

PolicyWatch #1423 : Special Forum Report

The New President and the Middle East: From Campaigning to Governing

Featuring [Patrick Clawson](#) and [David Makovsky](#)
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On November 6, Robert Satloff, Patrick Clawson, and David Makovsky addressed a Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute. Dr. Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, Dr. Clawson is the Institute's deputy director for research, and Mr. Makovsky is the director of the Institute's Project on the Middle East Peace Process. The following is a rapporteur's summary of Dr. Clawson and Mr. Makovsky's remarks; Dr. Satloff's were released as [PolicyWatch #1424](#).

Patrick Clawson

President-elect Obama has stated that the large-scale U.S. presence in Iraq has allowed Iraqis to avoid dealing with their problems and building the appropriate capacity to cope with the issues facing their country. He has also worried that this presence feeds nationalist resentments, thereby exacerbating the situation.

When Obama made this argument with respect to the 2007 U.S. military "surge," circumstances were different, and indeed the surge proved necessary to achieve security. His position, however, regarding the current problem of slow political progress may well be on target. Iraqi politicians have taken far too long to make important decisions about the budget, provincial elections, the oil law, the future of Kirkuk, and the status-of-forces agreement with the United States. Perhaps if Washington wielded both the "stick" of rapid withdrawal and the "carrot" of sustained commitment, progress will quicken. Obama repeatedly has said that if Iraqis do more to resolve their problems, the United States will do more to help them.

The Obama strategy offers the hope that Iraqi politicians will be motivated to deal with their country's problems, especially since there is a strong common will across Iraq's political spectrum to solve these issues. The large risk of this policy, however, is that Iraq could slip back into instability and that Iran could end up dominating Iraq.

Iran, on the other hand, presents a different set of challenges. A major U.S. effort to engage Iran is inevitable, primarily because the United States must reverse the common perception -- in the United States and around the world -- that Washington is at fault for the lack of progress on the Iran front. The United States is going to have to make a major effort to show that it is prepared to walk the extra mile for compromise. Washington has not been able to secure support for greater sticks against Iran; it can only gather such support if it is seen as also offering carrots. In other words, on the Iran nuclear issue, carrots are the only way to get to sticks.

Engaging Iran will be a challenge for several reasons. U.S. diplomatic efforts could backfire and feed deep-seated suspicions, as they did in 1979 when radicals seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran days after a meeting between the U.S. national security advisor and Iran's prime minister, foreign minister, and defense minister. The radicals thought the meeting was a plot to undermine the revolution, and the resulting chaos severely damaged U.S.-Iranian relations. Even today, suspicion of the U.S. motives for seeking engagement persists. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has indicated that the greatest threat to Iran is a "velvet revolution"

that will stem from foreign powers working with Iranian civil society.

U.S. diplomatic overtures could encourage Iranian hardliners who might argue that their tough stance had forced Washington to make concessions. European diplomats already worry that Western offers to Iran improve every six months, thus encouraging Iran to remain uncompromising. U.S. willingness to negotiate with Iran's hardliners could seriously undermine Iranian reformers, by suggesting that Washington will work with the hardliners in a way it did not with the reformers.

Attempts to engage Iran may also promote grave doubts among U.S. friends and allies. European diplomats, especially those in France, worry that the United States is acting as a lone cowboy, preempting what had been a European-led negotiating process. Gulf monarchies may think Washington is making a strategic deal with Tehran at their expense, leading them to either seek accommodation with Iran or develop their own weapons capabilities. For Israel, such efforts may signal America's willingness to live with a nuclear Iran, in the hope that Tehran can be deterred and contained.

David Makovsky

When it comes to the Arab-Israeli conflict, a strategy of "engagement without illusions" will most likely drive the Obama administration. Prospects of diplomatic success are worth trying, but at a minimum, engagement would attempt to reverse the slide toward radicalization.

Since Obama will be preoccupied with a recession at home and two wars abroad, he does not have to be personally involved in every detail of Arab-Israeli negotiations. He could delegate that responsibility and time his interventions to maximum effect. The Obama administration's engagement will come under circumstances less auspicious than those at the end of the Clinton administration, particularly Hamas's ascendancy in Gaza and the emergence of the rocket threat to Israel.

The new administration should try to salvage the two-state solution, or at least avert a Hamas takeover of the West Bank. The good news is that Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) have converging interests in the West Bank, since both parties fear the rise of Hamas. Moreover, both seem to believe the way to stave off this threat is by delaying the Israeli army's withdrawal, bolstering the training of Palestinian security forces in Jordan, increasing security cooperation, and building Palestinian civil institutions. This approach has paid at least some dividends: a million tourists have visited Bethlehem this year, unemployment rates have fallen to the lowest levels in eight years, acts of terrorism have decreased, and polls suggest that Gazans think the PA government in the West Bank is more effective than Hamas in Gaza.

The lack of clarity on settlements, however, threatens the stability of the West Bank and the strength of Palestinian institutions. Amid confusion about ongoing Israeli settlement activity, it is difficult for the PA to tell its citizens to be patient in their quest for sovereignty. Fortunately, the territorial differences between Israel and the PA on the final disposition of the West Bank are miniscule, and both agree to the concept of land swaps.

A joint delineation of West Bank land would diminish the mistrust between the two sides, answering once and for all the question of whether Israel is building on territory that will be Israeli or Palestinian. Such a delineation would show Palestinians that moderates can produce results and would give the PA time to strengthen its institutions as Israel maintains security control until circumstances permit otherwise. The large majority of Israeli settlers who live in areas adjacent to the pre-1967 border would become part of Israel, and the remainder would be relocated.

Additional issues come to the fore as the two disillusioned societies try to create a climate for coexistence: economic progress for the Palestinians and demonstration by the PA that it is educating the next generation for peace. In addition, every step taken by Israel toward the Palestinians should be met by steps from the Arab states to integrate Israel into the region.

Regarding Syria, the Obama administration will support Israeli-Syrian peace talks, assuming the new Israeli government wants it to do so. The new administration could explore offers that would draw Syria out of Iran's sphere of influence, just as Kissinger pried Egypt away from the Soviet Union. Such an approach would also weaken Hizballah, given that Syria has been a conduit for the militia's arms. Without this dimension, it is hard to see peace talks being successful.

Finally, the United States needs to reassure Israel about its likely diplomatic approach to Iran. Israel will want to know that such efforts will not be open-ended, thereby prohibiting Tehran from running out the clock in its advance toward nuclear weapons. Engagement alongside economic sanctions may not succeed, but even failed engagement within a fixed time period could make the other options more credible.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Laura Cohen and Becca Wasser.

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