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US Presence in the Middle East: Trends and Scenarios

A Working Paper in Preparation for the Herzliya Conference 2010

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The following document summarizes the main issues and the arising conclusions that were deliberated at the preliminary discussion. The document does not detail all that was discussed and therefore is not binding upon the participants or the Conference's management.

US Presence in the Middle East – Trends and Scenarios

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Executive Summary

The US Middle East policy focuses on five key issues – some of them anchored in specific geographical areas, and some with trans-national implications. These include: Iraq (with the implications for future Sunni-Shiite relations in the region and for Iranian and Jihadi influences), Afghanistan (with implications for Pakistan and potential for nuclear proliferation), Iran (with implications for possible nuclearization of the Middle East), Al-Qaeda and the Israeli-Arab Peace Process. Not only the actual American choice of action, but local expectations and opinions as for what the US course of action will be, will have a far reaching influence on the behavior of local actors.

Iraq - The US will probably pull out its troops from Iraq by the end of 2011; nevertheless it cannot totally disengage from the Iraqi theatre due to energy and other geostrategic interests. The decision whether to keep more troops after August 2010 will be affected, among other things, by the domestic developments in the country, and especially from the elections expected to take place in March 2010. It already seems that their results may strengthen the pro-Iranian camp, thus complicating the American disengagement from Iraq. The rise of pro-Iranian forces will force the US to engage Tehran in order to guarantee its cooperation during the withdrawal process. However, such engagement would probably impact on the willingness of other parties in the region to rely on US guarantees to contain Iranian regional aspirations, and particularly Tehran's nuclear program.

Afghanistan-Pakistan - US involvement in Afghanistan affects not only this country but holds implications for the future of Pakistan and stability in South Asia in general. Without investing significant additional resources, the US will not be able to achieve strategic defeat of the Taliban and their supporters or the elimination of Al-Qaeda strongholds in Afghanistan. Moreover, even with additional troops and resources in Afghanistan, these goals will be extremely difficult to achieve. Continued American military engagement in Afghanistan without any real resolution on the horizon (especially if the number of American casualties rises) may change American public opinion about this war. The war with the Taliban has already spilled over to Pakistan. However, while the US must rely on Pakistan in the war against Al-Qaeda, there exists a real possibility that the Taliban will broaden their own "sphere of influence" in Pakistan, both geographically in Waziristan and along the border with Afghanistan and institutionally in the Pakistani religious establishment and even within the regime itself. Such a development could affect the stability of this country and its willingness to cooperate with the US.

Iran - success or failure of the engagement policy of the Obama administration towards Iran will impact the status of the US both within the region and in other regions. As long as Iran does not cross the nuclear threshold the US government can claim that its policy of engagement has succeeded. However, the conventional wisdom in the region is that the US is reluctant to confront Iran due to the need to co-opt it into practical solutions in Iraq and Afghanistan-Pakistan. Thus, American pressure on Israel to refrain from any action against Iran that would undermine these efforts is seen as further proof that the US has accepted, at least de facto, Iran's claim for a regional hegemonic status. The Obama administration has not yet reached the point of decision in the matter of Iran. On one hand, it is clear to the administration that nuclear weapon in the hands of Iran would have devastating effects in regards to American influence in the region and the potential for a regional nuclear arms race. On the other hand, the administration seems to feel that military action against Iran must be avoided at almost any price. The positions presented by Russia, China and some European countries, set limits to the scope of the sanctions package which

can be consensually proposed and such a limited sanction regime will not suffice to change the position of the Iranian regime. Hence, there are increasing signs that the Obama administration is moving towards acquiescing to Iran as a nuclear threshold state, while attempting to reach understandings that would keep it from breakout. The willingness of the administration to provide assurances of extended deterrence to the countries of the region if Iran acquires military nuclear capabilities is seen in the region as further proof that the administration has already accepted a nuclear Iran. In the light of the failure of the administration to prevent Iran from going nuclear, it is doubtful that such assurances will suffice to convince the regional parties not to develop their own nuclear deterrence. In any case, it will be difficult for the US to provide the military deployment necessary to back up such guarantees, both from the domestic American point of view and from the point of view of the willingness of the countries in the region to increase their overt reliance on the US in the face of increasing radicalization.

Al-Qaeda - the ability of the US to achieve victory against Al-Qaeda is limited. American standing in the region will be affected by the extent to which Jihadi movements will succeed in their efforts to perform terrorist attacks the US, particularly against "quality" targets. If such attacks pass without a robust American military response, the support for local Jihad movements in the region will grow and the stability of moderate regimes will be threatened. The conflict with Al-Qaeda may draw the US involvement to entirely new theatres, such as, Yemen.

