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“Obama and the Muslim World”

OBAMA AND THE MUSLIM WORLD

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In the past six months, several polling firms have asked citizens of the rest of the world about their preferences in the American presidential election. The consensus, perhaps unsurprisingly, is an overwhelming one. The Gallup World Poll found voters in 71 out of 73 countries preferred Barack Obama; the BBC found support for Obama in all of the 22 countries that it surveyed.

But recently, Obama’s support has been at its lowest in Arab and Islamic countries, where most respondents indicated that they expect American relations with the world to remain unchanged. Conventional wisdom among many Arab and Muslim commentators suggests that Obama’s foreign policy will be a continuation of the last eight years.

Obama’s Philosophical Foundation

This skepticism is unwarranted. The historic election of Barack Hussein Obama as America’s forty-fourth president will indeed inaugurate a sea change in America’s foreign policy, and nowhere more so than in the Middle East and the greater Muslim world, where his approach will differ radically from that of George W. Bush, in style as well as substance.

Obama is no nacist and, to be sure,

he will not turn American foreign policy away from defending perceived American interests in the region. But he possesses a deep commitment to dialogue and diplomacy – along with a healthy skepticism about wielding brute force to resolve differences and conflicts. “I’m not opposed to all wars,” he said in his now-famous 2002 speech against the invasion of Iraq. “I’m opposed to dumb wars.”

That same speech laid out a realist case against the war in Iraq, which Obama presciently predicted would “require a U.S. occupation of undetermined length, of undetermined cost, with undetermined consequences. I know that an invasion of Iraq without a clear rationale and without international support will fan the flames of the Middle East, and encourage the worst, rather than the best, impulses of the Arab world, and strengthen the recruitment arm of al Qaeda.”

There is a vast intellectual divide separating the Bush doctrine, which embraced preventive war against countries perceived to be potential threats, and Obama’s emphasis on partnership and multilateralism. Obama put it succinctly during a Democratic debate in 2007: “The Obama Doctrine is not going to be as doctrinaire as the Bush Doctrine because the world is complicated ... That means that if there are children in the Middle



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East who cannot read, that is a potential long-term danger to us. If China is polluting, then eventually that is going to reach our shores. We have to work with them cooperatively to solve their problems as well as ours.”

Styling his foreign policy leadership along the lines of JFK, Obama pleaded with Americans to turn the page on the politics of fear-mongering practiced by the Bush administration since Sept. 11, 2001 and pledged to engage politically with America’s foes. “I will meet not just with our friends, but with our enemies, because I remember what Kennedy said, that we should never negotiate out of fear, but we should never fear to negotiate,” stated Obama at the 2008 Congressional Black Caucus Democratic debate.

According to the young African-American senator, now more than ever diplomacy and engagement are critical to rebuilding “our alliances, repairing our relationships around the world, and actually making us more safe in the long term.”

By relying on hyper-militarism and shunning direct contacts with adversaries, argued Obama, the Bush administration has done considerable damage to America’s vital interests and standing in the world. Far from punishing rogue states like Iran, Syria, Venezuela, North Korea, and Cuba, Bush and vice resident Dick Cheney reinforced a

widely-held belief that “we stand above the rest of the world,” as well as above international norms and practices.

Asked more than a year ago during a debate with fellow Democratic presidential candidates if he would be willing to meet, without precondition, with the leaders of Iran, Syria, Venezuela, Cuba, and North Korea, he answered: “I would ... And the reason is this: the notion that somehow not talking to countries is punishment to them – which has been the guiding diplomatic principle of this administration – is ridiculous. Ronald Reagan constantly spoke to Soviet Union at a time when he called them an evil empire.”

A tête-à-tête with the loathed Mahmoud Ahmadinejad? Had Obama lost his mind? The rookie senator from Illinois had uttered the unthinkable, and many commentators claimed that his answer would swiftly unravel his presidential bid. We were told that the “ultraliberal” senator did not understand the national mood and underestimated American resolve to confront its enemies. The country of George W. Bush was not ready for appeasement.

Showing steel nerves, Obama reiterated his commitment to talk with America’s foes. As it turns out, neither pundits nor Obama’s opponents understood the country’s hunger for fundamental change in domestic and international politics.

