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Preparing for a De-Americanized Middle East

Herzliya Report

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Key Findings

Background

The power of a state and its capacity to deter its enemies is a derivative of both “real” and “perceived” power. While the former can only really be known to the leadership of that country, the latter is only known to “other: - foe and friend alike – which must take strategic decisions on the basis of that perception. The perception of American power and American support of Israel has long been a central component in Israel’s own deterrence. Hence, decline in American projection of power in the Middle East has strategic implications for Israel’s own security.

Ostensibly, the real strength of the United States has not declined. American military power has proven itself in the last decade in simultaneous involvement in two major wars and numerous other interventions. Few would dispute that the US has the strongest military in the world. America’s broader economic, financial, social and technological strength also remains robust. Despite all of these dimensions of American power, the perception in the region is of the decline of American power. This perception is based on the assumption that the US will disengage from Iraq, leaving it to Iranian predominance, will engage the Taliban both in Afghanistan and Pakistan; will not act with resolution to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons (and will even try to prevent Israel from acting) and will even attempt to reach a “modus vivendi” with Iran as a regional power.

These perceptions are not without basis. An analysis of the situation seems to show that the United States will most probably pull out of Iraq by the end of 2011, leaving Iran to play a pivotal role of power-broker and engaging Tehran in order to facilitate the withdrawal. This engagement will affect American willingness to pressure Iran on its nuclear program and will impact the perception of the US as a protector of the other countries in the region against Iran’s ambitions. In the AFPAK theatre, without (the unlikely) investment of significant additional resources, the US will not achieve strategic defeat of the Taliban and their supporters, nor will the current level of military intervention or efforts to reach agreements with parts of the Taliban achieve the elimination of al-Qaida in Afghanistan. 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-Qaida, there exists a real possibility that the Taliban will broaden their “sphere of influence” in Pakistan, both geographically 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.

It is, however, mainly the policy towards Iran which will impact the status of the US both within the region and in other regions. The reluctance of the Obama administration to set a "terminus ad quem" for the engagement policy towards Iran, the impossibility of installing effective sanctions and the growing voices in Washington suggesting that military action against Iran must be avoided at almost any price and that assurances of extended deterrence for the Middle East and the Gulf will effectively contain a nuclear Iran lead to the conclusion that the administration is moving towards acquiescing to Iran at least as a nuclear threshold state at least. The willingness of the regional parties to rely on American assurances, however, has clearly diminished and will decline further once Iran achieves even a nascent nuclear status.. In any case, it will be difficult for the US to provide the high profile military deployment necessary to back up such assurances, 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. Furthermore, the US will continue to be reluctant to confront Iran due to the need to co-opt it into practical solutions in the Iraqi and AFPAK theatres. American pressure on Israel to refrain from any action against Iran will be seen in the region as further proof that the US has accepted, at least de facto, Iran's claim for a regional hegemonic status.

The key area in which the US will continue to make a concerted effort to upgrade its presence in the region is the Israeli-Arab Peace Process: The efforts to promote Israeli-Palestinian negotiations – and possibly Israeli-Syrian talks in the future - and the willingness to risk confrontation and crisis with Israel is seen by the Obama administration as a means to garner Arab and Muslim sympathy. This trend will probably continue and even escalate as the difficulties the administration faces in other facets of its regional policy increase.

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-Qaida 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. With this region's governments doubting whether or not the US will be willing to use its capabilities, 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. On the other hand, there remains a possibility – albeit slim – that 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.

The recent US Nuclear Posture Review presents a picture of the threat analysis of the administration, placing the acquisition of nuclear weapons by states (including but not only in the Middle East) as a challenge that can be contained using traditional cold war deterrence. The administration clearly does not perceive the threat of use of nuclear weapons in the Middle East as higher due to inherent political, religious or cultural features of the region. This assessment serves to justify the general trend of lowering the American profile in the region. On the other hand, the administration views acquisition of nuclear weapons by terrorists as a primary threat, however, one that can be contained by technical measures (better safeguards, isotope ID) and international cooperation. This assessment also serves the administration's interest in a dialogue with rogue states that are open proliferators to states in order to ensure that they do not proliferate to terrorists as well. Both these assessments conflict with the Israeli position which warns against a poly-nuclear Middle East without the restraints that governed the Cold War.