The Israeli-Arab Peace Process - The American administration sees the Israeli-Arab Peace process as a means to garner Arabic and Muslim sympathy. Hence, the effort to promote agreement for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will remain a key element in the American agenda in the region. An opportunity to move forward on the Syrian track might appear as an alternative to the stalemate in the Palestinian track. However, at this stage the Americans mostly present a vision and are unable to carry out any new inputs regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The regional perception of the US - In the light of his regional policy since assuming office, President Obama is perceived in the region as an enigmatic president and an appeaser towards Iran. The policy of the administration to date raises serious questions among the allies of the US whether this administration will uphold the traditional commitment of the US to their security. The American withdrawal from Iraq, whether it will take place during 2010 or later, is perceived as fraught with danger of boosting the strength of Iran on one side and Al-Qaeda on the other. In the eyes of the Sunni countries in the region, increasing Iranian involvement in the Shiite government in Iraq will be the manifestation of their worst expectations. The growing anxiety among the Gulf States in light of "the Shiite threat", portrayed by Iran, may bring a renewal to the alliance between these regimes and some of the radical Islamic elements based on both parties' anti-Shiite "platform". However, these regimes will not be able to restrain the radical elements from limiting their activities solely against Shiite and to avoid action against the Western Israeli "infidel".

The image in the region of American power and of American support for and strategic understanding with Israel will affect Israeli deterrence towards other countries. True, no party in the region holds any doubt about US military capabilities; it is the willingness to use these capabilities which is suspect. The administration might seek to balance this image by selling advanced weapons to Arab countries threatened by Iran, as it has already begun to do in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and some of the Arab Gulf States. However, from the point of view of Israeli interests, reinforcement of these countries' strategic capabilities – ostensibly against Iran – will have a negative effect on Israel's military advantage.

Nevertheless, the sense of existential threat from Iran towards the traditional regimes in the region may actually bring them into a convergence of interests with Israel. This may not produce open alliances but may enhance Israel's freedom of action towards the Iranian threat.

General

US policy under the Obama administration is aimed at reducing American military involvement in the Middle East as part of a fundamental change in US foreign and defense policies. Currently, this means withdrawal of most American troops from Iraq by the end of 2010 and transferring the center of gravity in the war in Afghanistan from fighting against Taliban forces and their supporters to fighting against terrorism by Al-Qaeda elements in the country.

However, the Obama administration, like former administrations, might find itself changing its policy's center of gravity due to regional events, public opinion, and inner-administrative variables affecting decision-making processes. Some possible scenarios and events may cause change and reassessment in US regional policy: regime change (or even succession within regimes that will bring younger and inexperienced leaders to the helm) in key states in the region (Saudi Arabia, Egypt); domestic developments in Iraq and Afghanistan that could undermine plans for redeployment and withdrawal of the US from those countries; the internal situation in Pakistan, including the possibility that other states in the area will seek nuclear capability as a result of undermining domestic stability in Pakistan; significant progress in the Iranian nuclear program; the future of Yemen as a base of Al-Qaeda in the region, and major terrorist attacks originating in one of the countries of the region.

Moreover, any examination of US policy in the Middle East cannot be detached from the administration's approach towards relations with Russia, its policy in Afghanistan and even in East Asia – towards North Korea. The administration's policy considerations are motivated primarily by internal-American considerations. Not only the actual American choice of action, but local expectations and opinions as for what the US course of action will be, will have a far reaching influence on the behavior of local actors. The expectations of countries in the region and the messages that Washington sends – intentionally or unintentionally – will determine the readiness of its Arab allies to still rely upon it against the growing Iranian threat.

Scenarios

US policy in the Middle East focuses on five key issues – some of them anchored in specific geographical areas, and some with trans-national implications. These include: Iraq (with the implications for future Sunni-Shiite relations in the region and for Iranian and Jihadi influences), Afghanistan (with implications for Pakistan and potential for nuclear proliferation), Iran (with implications for possible nuclearization of the Middle East), Al-Qaeda and the Israeli-Arab Peace Process.

Iraq

There is a strong tendency within the Obama administration not to prolong the duration of a military presence in Iraq. Arguably, this could change if there were far-reaching developments such as a direct and unequivocal military threat on Iraq by Iran. Nevertheless, there currently remains a more flexible interim date as for the US withdrawal schedule. The administration has committed to withdraw its combat forces from Iraq by August 2010, while leaving behind 50,000 troops at most. However, it is not likely that along with eliminating massive military presence in Iraq, Washington would abandon the Iraqi theatre entirely. Maintaining a small presence in chosen bases outside the main cities is meant to preserve the image of the long-term American commitment to Iraq's security.