Obama’s genius lies in nourishing that desire for a return to political realism, if not enlightened liberalism, in foreign affairs. Seven years after the onset of the costly global war on terror, America is in the mood for normalcy, military de-escalation, and diplomatic engagement. Americans now realize that their country’s foreign policy has been hijacked by a small group of ideologues and social engineers. Time and again Obama reminded Americans of the Bush legacy: tarnishing the country’s standing in the world and making more foes than friends.

Obama’s Foreign Policy Priorities in the Middle East

We can see Obama’s priorities by assessing four key issues facing his new administration: Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Palestine-Israel peace process, and Iran.

Iraq

In Iraq, Obama breaks with both Bush and McCain by insisting that the military’s new mission will be to bring the war in Iraq to an orderly end. Although his plan will leave a residual American force in Iraq, he has stated again and again that there will be no permanent military bases there.

The question is not whether he will disengage from Iraq, but how swiftly he can carry out his pledge. Obviously, Obama will face resistance from some in the

military – and perhaps even some of his own hawkish advisers – to delay withdrawal, backed by doomsday warnings about violence erupting after an American exit. Once he enters the White House, institutional pressures and constraints will complicate his expressed desire to end the war in Iraq.

But neither Obama nor America can afford to stay the Bush course in Iraq. For Obama it would be political suicide: his progressive base was energized by his opposition to the war, and those who voted in the primaries punished his rival Hillary Clinton for her vote authorizing the invasion.

Facing the greatest financial crisis since the Depression, America now spends \$10 billion a month in Iraq. Both Obama and his vice president Joe Biden have indicated their top priorities: to stabilize and strengthen the economy and to end the costly adventure in Iraq. Obama appealed to voters' economic anxieties by drawing a connection between financial stabilization and war spending.

“When it comes to keeping the country safe, we don't have to choose between retreating from the world and fighting and spending \$10 billion in Iraq while the Iraqi government sits on a huge surplus,” Obama said in a recent speech in Florida.

His vice president was even blunter and more direct: “Read

my lips. We will end the war and bring U.S. troops home,” Biden repeated again and again before rallies that rewarded him with standing ovations. On the eve of the election, Biden pledged yet again that “we will once again restore America's respect in the world. The first step is to end this war in Iraq. And we will do it responsibly.”

Afghanistan and Pakistan

Obama has already laid out his rationale for pulling out of Iraq: Afghanistan and the lawless tribal areas along the Afghan-Pakistan border, not Iraq, are the central front in the war on terror. But he has, at times, lumped the Taliban and al-Qa'eda together while calling for a shift in American resources to defeat them both.

There is a real danger that the Obama presidency, unless level-headed advisers prevail, could find itself embroiled in a prolonged and costly conflict in the Afghan-Pakistan theater.

Obama has said that he would send at least two additional combat brigades to Afghanistan and seek greater contributions (with fewer restrictions) from America's NATO allies. He also threatened to sanction counter-terrorism operations inside Pakistan if the Pakistani authorities do not secure their border with Afghanistan and crack down on terrorist camps. But one hopes that such declarations were intended to

demonstrate his toughness and resolve, rather than ironclad commitments: there is no military solution in Afghanistan or Pakistan, as Pentagon chiefs now acknowledge.

Al-Qa'eda has recently gained limited traction along Pakistan's border with Afghanistan by virtue of its close collaboration with the Taliban, who have recently deployed al-Qa'eda-style suicide attacks with deadly effect. But the conflict in Afghanistan and Pakistan is much broader and more complex, pitting a formidable Pashtun tribal coalition on both sides of the border against what they see as a foreign threat to their identity and way of life.

Regardless of their tactical success, American air strikes, which often cause civilian deaths, inflame Afghan nationalism and anti-American sentiments in the Pashtun region and cement the unholy alliance between the Taliban and foreign extremists. This has the potential to destabilize nuclear-armed Pakistan.

Ridding the Pashtun tribal lands of al-Qa'eda and other foreign fighters demands a region-wide political settlement and a negotiated agreement with the Pashtun tribes, which would likely bring the Taliban into government. In addition, this would likely result in the expulsion of al-Qa'eda and other foreign fighters.