The constraints on US policy towards Iran will grow as the American efforts to disengage from Iraq and Afghanistan gather speed, Iranian influence in these theatres grow and American dependence on Iranian good will increases. This will create an ever-widening divide between the interests of Israel (and many of the other countries in the region) and the US vis-à-vis Iran, including towards the Iranian nuclear program.

The Obama administration – backed up by the US military establishment – views Israeli military action against Iran as fraught with negative consequences for American interests. Such action – whether it results in the doomsday scenarios circulated today or not – will increase the feeling in the region that the US has lost its “clout” as it was unable to restrain its traditional ally and will certainly create further tensions between the US and Israel and a bid by the US to reinstate its standing in the region through pressure on Israel. The claim that Israeli actions and positions (including the Israeli lobby in the US) are subverting strategic American interests in the region will continue to be heard from circles in and around the administration – both because it reflects their true assessment and because it serves as a whip with which Israeli actions can be constrained.

As US the perception of US presence and commitment declines, parties in the region will seek out alternative international support. Europe – particularly if the current economic malaise of the EU draws on – will not be able to provide such an alternative. This may bring about a greater Russian and Chinese involvement in the region. The former may be manifested in political, economic and military involvement – including military sales – and the latter primarily through economic ties and military sales. Both countries (along with Pakistan and North Korea) will be seen by countries in the region as potential proliferators of nuclear knowhow and equipment.

These trends are not irreversible. Events in the region may impose on the administration a change of policy and return to a higher level of involvement in the region. Such changes may emerge from terrorist acts against the US, Iranian nuclear breakout, instability of regimes (in the Gulf, Egypt or Pakistan) or regional conflicts in the Gulf or in the Israeli-Syrian-Lebanese theatre. Any of these developments hold the potential to galvanize a re-assessment of American interests and the level of involvement necessary to maintain them. Such events could potentially re-converge Israeli and US interests.

Policy Proposals

Israel must prepare itself for an extended period of time in which American presence in the Middle East has declined, the perception of American support of Israel has diminished and regional players are searching for alternatives to bolster their security against the threat of Iran. Notwithstanding, American involvement towards the Israeli-Palestinian peace process may remain high profile.

Israel should be constantly aware of potential convergence of interests with key players in the region vis-à-vis the Iranian challenge and should be prepared to take advantage of them, without linking such collaboration to the peace process. **In many cases, American involvement in such overtures may be counter-productive to the Israeli interest to develop such relationships due to conflicting interests. Therefore, Israel should be prepared to act in the region with far less levels of coordination with the US than in the past**.

Despite what seems to be a steady decline in the popularity of Obama, Israel must prepare for both a change in the US leadership in 2012, and for a full eight year term of the incumbent administration. Meanwhile, Israel should take steps to minimize the claims that Israeli actions and positions (including the Israeli lobby in the US) are subverting strategic American interests in the region.

Israel should prepare for the revival of Russian and to a lesser extent Chinese involvement in the region. Here too, Israeli interests may not coincide with those of Washington and Israel's policies may be exploited by its detractors to highlight contradictions between Israeli and American interests.

Israeli public diplomacy must prepare for this situation. Contingency plans should be drawn up for clashes between Israeli and American interests in the region. Special attention must be paid to efforts (already taking place) to neutralize Israeli supporters in the US on the grounds of "split loyalty".

Israel can take lever the American campaign to prevent proliferation to terrorist organizations by linking it to its own concerns regarding the possession of nuclear materials by regimes whose stability may be compromised by radical Islamic movements affiliated with terrorist groups. Such a linkage may improve the Israeli case in American public opinion to view proliferation to states with higher priority.

A. American Power - Perception vs. Reality

During the height of the Cold War, there was a robust discussion on the real vs. the perceived strength of the United States – the former a fact that only the American leadership could know for sure and the latter in the eyes of its enemies and allies alike. While the former may have determined the actual outcome of any military confrontation it was never put to the ultimate test. The latter however determined the extent to which the enemy of reference (the Soviet Union) was deterred from creating a situation that may put the former to the test and the extent to which allies could rely on the American strategic umbrella. In this framework:

1. Real strength was the actual ability to destroy major Soviet targets with nuclear weapons. In a more comprehensive form, it can be measured using the DIME formula: a combination of Diplomatic clout, Intelligence dominance, Military power and Economic/financial power. To this we ought to add the domestic strength of the nation - the strength of government, the social trust, and the national leadership. On top of all of these, the measurement of strategic strength should

separately take into account alliances and friendships as an extension by proxy of both diplomatic and military power.

