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## In Transition: The Obama Administration

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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. Satloff's remarks; a summary of Dr. Clawson and Mr. Makovsky's remarks on Iran and the Middle East peace process, respectively, was released as [PolicyWatch #1423](#).*

Presidential transitions, such as the one U.S. president-elect Barack Obama has just begun, are important in at least three respects.

First, through the first wave of the new president's appointments, the transition provides a sense of the direction of the administration's foreign policy. Casting, as in the film industry, is everything. Three models of foreign policymaking stand out in recent U.S. history: the "strong secretary of state" approach (for example, James Baker); the "special envoy" system (for example, Clinton's second administration); and the "White House-run" paradigm (for example, Nixon's first administration). With economics likely to dominate the early months of the presidency, the third model is unlikely.

Second, the transition sets the early tone for the administration: Is it chaotic? Organized? Centralized? Pragmatic? Ideological? On the last point, the transition will provide a chance to see whether that part of the Democratic Party that opposes the centrist, mainstream foreign policy Obama enunciated during his campaign -- the fringe that views America as the global villain, Israel as an albatross, and Muslims as universal victims -- begins to assert itself and demand a seat at the table.

Third, the transition offers the new president an interlude in which he can lower expectations ("Who knew the situation was so bad?") and gives foreign leaders -- both friends (such as Europe) and competitors (such as Russia) -- an opportunity to put down markers. In addition, the new team rarely has the luxury of starting with a clean slate because during transitions events occur that set the stage for the new administration. Sometimes events transpire abroad; in the Middle East context, for instance, the Clinton administration on its first day in 1993 was forced to focus on finding a solution to the issue of hundreds of Hamas detainees deported by Israel to southern Lebanon. In other cases, new realities are bequeathed to the new team by the outgoing administration, as was the case with President Reagan's decision to open a political dialogue with the PLO in November 1988. In theory, there are at least three Middle Eastern actions that the Bush administration could take that would have lasting repercussions for Obama: a new statement of peace process "parameters" on final-status arrangements between Israel and the Palestinians; counterterrorism or military operations that have a political dimension, such as the recent U.S. attack against targets in Syria; and preventive military action against Iran's nuclear capabilities. As time passes, the last looks increasingly unlikely.

### 'Change' and Foreign Policy

The 2008 election was about "change." In 2007, for many Americans, change referred to adjusting course on

the Iraq war. Today, for most Americans, change has come to mean a new direction on the U.S. economy. Given that shift, it is likely that the new administration will pursue its foreign policy objectives without stirring up unwanted problems, setting unlikely goals, or making huge commitments. One Obama advisor, former Navy secretary Richard Danzig, encapsulated this approach at the Weinberg Founders Conference by offering the phrase "sustainable security" to describe the likely Obama foreign policy -- a maxim that does not imply bold new initiatives, grand plans, or world-changing ideas. As the new team ranks its foreign policy priorities, top spots are likely to go to Iraq, Pakistan/Afghanistan, Russia, and international financial system reform. The Iranian nuclear issue may break into the top tier, but few are likely to argue that -- in terms of urgency -- the Middle East peace process deserves to be in that category.

But despite U.S. preferences, the Middle East will stake its claim on the new president's limited time. Some players in the region will do so in a positive way, hoarding concessions now so they can deliver them to Obama; others will seek to test him in destructive ways. Optimists place Syria in the first category; nearly all observers would put Iran, Hizballah, and Sunni jihadists in the second.

