



After Cairo and Iran: Next Steps for US Diplomacy in the Middle East

Executive Summary

Among the many issues and recommendations to the Obama administration contained in the policy paper, the key ones are:

- Continue engagement with Iran and the President's initial policy favoring dialogue, but do not do so in as outward and public a manner as was anticipated before the elections there, with initial contacts preferably being private and secret. (There is a dissent on this recommendation).
- Reassess the policy of engagement with Iran to take into account the possibility of the failure of dialogue.
- Move ahead to actual Israeli-Palestinian negotiations as soon as possible, dealing quickly with preliminary matters such as settlements and incitement.
- Consider the role of Hamas and the current impasse over Gaza.
- Sponsor Track Two discussions between Arabs and Israelis on the Arab Peace Initiative and on specific issues in dispute such as Jerusalem, refugees, etc.
- Guide the parties to move directly from phase one of the roadmap to phase three – convening an international conference and moving to final status negotiations. Skip phase two, the negotiation of a provisional state, because it is a controversial and time-consuming step that will block rather than promote further progress.
- Pursue the Syrian-Israeli channel simultaneously with Israeli negotiations with the Palestinians. Encourage continued Turkish sponsorship, but become involved with support and backing.
- Remain involved in the politics and stabilization of Iraq even as we continue to withdraw. Failure to pay sufficient attention will mean a greater chance of deterioration there, will weaken the entire US Middle East policy, and complicate the new approach to Iran.
- North Korea has important Middle East ramifications; if it continues to pursue its nuclear program, it can cause serious problems in the region through arms sales and becoming a model for those like Iran who seek nuclear weapons of their own.

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The Cairo Speech

We believe the President's Cairo speech was an outstanding framework for a new American policy. Indeed, historically speaking it provided the best outline of a regional approach to the Middle East by an American President ever. This strategy requires a broad regional effort and the implementation of a host of issues, often interrelated. To be fully implemented, it requires a series of policies on a host of interrelated issues.

We have reviewed the various elements of the President's policy as it is evolving, and provide below our suggestions for improvements or new approaches where we deem them necessary. We have also indicated where we think the Obama administration is moving in the right direction.

Iran

The two pillars of Obama's policy are engaging Iran and resolving the Arab-Israeli dispute, but the Iranian approach is particularly critical. According to the original theory, a dialogue with Iran that resulted in agreements on major issues such as the prospective Iranian nuclear force and Iran's support for terrorism would make most of the other major Mideast objectives of the Obama administration more achievable. It would facilitate Arab-Israeli negotiations because it would be expected that Hamas would not have the same kind of material support from Iran as it is currently receiving. Hezbollah would potentially be less likely to confront Israel. Iran would be expected to aid in enhancing the stabilization of Iraq and Afghanistan. The United States and Iran clearly have common interests vis-à-vis Afghanistan and Pakistan, in particular, as well as in a modicum of stability in Iraq.

The re-emergence of Iran as a major regional power over the last decade made the policy of engagement logical and imperative. We strongly support that approach, but the crisis in Iran has complicated this policy. Prior to the election, we were prepared to advocate a program in which the United States would make a series of positive public statements with an emphasis on carrots leading up to secret or public negotiations. We strongly urged the United States not to emphasize the fact that failure to cooperate with Washington would lead to enhanced sanctions or even the consideration of starker options. The President has given a signal that he would reassess his Iran policy by the end of the year, but presumably if talks were proceeding smoothly there would still be time to continue these efforts. Threats of intensified sanctions were not necessary; the Iranians were well aware that they would be forthcoming if talks failed. As we will explain below, with modifications, we see no reason to change this set of recommendations.

Obama's policies were predicated on a smooth election in which one of the major candidates was selected. Instead, of course, Iran was thrown into disarray by the disputed election. It is clear that President Obama avoided directly involving the United

States in the election protests. First, he was clearly trying to avoid even the appearance that the United States was involved in organizing the protests so as not to further jeopardize the opposition. Second, President Obama sought to avoid overly criticizing the current Iranian government because of the significance of some kind of engagement with Iran. The goal was to maintain a position where he could talk with any government that emerged in Iran after the crisis had ended.

