Challenges for the U.S. Administration: A Broader Middle East Strategy

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The U.S. administration of Barack Obama will inherit a host of challenges in the Middle East. Several early policy choices could place its Middle East policy on solid footing:

**Appoint a Middle East "Super Envoy:"** The president should appoint a Middle East envoy, reporting directly to him, tasked with addressing U.S. policies in the Middle East and given the authority necessary to bring all instruments of national power to bear. In a region in which relationships are everything, this should be no neophyte, rather someone of the caliber of Ambassador Dennis Ross or Gen. Anthony Zinni.

**Open Negotiations with Iran Without Preconditions:** Conversations do not have to be pleasant, but they should still occur. By seeking a negotiated agreement, the United States would force Iran to make a strategic and very public decision, either toward rapprochement or further rebellion against international norms. If rejected, the United States would be in a stronger position to seek further sanctions, including those most likely to have serious affect, such as refined fuels.

**Avoid an Israeli Preemptive Strike and Regional Arms Race Through Assurances:** While a nuclear Iran is not in anyone’s interests, the U.S. president should be prepared with a plan of deterrence should negotiations fail. Key to a deterrence strategy will be a firm declaratory policy. The Iranian regime must know that they face certain destruction if they use or transfer nuclear weapons. Additionally, theater ballistic missile defenses and conventional capabilities of our allies in the region should be built up in a way that protects the peoples of the region from Iranian attack and ensures Iran’s strategic defeat.

**Strengthen Iraq:** A militarily strong Iraq has been a check against Iranian regional ambitions in the past - and can be again in the future. A partnership in modernizing Iraq’s military brings with it joint training, maintenance, and sustainment relationships that will continue to build bridges between the Iraqi state and the United States long after American and coalition forces have redeployed. The U.S. president should place modernization of the Iraqi military as a high policy priority within the region.

**Seek a Regional Solution to Middle East Peace:** A two-state solution is untenable under the current circumstances, and will be difficult without a regional approach:

**The United States Should Participate in Turkish Negotiations with Syria/Israel:** Of late, Syria has been sending signals that it wants to participate more fully in the international community, but it has continued its malign activities simultaneously. Like Iran, Syria should be forced to make a choice. It must decide if it wants to be a regional pariah with Iran, or if it wants to rejoin the international community as a leader in the Arab world.

**Palestinian Authorities’ (PA) Capacity to Improve the Economy and Provide Services Must be Strengthened:** The PA must be strengthened and show it can deliver on social issues as well as Hamas does. If it cannot, here will be failure in the West Bank, as well as Gaza. Arab states in particular should show support to the Palestinians by supporting the PA.
Palestinian Authority Security Forces (PASF) Must be Bolstered: As long as the PASF are incapable of keeping terrorism in check, Israel will feel driven to conduct security operations in the occupied territories. To that end, PASF training and equipping should be a top priority of the next administration. A third party security assistance effort modeled upon U.S. experience with Iraqi security forces is needed, with professional training linked to side-by-side operations, embedded advisors, and eventual self-sufficiency.

A New Counterterrorism Strategy: Our current counterterrorism strategy of capturing and killing irreconcilables will fail in the long term unless the conditions that breed terrorism are rooted out.

Liberal political and economic reforms are necessary throughout the region. This requires a long-term, generational approach. We must also step-up our efforts in the "war of ideas." The United States and its allies can and must communicate through deed and word our commitment to the universal value of liberty and the rule of law.

True freedom will require further development of civil society, an increased sense of individual responsibility, and an adoption of an ideology of liberty over the Hobbesian state of nature where all are in a state of war "and such a war as is of every man against every man." Ideals of liberty must be engraved in the hearts of the people - this is the quintessential battle for hearts and minds.

Conclusion

Through smart management of a whole of government approach by a top presidential envoy, these opportunities can be exploited and we may one day find the region transformed, full of hope, and able to serve as an example to the rest of the developing world.

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