2. Perceived strength, on the other hand, may be measured as the net impression of strength that the US nuclear arsenal creates in the minds of the Soviet Union, the US, and other countries. Perceived strength can be seen as a complex, widely shared impression generated or influenced by: 1) perceptible real strength, 2) apparent weaknesses, and 3) observer errors.¹

America's Real Strength

On the face of it, the real strength of the United States has not decreased. American military power has proven itself in the last decade in simultaneous involvement in two major wars and numerous other interventions. Few would dispute that the US has the strongest military in the world. Relative to other countries, it is perhaps the strongest the world has ever known. The US has the largest defense budget in the world; 1.5 million people on active duty and an additional 850,000 people in the seven reserve components. US armed forces are stationed at more than 820 installations in at least 135 countries. The US Navy is the largest in the world; its battle fleet tonnage is greater than that of the next 13 largest combined. The US Navy also has the world's largest carrier fleet, with 11 in service and one under construction. The US Air Force has more than 5,500 manned aircraft in service; approximately 180 unmanned combat air vehicles; 2,130 air-launched cruise missiles and 450 intercontinental ballistic missiles. And despite the fact that American nuclear arsenal is aging, is not being replenished, and will be reduced through treaty and policy, the US still maintains somewhere between 6,000 and 10,000 warheads—an awesome power. True, this power is overextended and this overextension has put strains on the military. This raises calls – including by Secretary of Defense Gates – to redefine what tasks the military should be performing and to transfer some of the tasks that the US performs for what seems to be less than grateful allies (policing energy supplies, which the US does not consume directly) to multilateral forces.

On the intelligence front, the US continues to maintain the largest and best-endowed (technologically and financially) intelligence community in the world. American capabilities in collection of intelligence on terrorism and WMD have, since the nadir of 9/11 and Iraq been demonstrated again and again. The analytic capability of the US intelligence community however has been drawn into question both by the failures of those events, by failures in preventing the few terrorist attacks since 9/11 despite existing information, by inconsistency in analyzing the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs and by political correctness imposed on the wording of intelligence estimates². These failures impact on public attitudes towards the intelligence community and restrict the role it can play in strategic decision making.

¹ Maxwell D. Taylor, "Perceived versus Real Strength of America's Strategic Forces," *Parameters: Journal of the US Army War College*, Vol. IX, No. 4 (December 1979), pp. 7-11.

² Some relevant instances include: the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) which referred to the efficacy of diplomatic pressure on Iran due to information regarding suspension of the Iranian weaponization program in the autumn of 2003; the failure to prevent the terrorist attacks at Ft. Hood and on the American Airlines flight to Detroit, the report on the former attack, which censored any reference to the Islamic motivation of the attacker et alia.

America's broader economic, financial and technological strength remains strong. America's GDP is still 10 times larger than all of the Middle East countries combined. In the realm of Science and Technology, the US files 22% of all scientific patents in the world - nearly 400,000 in 2006. The global recession will affect the US at least until 2012 however relatively to the rest of the world, but its economy will remain strong. The Chinese do not buy American treasury bonds because they like American policies. They do so because these bonds are the best long term bet for making money safely, because of the number of scientific patents, because American policies tend to be pro-growth. The adaptability and the malleability of American society is a source of enormous and enduring strength.

The internal strength of the United States also remains robust. Despite political partisanship being at an historic high, America remains very united. The durability of the American government remains unquestioned. In fact, in comparison to potential adversaries such as Russia and China, or most regimes in the Middle East, the durability of the American regime is unrivaled. Insofar as alliances and friendships are concerned, the US has strong bonds with both its northern and southern neighbors. And despite the tribulations of NATO as an effective fighting force in Afghanistan, America's power is augmented by its status as a founding member of the world's largest military alliance. Likewise, America's other major non-NATO allies in the Greater Middle East and Asia help form a bulwark against aggression and hegemony.