This policy became more difficult as the Iranian crisis proceeded. As an election dispute turned into a government oppressing its people, President Obama had no choice but to speak out against the Iranian government's actions. Despite the President's interest in maintaining an option for discussion with Iran in an open and visible format for the world to see, both the Supreme Leader and President Ahmadinejad accused Obama of interfering in domestic Iranian politics anyway.

In light of all these developments, President Obama will not be able to conduct an engagement with Iran as deeply, thoroughly, or quickly as he might have hoped. Given the likelihood that the current leadership will remain in power, it will be difficult to reengage with the Iranians in as outward and public a manner as might have been anticipated.

We still believe that the President should pursue a policy of engagement given the dire consequences of failing to move on a fresh approach. However, we strongly advise that the initial contacts be more private and secret than would have been anticipated originally. It may also be necessary to rely on Track Two in which participants acting in their private capacity have the support of their respective governments to talk, but not to negotiate. As a means of setting the stage for greater mutual involvement and understanding Track Two is more important now than would have been the case originally.

The administration must pursue a consistent policy toward Iran that makes it clear that the United States is prepared to talk with any government in power, given the perils precipitated by Iran's development of a nuclear force, its support of terrorism, and its more aggressive foreign policy in recent years. At the same time, given American values and human decency, we are also obligated to oppose the Iranian government's oppression of its people. Therefore, President Obama has taken just the right combination of caution and firmness. He has admirably presented the United States as prepared for serious engagement and negotiations, while making our opposition to the Iranian government's treatment of its people clear and firm.

It is difficult to conceive of a comprehensive breakthrough with Iran under the present circumstances, but it is still possible for the President to offer a new vision of a different relationship than we have now. Yet Iran's leaders may not be prepared to accept American overtures, especially if they are combined with criticism of the treatment by the government of its people. Therefore, it would be useful for the administration to begin to think of the possibility of failure of dialogue with Iran and what that might imply

for the future of its policy in the region. That reassessment should be performed quietly and out of the public eye, and for all we know it has already begun.

It may be that in the end the U.S. will have no choice but to give up on dialogue in light of the fact that Washington cannot simply pursue fruitless talks while the Iranians move ever closer to completing development of a nuclear force of their own. No matter how the Obama policy emerges, any future options pursued will have a stronger possibility of success if the Obama administration has first tried accommodation, even with Ayatollah Khomeini and President Ahmadinejad.

Arab-Israeli Conflict

We applaud the new vitality in the American approach to the Arab-Israeli dispute under the Obama administration. In particular, the appointment of Special Envoy Mitchell, and the team he has assembled, is very encouraging.

Settlements, Violence, and Incitement

We believe that it was worthwhile to begin the process of supporting peace efforts with a demand for freezing Israeli settlements in the West Bank as a dramatic initial step. Indeed, the approach has already compelled Prime Minister Netanyahu to acknowledge Israel's long-standing commitment to accepting the idea of a two-state solution and offering some compromise on the settlement issue by the new Israeli government, however halting.

On settlements, a freeze can be interpreted in many different ways. Several successive American administrations have a long and frustrating history of attempting to conclude with Israel a definition of what a freeze constitutes. Typical questions include defining what precisely stopping construction means, or whether a freeze includes buildings in progress or additions to existing houses. This administration in general, and Special Envoy Mitchell specifically, have handled this issue well and are clearly making some progress.

It is also worth taking into account that if the Israeli commitment to remove almost 100 illegal outputs is fulfilled, the images of Israeli soldiers taking settlers out of their homes will not only impact Israeli politics, but would indicate to the region that Obama means business and is convincing Netanyahu to take unprecedented steps.