To his credit, Obama recently offered a more complex strategy for stabilizing Afghanistan, one that addresses governance, political and economic security, education, and employment. He has pledged to assist the democratically elected government in Islamabad and “provide concrete solutions to the poverty and lack of education that exists.”

The risk facing both Kabul and Washington is that the Taliban, emboldened by recent successes, would likely reject a power-sharing arrangement and fight on, drawing a new Obama administration back into the labyrinth of Afghani tribal politics.

This multifaceted approach to Afghanistan should allow Obama to drive a wedge between the Pashtun tribes and al-Qaeda. In contrast to the Bush administration, which relied on force alone – and alienated Muslim opinion around the world – Obama will deploy America’s soft power and utilize political means to tackle bin Laden and reach out to Muslims.

Obama has said that one of his first initiatives will be to visit a pivotal Muslim country to make the case that America is not waging a war against Islam. In stark contrast to Bush’s Manichean worldview (in which you are “either with us or against us”), Obama’s style is to build genuine multilateral coalitions and work closely with Muslims

to arrest the proliferation of political violence and terrorism. He will emphasize civilizational dialogue and coexistence, religious tolerance, and inclusiveness.

Do not underestimate the symbolic power of Obama’s personal appeal to the Muslim world. President Obama, an African American with Muslim ancestry, will shatter widespread stereotypes about America. A visit by Obama to Cairo, Tehran, or Jakarta would send a powerful message resonating across the Arab world among those who feel that America still sees them as the enemy.

The Palestine-Israel Peace Process

Obama knows that he needs to offer more than lofty and uplifting rhetoric to repair broken bridges of trust with Muslims. Taking a jab at his predecessor, he has pledged to move swiftly after inauguration to broker a Palestine-Israel peace settlement based on two viable states living side-by-side in peace. He has made it clear that he will be directly involved and invest some of his presidential political capital to help engineer a breakthrough.

Much ink has been spilled on Obama’s speech before AIPAC last June, in which he sought to show his unwavering commitment to Israel’s security: “Our job is to do more than lay out another road map; our job is to rebuild the road to real peace

and lasting security throughout the region. That effort begins with a clear and strong commitment to the security of Israel: our strongest ally in the region and its only established democracy.”

There is no denying that Obama accepts the dominant American narrative on Israel as a special ally. He has labored hard to dispel suspicions and innuendos spread by Zionist hardliners and the religious right that he is sympathetic to the Palestinians and is no friend of Israel.

The stance of the Obama presidency on Palestine-Israel will resemble the Clinton administration’s. In fact, some of the same players, mainly liberal Zionists like Denis Ross, may be in charge of this sensitive portfolio. One would hope that they have learned a lesson or two from Clinton’s inability to conclude a deal.

At Taba, with the explicit support of Clinton’s advisers, Palestinian and Israeli negotiators agreed on the specific contours of a peace settlement. The new Obama administration could launch another serious bid to bring Palestinians and Israelis together. He appears willing and committed to advancing the peace process, but the odds are still long. The powerful Likud lobby will keep Obama’s feet to the fire, and it is unlikely that he will even attempt a move on the peace process until Palestinians

and Israelis resolve their own leadership crises.

Iran

There is also a real potential for a breakthrough in American-Iranian relations: Obama has not only proposed direct high-level contacts, but also the normalization of diplomatic relations. The Obama administration has stated a willingness to recognize Iran's rising role as a regional superpower – if the Iranian government “abandons its nuclear program and support for terrorism.”

Those are tempting offers to Tehran after years of fierce struggle with Washington. But the ruling mullahs are masters of bazaar bargaining and negotiation. They are fully aware that America needs their assistance to exit Iraq without triggering genocide and further turmoil and chaos. As in Afghanistan, normalizing relations with Iran will require a region-wide strategy to resolve the multiple conflicts still simmering: it will take time, effort, and a prolonged commitment by Obama to shepherd the process to its conclusion.

Will Obama be able to overcome all of these foreign policy challenges while putting America's economic house in order? Will he be able to navigate the minefield of institutional pressures, constraints, and

powerful lobbies he will face after taking the oath of office? There is good reason to believe that he may, backed by the American public's delivery of a landslide victory and an overwhelming repudiation of the policies of Bush and McCain, thus showing that Americans are intent upon returning their country to the position of global leadership it methodically surrendered over the past eight years.

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