The decision whether to keep more forces after August 2010 will be affected, among other things, from domestic Iraqi developments, mainly the elections scheduled to take place in March 2010. If the elections produce a stable government with a parliamentary majority within a reasonable period of time, there will be no reason to postpone the withdrawal. The indecisive results that prevent the establishing of a stable government may bring the US to postpone its partial withdrawal. The previous elections (2006) led to a clear coalition division of religious / ethnic nature and to an unequivocal victory of the moderate Shiites and even then it took six months to form a coalition; it seems today that the religious coalitions on both sides - Sunni-Shia - have completely disintegrated. Therefore, the interim period until the formation of a government could last even more. In such circumstances, it would be difficult for the Obama administration to adhere to the American political schedule to hold elections in November 2010, and to ignore the Iraqi time table.

Even in the best possible scenario of the elections, it does not seem that the results will facilitate the withdrawal. The US is at a severe disadvantage in not trying to influence the election results, while Iran is investing enormous efforts in acquiring support. Therefore, the election results may lead to the emergence of the pro-Iranian forces (mainly those related to Muqtadā al-Şadr and his allies). Under these circumstances, the US would have to engage with Iran in order to guarantee an orderly withdrawal process. The "grand bargain" that Tehran will attempt to conclude would probably include an Iranian commitment to allow the US withdrawal to be conducted in a dignified manner in return for the US to refrain from attacking Iran and to prevent Israel from attacking Iran and having the International economic boycott removed from it. Such a development would severely damage the image of the US among the Sunni countries, as a future source of reliance against Iran.

However, the Iraqi theatre will not be controlled solely by Iran. Since the war, we have witnessed that all the Sunni countries surrounding Iraq have developed their own areas of influence and nurtured relationships with groups inside Iraq. Turkey may serve as a moderating and counterbalancing factor to Iran. Even if Turkey now seems as if courting Iran, Ankara's interest is to influence the upcoming events in Iraq following the withdrawal and to moderate (or contain) the Iranian influence. Today there are already close ties between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan, and between the Turks and Shiite delegate such as Muqtadā al- Şadr and others. The US may encourage this trend as a preferable alternative to Iranian influence.

The Afghan-Pakistani Theatre

The conditions in Afghanistan are entirely different from those in Iraq:

- The Karzai government is weak in every possible way, and controls only the vicinity of Kabul. The rest of the territory of Afghanistan is being held by war barons and other regional tribal rulers. In light of the lack of an effective central government, the US military finds it difficult to mobilize local forces as was done in Iraq. There are very few qualified Afghan battalions, and even much less police forces. Moreover, the Northern Alliance troops, which initially welcomed the entry of the US, today are attacking straggling American forces and operating against them.
- The Islamic groups in Afghanistan do not include only Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Their basic world-view is deeply rooted in that of the Pashto population – at least in the southern areas of the country.
- Unlike Iraq, where most of the fighting was in the country, the fighting against the Taliban has already "drifted" from Afghanistan into the neighboring Pakistan. Strengthening the Taliban "sphere of influence" in Pakistan would affect its stability and the willingness of government officials to cooperate with the US. Today there is an American recognition of the error made when the previous administration supported the removal of Musharraf from power. The current president Zardari is more corrupted and even worse to American interests. In part, because of his close ties with leaders of the kind of Nawaz Sharif and Abdul Qadeer Khan, the father of Pakistani nuclear program. The religious radicalization among Pakistani officers is becoming clearer in recent years, for many opinions in Pakistan think that the real enemy is not radical Islam but India.
- Although a recent decision of President Obama to reinforce the American forces in Afghanistan, such power is not enough to manage a strategy of counter-insurgency (COIN). According to American combat doctrine, that requires a triple amount of force than the one actually decided to be launched. Under these circumstances, the US must rely more on Pakistan, while shifting from the policy of COIN to the policy of targeted attacks on terrorists.

The development of the American involvement in Afghanistan will have implications not only for the future of this country, but also for Pakistan and for the overall stability in South Asia. The chances for the US to achieve its objectives – a decisive victory over the Taliban and their supporters and the elimination of Al-Qaeda strongholds in Afghanistan – are slim to begin with and the administration is not willing to commit a large enough force to fulfill the

minimum necessary for COIN operations, even according to the US military doctrine. The US may decide to forego the goal of pacifying the entire territory of Afghanistan and to attempt to stabilize only areas controlled by the central government in order to reduce terrorist attacks in these areas. Naturally, this will be perceived as an accomplishment. Meanwhile, the US will pressure Pakistan to take part in a major integrated campaign against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. However, deterioration in areas adjacent to the border of Afghanistan will reflect upon the stability of Pakistan and will encourage the country's radical Islamic parties.