While the President must seek some visible movement on settlements quickly, he must also pressure the Palestinians so that his moves do not appear one-sided and so that he can progress as quickly as possible to a situation in which Palestinian-Israeli progress is being made. In particular, the important work of General Dayton in training new and effective security forces must move forward as quickly as possible and the Palestinian Authority must be pressed to enhance the limit on violence against Israelis. As of now, violence from the West Bank may be down, but an atmosphere of constant possible attacks against Israelis remains. The continued incitement on the Palestinian

side against Israelis is another related issue that needs to be addressed quickly, thoroughly, and as vehemently in public as it has been in private.

Israelis, justifiably, require confidence in both Palestinian and Arab negotiating partners. It is also imperative that the administration gain Arab state involvement in the new process. The President did indicate in his Cairo speech that as important as the Arab Peace Initiative is, there must also be specific attempts by Arab states to facilitate negotiations. As the process progresses, some examples might include (1) their own engagement, (2) funds provided to the process, particularly to the Palestinians, (3) confidence-building measures toward the Israelis such as EI Al over flight rights, trade steps with Israel, or the establishment or resumption of Israeli offices in Arab capitals. An additional confidence building measure would be an Arab oriented program of public relations outreach, not just in Israel but in the Arab capitals. If regional peace is being discussed on opinion pages and in the local media of the Arab world as something desirable and attainable, this will gain Israeli attention, and vice versa.

We believe strongly that neither the settlement nor the incitement issue should become the focus of negotiations. The President cannot be stuck on these issues indefinitely. At some point, probably by mid-fall, the administration must move beyond settlements and incitement and toward the next stage. It must be clear to the parties that they will have even more problems later with the US if they cannot even cooperate satisfactorily on the initial effort.

Negotiate Now

What we have described so far are all important, if largely symbolic steps, but if the administration's efforts toward both Arabs and Israelis are to have any chance of success, it is critical to move as quickly as possible toward actual negotiations. While Netanyahu has repeatedly offered immediate talks, Mahmoud Abbas has said he will not resume official discussions until the construction of settlements is halted. The administration must focus, and fairly quickly, on getting over the immediate hurdles to begin actual talks.

Palestinian Authority-Hamas Split

Of course, a further major stumbling block to effective negotiations is the split between Hamas and the PA. The President's speech hinted at a novel approach to Hamas and we recommend exploring new diplomatic possibilities through secret talks or through the use of the Arab quartet. The United States cannot enter the process of negotiations without considering the role of Hamas, the current impasse over Gaza, the continued incarceration of Gilad Shalit, and the issue of Gazan trade and the district's connection to the outside world, especially Egypt, Israel, and the West Bank. It may be necessary initially to pursue negotiations focused only on the PA, but if the current internal Palestinian split is not overcome, talks of some kind will have to be conducted with an eye to stabilizing the Gaza issue, perhaps with a long-term ceasefire, and the return of an acceptable number of Palestinian prisoners and Gilad Shalit. Needless to say, Gaza

is an extremely difficult issue to address, but that task is essential if the kind of progress on the Israeli-Palestinian front the President seeks is to be achieved.

Arab States' Role and the Arab Peace Initiative

Among the Arab states, Saudi Arabia and Egypt will be key to advancing the process. For Saudis and much of the rest of the Arab world the key to drawing them into the process is Jerusalem. It may be the thorniest issue, and therefore the impulse will be to leave it for last. This would be a mistake. The groundwork for dealing with Jerusalem should begin now. The Saudis seek to ensure access to the Haram-el-Sharif or Temple Mount without passing through Israeli checkpoints. Acknowledging this objective in the next Obama speech whenever it may come will be helpful in framing the issue and preparing all sides for the difficult negotiations ahead. And it may create momentum for Arab states to become involved and more helpful with persuading Arab negotiators with Israel to make concessions and for several Arab states to accept the kinds of confidence-building measures suggested above.