### **General Comments about Obama and Middle East Policy**

- li> • In terms of peacemaking itself, Obama has an opportunity to make a much greater contribution than just injecting more vigor, urgency, and activity into the existence paradigm of Oslo/Roadmap diplomacy. His natural skills and unique international standing give him the chance to become a agent of change on the normative aspect of peacemaking -- that is, the psychological, emotional, intellectual, and ideological contest over legitimacy. Specifically, if he is going to invest his personal capital in the peace process, he could do so most effectively with an effort to bring about Arab acceptance of Israel as a Jewish state and an end to all state-supported incitement against Jews. This is the critical missing ingredient in peacemaking, an element that he could address with eloquence and empathy. If such an effort bore fruit, one could expect all potential Israeli governments -- Likud, Kadima, or Labor -- to respond with substantial compromises on most of the negotiating issues dear to the Arab side.
- If the peace process is the Obama administration's preferred tool to repair relations with Arabs and Muslims, it would be tragic if, in so doing, the new president's team jettisoned any serious effort at political reform in Arab and Muslim societies. The Bush administration's errors -- most notably, the backfiring of the 2006 Palestinian election, which brought Hamas to power -- made the issue radioactive; sadly, the region's autocrats and radicals are cheering this fact. The United States can promote the conditions for positive change; the challenge is to do it right.
- The world is schizophrenic -- it wants America to listen more, but it also wants America to lead. As a consequence, new administrations have difficulty striking the proper balance between hearing out allies and advancing a new president's ideas. The Clinton administration fumbled early on when Warren Christopher visited Europe in May 1993 to solicit views on Bosnia rather than to present an American plan. Iran is the Bosnia of 2009 -- the test of where the administration draws the line between listening and leading. If the administration is too independent, "creative," and open to the idea of any uranium enrichment on Iranian soil, it will lose the goodwill of Europeans who have carried the torch against any enrichment in Iran for years; if Washington is too timid and deferential, the world loses the American leadership that Europeans crave and Arabs need on this issue (and without which there will surely be an Iranian bomb before long).
- A wide range of Obama advisors (including Anthony Lake, Susan Rice, Richard Danzig, Tom Donilon, Richard Clarke, Wendy Sherman, and Dennis Ross) have publicly embraced a strategy of prevention, rather than deterrence, to address the Iranian nuclear challenge. Now comes the hard part: although prevention does not begin with military force, one has to recognize that it could end with military force. The implications for Obama's foreign policy planning are profound.
- Iran is critical to almost everything the Obama administration will attempt to do in the Middle East, including, for example, maintaining key relationships, the bread-and-butter of diplomacy. There are five mega-relationships with partner countries in the region: Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iraq. All are complicated; no single issue predominates in any of them. But Iran is the one issue that connects them all, not because Iran is a regional superman but because Iranians have acquired enough assets to

cause mischief on multiple fronts. An early definition of overall Iran policy is essential.

- Viewed through the prism of Iran, the groundswell of support for retaining Secretary of Defense Gates at the Pentagon seems odd. Despite his many fine qualities, Gates has enunciated views on Iran diametrically opposed to those of Obama. In late September, for example, he delivered a ringing defense of the Bush administration's current approach by noting that an Iranian willingness "to stop their enrichment in some kind of verifiable way is not an unreasonable precondition to high-level talks. I just think this is a case where we have to look at the history of outreach that was very real, under successive presidents, and did not yield any results. I think until the Iranians decide they want to take a different approach, to the rest of the world, that where we are is probably not a bad place." Obama argued that Iran policy was broken; Gates contends Iran policy is working as best as one could imagine. That is a huge difference.
- The 3 a.m. call: In anticipating the unexpected, there are at least four political events in the Middle East that could make Obama's hair turn prematurely white, quite apart from a terrorist attack. These include:
  1. The collapse of the Palestinian Authority
  2. A Hizballah takeover of Lebanon, either through next year's parliamentary elections or via extra-legal means
  3. A succession crisis in Egypt, a vitally important country with an octogenarian president and no open, transparent, and accountable system for the transfer of political power
  4. News of unexpected nuclear "success" by Iran

### **Advice for the President Elect**

Keep an eye on your advisors, who are making their own transition. Before the election, their job was to keep you out of trouble. After the election, they are eager to win your interest in their issues. In 1992, for example, Bill Clinton ran on a platform that was to the right of then-president George Bush on at least two foreign policy issues -- Syria and China. Bush, Clinton said, was soft on both. After the election, his tone dramatically changed. Instead of "get tough" language on Syria, Clinton received transition briefings that suggested he could help engineer not one but three Arab-Israeli peace agreements and bring about the end of conflict in the Holy Land. From that moment on, he was hooked on the peace process.

Against this backdrop, you would be wise to define and keep your priorities, husband the remarkable outpouring of goodwill you have received from around the world to focus on the most urgent matters first, be open and receptive to diplomatic opportunities, but not expend energies drilling in a dry well. At this moment in history, the agenda is simply too full to let that happen.

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