Even if the US is successful in the withdrawal from Iraq in a relatively dignified manner, the war in Afghanistan might be prolonged without any resolution or tangible achievements. Furthermore, a rise in American casualties could cause a shift in American public opinion concerning, which still sees the Afghanistan war as a "just war" against terrorism, as opposed to Iraq which was the "wrong war". Such a shift, bringing public opinion to perceive it as a second "Vietnam War" may bring the administration to look for a way to "cut losses" and to initiate an early withdrawal, or alternatively, to invest further resources in order to achieve an image of success. There is also a possibility that the US will be forced to keep its troops in the region, due to circumstances and developments, taking into account that there are strategic assets (Pakistan), from which the US cannot withdraw.

The Iranian Theatre

Success or failure of the engagement policy of the Obama administration towards Iran will also affect the status of the US. Victory and defeat in the battlegrounds of Iraq and Afghanistan will be measured in stability, casualties and military presence. On the Iranian issue, however, the picture of success or failure is much more elusive. If Iran crosses the nuclear threshold it will have "won" against the pressures of the international community. As long as this threshold has not been crossed the US government can claim success of its engagement policy. Nonetheless, the cumulative impression in the region is of US reluctance to confront Iran out of consideration of Iran's "trouble-making" capacity in the Iraqi and Afghani theatres.

The Obama administration has not yet reached the point of decision in the matter of Iran. On one hand, it is clear to the administration that nuclear weapon in the hands of Iran would have devastating effects in regards to American influence in the region and the potential for a regional nuclear arms race. The Obama administration sees a third Gulf War as totally incompatible with American interests. Any scenario of such a war would harm the efforts to improve US relations with the Muslim world and would entail negative economic consequences. On the other hand, the administration is aware of the consensus among the political leadership in Israel that a nuclear Iran is unacceptable and that it would lead to a long list of negative outcomes: the end of the Peace Process; undermining the stability of moderate regimes and strengthening Hezbollah and Hamas.

Ostensibly, a credible Israeli threat against Iran will serve the US as pressure against Iran. However, the concern in the administration over a large scale Israeli operation is not only caused by geo-economic considerations, such as a possible surge in oil prices. The overriding concern of the administration is that Israeli military action will lead to severe reactions in the Muslim world, would damage friendly regimes and inspire terrorist activities against the US. On the other hand, the administration seems to feel that military action against Iran must be avoided at almost any price. The positions presented by Russia, China and some European countries, set limits to the scope of the sanctions package which can be consensually proposed and such a limited sanction regime will not suffice to change the position of the Iranian regime.

Therefore, there are increasing signs that the Obama administration is in the process of redefining its objectives when facing the option of a "nuclearization" of Iran: from the complete prevention of a "nuclear" Iran to the acceptance of Iran as a nuclear threshold state, while convincing Tehran not to cross the threshold. This approach rests upon the administration's position as for Iran not being an immediate threat, but a problem that needs to be dealt even within a year or more.

For Israel the Iranian issue is urgent and of great importance, and cannot be postponed. There is room for evaluation, that if and when President Obama will face a critical decision – whether to launch an attack against Iran or not – he would rather be mentioned in the book of chronicles as someone who allowed Iran, during his term, to become a nuclear state than as someone who led the US into another war in the Middle East.

Meanwhile, the internal events in Iran are seen as a kind of a potential *deus ex machina* for solving the issue without violence. This is based on the belief that regime change in Iran would bring about suspension of the nuclear program or even its complete dismantling.

The question at hand is whether the emerging tendency today in some Gulf States to recognize Iran's status as a local "superpower" will not intensify in the light of the image of the US as a "patron" who is able and ready to defend their interests against Iran. The willingness of the administration to provide assurances of extended deterrence to the countries of the region if Iran acquires military nuclear capabilities is seen in the region as further proof that the administration has already accepted a nuclear Iran. In the light of the failure of the administration to prevent Iran from going nuclear, it is doubtful that such assurances will suffice to convince the regional parties not to develop their own nuclear deterrence. In any case, the implementation of such assurances may be costly and difficult to implement from a domestic American political angle. In the Middle East, an individual assurance is required for each country separately (as opposed to the collective agreement to provide an American nuclear "umbrella" which was achieved in Asia). Furthermore, the massive military presence that such assurances may entail would most probably make the US a more visible target for terrorism. With increasing Iranian influence and rising radical Islamic sentiment in these countries, it will become harder for these regimes to count on American support against another Muslim country.