The administration should also sponsor Track Two discussions between Israelis and Arabs on the Arab Peace Initiative. The Arab League has now tabled the proposal twice without an official Israeli response. It was a serious proposal; indeed the first of its kind; it should not be readily dismissed or ignored. Israelis and Arabs should explore where this proposal might lead. Meetings could be limited to a small but well-connected group of experts who would join together in mutually acceptable settings, possibly including American or European facilitators or mediators. Of course, were Israel and/or Saudi Arabia to be a venue, that in and of itself would constitute a confidence-building measure. The goal would be to create momentum for the peace process by convincing both publics and officials that there are reasonable prospects for implementing the Arab Peace Initiative in a way that promotes success and convinces even skeptics that the process can be successful.

As a Track Two initiative, this idea fits into the category of a trial balloon instead of binding negotiations, while simultaneously recognizing the Arab League for its initiative. An alternative might be to broaden and deepen the Arab Peace Initiative to encompass the idea of King Abdullah of Jordan – a 57 Arab/Muslim state peace initiative with Israel in which some of the Muslim states outside of the region would contribute to confidence building measures and to negotiations, resulting in the end in the recognition of Israel by most if not all Muslim states. So rather than an Arab state carrying the water on Israel, it could be a country like Indonesia possibly joined by Arab states. This idea would comport with Obama's outreach to the Muslim world.

Amend The Road Map

It should not be forgotten that whatever the prospects for these longer-term ideas, the road map itself offers a series of steps that could be taken to provide a framework for advances. In phase one, there are confidence-building measures demanded on both sides, which include an end to Palestinian violence against Israelis, Palestinian reform,

an end to illegal settlements in the West Bank, and an Israeli settlement freeze. Many of these acts have either been taken or are in the process of being pursued. Assuming that there is progress on the incitement and settlement issues, we believe that there has been sufficient progress in phase one so that we can now move on.

In any case, it is a mistake to become preoccupied with the individual stages of the road map, which are to some extent out of date in the current setting. The important point is that because of some progress on phase one, it is time to skip over the second phase of the roadmap that called for a “provisional state” with temporary borders. It has now become anathema to the Palestinians, and will only waste time and effort. Instead, the US should guide the parties in moving directly to phase three, where an international conference should be convened as called for in the road map. In subsequent negotiations, the parties should try for permanent borders except for Jerusalem which would be left in the hands of a special international negotiating committee, the preparations of which would occur in the Track Two process mentioned above. The same conference in phase three should be reconvened when the administration concludes that the parties are ready to hammer out the rest of the issues. It is worth noting that this is a recurring promise, in the old and aborted Geneva Conference model from 1974, discussed again in 1977, in the Madrid model of 1991, and in the Geneva exercise earlier this decade.

Syria

In this discussion, we have stressed the Palestinian-Israeli relationship, but Syria cannot be ignored. Problems separating Israel and Syria are deep, and involve both the Golan and Syria’s new role in the region after a peace treaty. The recent trip by Special Envoy Mitchell to Damascus and the moderates’ victory in recent Lebanese elections both provide a basis for engaging with Syria on the Israeli-Syrian issue as well as on the problem of Iraq, and the overall US-Syrian relationship, and that process has begun. The US has also recently announced it will return its Ambassador to Damascus.

Turkey is prepared to resume mediation of talks where they left off last year, and some parties believe that the two sides were not as far apart as might be assumed. The United States should work closely with Ankara on this process, and encourage Netanyahu not to miss this opening to achieve a real breakthrough on the northern front.

Considering all of these factors, we urge the administration to implement the road map on the Palestinian front and to pursue the Syrian channel simultaneously. Because of the plethora of American engagements in the region, it would be easier to move on the Syrian track through the auspices of the Turkish government. We do not accept the notion that only one issue can be addressed at a time in Israeli-Arab negotiations.

Iraq

We have considered in great detail the current situation in Iraq. What we find is disturbing. We certainly support the Obama administration's efforts to reduce the American footprint in Iraq, leading to the end of an American combat role and ultimately America's departure. We support the accomplishment of this objective as soon as possible.

