administration neglected the peace process and spent its precious political capital on the global "war on terror" and "promoting democracy" in the Muslim world. The result has been catastrophic. Obama has vowed to change all that.

Although Obama's selection of Hilary Clinton as his top diplomat damped optimism in the Arab world about the prospect for peace, her foreign policy views are, in general, almost identical to his. Recently, she has expressed some of the strongest pro-Israeli views among American politicians. She was - and is - the darling of AIPAC and will likely make the case for Israel in the Obama cabinet. But one point must be made clear: Clinton is not opposed to a settlement based on a two-state solution. She will be a team player and carry out diligently whatever consensus is reached by the Obama administration.

The challenge facing the new president is will he lead and will his vision guide American foreign policy, or will his pro-Israel advisers and his narrow political instincts cloud and undermine his vision? There is a 50/50 percent chance either way.

On his visit to Israel and Palestine last year, Obama reportedly questioned President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli leaders about their views on the 2006 Arab peace initiative. "The Israelis would be crazy not to accept this initiative," Obama told Abbas according to *The Sunday Times of London*. "It would give them peace with the Muslim world from Indonesia to Morocco."

Kurtzer, Obama's senior adviser who accompanied him on his visit to the Middle East, and other aides have impressed on the president the urgency of making an immediate move to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. All that remains now is for Obama to act on their advice.

A bipartisan group of senior foreign policy heavyweights has also urged the new president to give the Arab initiative top priority immediately. These included Lee Hamilton (former co-chairman of the Iraq Study group), Brent Scowcroft (a Republican former national security adviser), and Brzezinski. Scowcroft said that an early start to the Palestinian peace process was "a way to psychologically change the mood in the region" - the most troublesome area in the world.

Europe has also urged Obama to act swiftly and warned that the moment was fast approaching when a two-state

solution would no longer be possible. The 27-member European Union has drawn up a document that calls upon Obama to give early attention to the Arab-Israeli conflict and saying that the EU offers to play a stabilizing role.

Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair expressed hope that Obama's administration will press hard and immediately for progress in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. In his capacity as the international envoy to the Middle East, Blair told a meeting of the Council on Foreign Relations in New York in early December that the time was right for a fresh push for progress. Much will be riding on what Obama does, he said: "The question is now -- what people will watch for -- is it taken forward with the requisite urgency and determination? I have every confidence that it will be."

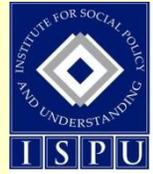
Indeed, Obama should immediately push for a broad Arab-Israeli settlement that would transform Arab and Muslim politics and America's relations with that part of the world. For many Arabs and Muslims, the Palestinian predicament is an identity (not just a political) issue. It is a bleeding psychological scar that has radicalized and militarized Arab politics. From Nasser to bin Laden, Palestine has been a rallying cry.

Israel is viewed as a Western fortress in Islam's heartland, and its occupation of Muslim lands is a constant reminder of European and, now, of American domination and subjugation of Arabs and Muslims. In particular, America is considered responsible for allowing Israel to oppress and humiliate the Palestinians. Deepening anti-American sentiments stem from simmering Arab-Israeli hostilities.

The risks Obama would take in following such a course are worth the possible rewards. An American-brokered Arab-Israeli solution and the establishment of a viable Palestinian state would facilitate America's political engagement with Iran and its decision to find a region-wide formula to stabilize Afghanistan and deal with the rising political extremism in Pakistan. But most important of all, a peace settlement will end the chronic suffering and agony of the Palestinians and bring lasting security to Israel.

Obama might even go down in history as the man who brought peace to the Holy Land. Will he have the moral courage to transform America's strategy in the Middle East? Only time will tell.

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