Al-Qaeda

Unlike the three other "geographical" theatres, Al-Qaeda is a worldwide phenomenon. Consequently, success against the organization in one theatre does not guarantee victory in the fight against Al-Qaeda. Another successful attack of Al-Qaeda along the lines of 9/11 would most probably increase the support to local Jihadi movements, harm the stability of moderate countries in the region and impair the image of the US as a power which they can rely on. However, the Obama administration's policy shift towards activism, following possible attacks against American interests, may change the equation back and strengthen the deterrent image of the US.

The conflict with Al-Qaeda may draw the US involvement to entirely new theaters. The escalation in Yemen in late 2009 is a clear example of this. Through responses to the attacks of Al-Qaeda, the US government may find itself drawn deeper into military involvement in additional theatres. Again, this would delay the US disengagement from existing theatres, in which some achievements have already been achieved against Al-Qaeda. The US already operates in theatres such as Yemen, Somalia and the Maghreb through tight support and fostering security capabilities of local institutions in these areas.

The Israeli-Arab Peace Process

The Obama administration views its involvement in the peace process as a lever that can assist in garnering Arab and Muslim sympathy. Therefore the effort to promote an agreement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will remain a core element of the American agenda in the region. As with previous administrations, an opportunity to advance on the Syrian track might appear as an available alternative to the Palestinian channel stalemate. The administration considers the peace process in the region as an integral part of the events in the overall Middle East system. The US believes that this issue is essential both morally and strategically. However, at this stage the Americans mostly present a vision and are unable to carry out anything regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Implications for the strategic position of the US

Currently, Obama is perceived in the region as an enigmatic figure, appeasing and compromising in relation towards Iran. There is no way of knowing whether he will stick to the traditional commitment of the US to its allies or act similar to President Jimmy Carter who abandoned the Iranian Shah, and in doing so contributed to the outburst of the Islamic Revolution led by Khomeini.

The chances that the US will succeed in disengaging from Iraq with all its aims intact – i.e. a stable democratic regime, accepted upon all parties, without a significant Iranian infiltration, and extinguishing terrorism – are not high. It is also highly unlikely that the Obama administration will change its policy on the issue and leave the forces for a long period. Therefore, the withdrawal from Iraq, whether it will take place during 2010 or later, will be presented by parties in the region that are hostile to the US as an American retreat, and will be levered to increase support for themselves. For the Sunni countries in the region, increasing Iranian involvement in the Shiite government in Iraq is a nightmare comes true. These countries would have to live both under an Iranian threat and a feeling of Shiite ascendancy within the Sunni world, as an expression of Iranian hegemony. At the same time, conservative Arab regimes fear that the US is in the process of shifting its support from the “old guards” in the region to oppositional popular forces such as the Muslim Brotherhood. These countries would find themselves for the first time since the days of the Cold War without a strategic mainstay, on which they could rely. The administration will try to dispel these feelings through declarations of commitment and signals that the withdrawal from Iraq, and eventually from Afghanistan will ultimately enhance America’s operational flexibility and hence its deterrence vis-à-vis Iran and in favor of its allies.

The growing anxiety in the Gulf States from a "Shiite threat" due to the prospects of a nuclear Iran and increasing Shiite (Iranian) influence in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon could lead to enhanced strategic collaboration between these regimes and radical Islamic elements on the basis of an anti-Shiite "platform", common to both parties. However, these regimes will not be able to compel the radical organizations they sponsor to restrict their militant activities solely to Shiite and Iranian targets and to avoid action against the Western "infidel" and Israel.

The image of American power in the region is an important component of Israel's own deterrent image. This is expressed in the very image of American capacity to act in the region to support its allies and in the assumption of a strategic alliance and special relationship between the US and Israel. The erosion of the image of American power is not due to the perception of American capabilities per se, but to the perception of willingness of the US to act in the region to support its allies. Erosion of the image of support for allies in general and for Israel in particular, will have a detrimental effect on Israel's deterrence. The administration may attempt to balance the erosion of its own image by selling advanced weapons to Arab countries threatened by Iran – a step already initiated vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia, Egypt and some of the Arab Emirates. However, for Israel strengthening the image of the US in this way will have an adverse effect on Israel's own strategic advantage, particularly in circumstances in which the stability of the regimes in these countries may be in question and there exists a possibility of extremist regimes coming to power. In contrast, a sense of existential threat in part of the countries in the region may result in a partnership of interests with Israel, perhaps even beyond that.