Yet in order for the United States to be successful in its departure, it must remain involved in the politics and stabilization of the country. That has not been happening as Iraq has been treated as an old problem that is on the way to being concluded.

The current increase in violence in Iraq suggests how fragile recent gains are and how easily the country could return to a form of civil war and chaos. President Bush was often faulted for calling Prime Minister Maliki of Iraq too often. President Obama never calls him and has shown a significantly reduced interest in the problems of the country. That approach may be adequate as long as the President's (and Vice President's) continuing concern is publicly apparent.

If the Obama administration finds itself in a situation where Iraq is seriously deteriorating, not only will it threaten the entire Middle East policy of the President, but it will weaken the United States, Israel, and the Arab states in the region and strengthen Iran, making those negotiations should they transpire more difficult.

North Korea

It is also worth noting that the North Korean crisis has important Middle East ramifications. To the extent that the North Koreans remain out of control and continue on their nuclear path, they will be free to continue to supply weapons and even nuclear instruments as they have in the past to such countries as Iran and Syria. Such behavior will undoubtedly result in a deterioration of the Middle East situation. More important, perhaps, the failure of the United States to handle North Korea will be seen throughout the Middle East as an indication that the Obama administration is unlikely to be able to deal with Tehran. Meanwhile, Iran itself will be strengthened in its nuclear ambitions given the North Korean experience.

Conclusion

After giving major speeches in Turkey and Egypt on the Middle East, President Obama has established his ownership of the issue. Now the region will be looking to see if the President has the wherewithal to deliver the goods. This challenge includes keeping the momentum going forward on almost a daily basis with practical steps and leadership. The region is now testing the President. Countries will not act unless they are sure the United States is committed at the highest level to sustained involvement. One action the President could take is to begin preparing for his next major Middle East speech now, and develop a detailed plan on concrete steps that can be completed in the interim. He needs to create a "peace process momentum plan." That speech must lay out specific

actions the Israelis, Palestinians, and Arabs must take to improve the atmosphere in which the Israeli-Palestinian dispute will be resolved.

The President in his Cairo speech enunciated an admirable holistic approach to the Middle East, recognizing the interrelationship between a great many issues. This is a brave and courageous policy. We strongly support it. But in attempting to implement that policy, we see successes and problems. Success in persuading the new Israeli Prime Minister to support a two-state solution and to begin to compromise on a settlement freeze; success in expressing American interests in a two-state solution; success in reaffirming the strong and unbreakable ties with Israel; success in expressing American understanding of the Palestinian plight; success in enunciating the strong interests of the United States in improving relations with Iran; success in demonstrating to the Islamic world and the Arab states in particular that the United States means business in its determination to bring about moves toward Arab-Israeli peace.

On the other hand, we see dangerous signs, most clearly in the problems with continued engagement with Iran, in the Iraq theater, in the North Korean impact on the Middle East, and in the difficulties of attempting to bring both Israelis and Arabs on-board to the ambitious and comprehensive path on which the administration has embarked. A regional strategy in the Middle East is so rarely attempted by American presidents because it is so difficult. With the myriad of problems which the President faces at home and abroad, his effort is certainly admirable. We believe that with the fine-tuning which we have recommended here, the President's prospects for success will be considerably enhanced.

Alternative Strategies: A Partial Dissent

Without a doubt, President Obama must pursue a Middle East policy that is integrated and related. The many regional issues facing this administration require an approach that takes into account the relationship between success or failure in one area and success or failure elsewhere. While we agree with many aspects of the above policy paper, we cannot concur with the recommendations on Iran, nor fully on the Arab-Israel front.

Iran

What appears to be happening in Iran is the return of the Shah, or monarchy, in clerical garb. It is SAVAK all over again and it is unlikely that dialogue can do anything to change the course of history in the absence of a unified global opposition to the self-sustaining security/political/clerical apparatus existent in Iran. The Revolutionary Guard is not going quietly and will not give up their privileges easily. Religion is no longer the dominating force: guns, arrests, and the reins of power are.

The evolving leadership in Iran will be far less likely to open up to the West or to the US since it sees the forces that we represent as being inimical to their hold on power. So, while the US needs to keep a door open for the future, we should not kid ourselves with wishful thinking. What is happening in Iran will only reinforce those in Hamas and Hezbollah who believe that they have to maintain an iron grip on power and that their greatest vulnerability is the West and what the West stands for.

A policy of accommodation is the least likely policy to succeed. We face a period in which there may be very little that we can do with Iran for some time to come. In that case we should be using this time to focus on China, Russia and the Europeans to build a solid coalition against nuclear proliferation and the terrorism that Ahmadinejad and the current regime represents. We need a coherent policy that can be sold in the broader international community, as well as at home. And, we need a policy that Israel can buy into.

Ahmadinejad's Achilles heel is his mismanagement of the economy and the similarity of his tactics to those of the Shah. We need to focus on these failings and amplify them. Indeed, this is the time to move for enhanced sanctions targeted on the forces of repression in Iran. This is also time to vigorously identify the forces of repression with the ancien régime. It is time to stop our love affair with the Shah.

It is also time to solidify the unity of the Gulf states in opposition, not to Iran, but to the Revolutionary Guard and what it stands for. The Gulf states need to engage in active economic diplomacy to assure that China will not suffer if it stands against the current regime in Iran. We have to change the character of the debate from one of a fear of democracy to a rejection of repression.

In sum, the situation has changed sufficiently so that we need to reconsider our recommendations. The premises on which the above recommendations are based and the conclusions reached with regard to Iran do not seem relevant today. While Track Two may make sense, the key component of such an approach depends on who is representing Iran. If Ahmadinejad has a veto hold over who participates in formal or informal negotiations, then we are only strengthening him and the elements he represents. A recent effort this winter to engage the Iranian Foreign Ministry was cancelled by Ahmadinejad because he wanted to dictate the players. Continuing to hold out a vision of a different relationship still makes sense, particularly with respect to convincing the international community of our sincerity. But, we have reached the point where being the suitor has taken on the appearance of weakness, when what is needed is the reality of strong leadership.

Arab-Israeli Conflict

There is general agreement with this section. However, some of us who have worked with Netanyahu on the settlements issue, know first hand that unless Netanyahu wants a fundamental change in Israeli policy and is willing to alienate his core constituency, he will find a million ways, both legal and illegal, to undercut our case. The risk is apparent; putting too many eggs in the settlements basket and not enough in the basket to improve life for the Palestinians. That is where Netanyahu has already signaled that he has flexibility.

While the pressure on the settlement issue can be maintained, we should not get bogged down in trying to decide natural birth vs. a cousin or a visitor. This is an area where we can link the policies - a better life and movement back to sincere negotiations means less pressure on your sore spot - the settlers. By contrast, linking the Jerusalem problem to the refugee issue needs to be explained more clearly. One of the failings of Camp David II was the attempt to link trade-offs on the issues of Jerusalem and refugees. They are totally different with entirely different constituencies. Finally, the above paper does not deal adequately with the Palestinian problem of Hamas. While we can see the linkage to Iran, it seems to us that this part of the paper deserves to stand on its own, perhaps after some more focused discussion.

Conclusion

There is nothing in the paper as originally drafted with which we would take exception. And we would willingly sign on to its text. This addendum is meant to explore an alternative strategy, which may take on more relevance as time goes on. We agree that the testing process should continue for now and that the US should hold open the door if only because most of those we would want to align with us in a more rigorous approach are not yet convinced that the Iranian regime is resolute in its opposition to any moderation of its policy. But if the Iranian regime remains intransigent, then we will need to move along a different path, and this is what this addendum is meant to suggest.

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Titles are listed for identification purposes only.

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