The Perception

Despite all of these dimensions of American strength, the perception is of the decline of American power. Perception – particularly in the Middle East – frequently may not be based on what is actually happening, but rather on what is believed will happen in the future, and extrapolation from that “belief” into a “virtual” reality. Hence, the current regional perception of the future is based on the “established fact” that, come Hell or High Water, the US disengage from Iraq, leaving it to Iranian predominance, will engage the Taliban both in Afghanistan and Pakistan; will not act with resolution to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons; and will try to restrain Israel from acting. The perception of American power is derived from this set of “facts” even though they have not yet played themselves out. Middle Eastern proclivity towards conspiratorial thinking also colors the perception of American intentions. No action or omission by America (or Israel) is perceived as unintentional. Everything that is said and done in the US (whether it is intentionally signaling or not) is perceived in the region as signaling, and is integrated into the assessment of American intentions.

Even without taking into account the peculiarities of Middle Eastern perception forming, there are objective elements which warrant a somber assessment of the future of American power in the Middle East.

Public Diplomacy and Export of Values

On the diplomatic front, since the end of the Clinton administration, American public diplomacy is at a nadir. It is hard to market a failing policy, but American public diplomacy has failed even in marketing successes (such as the great improvement in Iraq, the progress towards democracy in that country and the fact that the Jihadi movement remains on the defensive). Public affairs activities such as *al-Hurra* are perceived as no more than propaganda by their target audiences. The image of the United States suffers from a severe lack of credibility. This is manifested in almost every area of foreign policy: when the US declares that settlement activity in the West Bank is unacceptable and then accepts it; when it

calls for “crippling sanctions” against Iran and then compromises on “targeted sanctions against the IRGC; when it performs a volte-face in the policy towards the Taliban; when it declares that North Korean actions have consequences and then refrains from any serious action against Pyongyang. This record has impacted on the regional perception of US public diplomacy.

The perception of American strength projects directly on the willingness of the peoples of the Middle East to consider adoption of “American” values and American leadership. The political culture that the US has been trying to export to the Middle East, based on democracy, freedom and openness is not valued or shared in most of the societies of the region. Therefore, America’s ability to project power based on shared values and a shared political culture is limited. The other option –acceptance of American leadership – and subsequently of American values – by virtue of its power is contingent on the initial perception of power. The simile used by Osama bin Laden of “the strong horse” and “a weak horse” is apt. If the United States is perceived as a “weak horse”, the pragmatic “Arab Street” will not bet on it, will not accept its leadership and will not vote for its values.

This perception is compounded by the fact that the Obama administration has itself removed the demand for human rights and democratization from its strategic agenda. Every administration since the Carter administration has championed these values to some degree. The Bush administration stressed these issues vehemently for several years and refused to accord legitimacy to forces which contradicted those values. The liberal forces in the region perceive a shift in American policy from an effort to reform the Middle East in the image of its own values to a virtually tactical management of relations with the powers that be and willingness to co-opt any regional player for short term goals. These forces – as small as they were previously – have now lost their prime mainstay. At the same time, radical forces are emboldened by the sense that the US will not try to stem their tide, and is already accepting them as a future interlocutor.

The conventional wisdom in the Middle East that the United States is entering a new phase of “inward-looking” after eight years of strategic involvement in the Middle East also feeds a perception of American disengagement. The Obama administration is perceived as quintessentially “domestic” in its agenda and eschewing all that characterized the Bush era. The sense, therefore, that Americans would prefer not to become involved in the squabbles of Arabs and Israelis, and should focus on issues in their own hemisphere begs the conclusion that American power – even if it exists in potential – will not be exerted.

Many senior American observers - inside and outside of the administration –describe American strength as weakening. Some have adopted a European style “post colonial guilt syndrome” – an apologetic belief that American power is, by its very nature, wrong and evil. Others truly fear a decline of American power and warn against it in public. Whatever their motivation may be, these voices inside the United States are picked up in the world as indications of a weakening America.

Engagement under Scrutiny

The hallmark of the Obama administration’s foreign policy world view can be summed up with the word "engagement" as opposed to the “confrontational” attitude of the Bush administration. To date, this policy has not achieved any substantial gains, either in the Western hemisphere, where Chavez has not become less anti-American despite a failed American effort to impose a Chavez ally as president of Honduras, nor towards Russia or China, who have not requited American strategic concessions with

the hoped for quid pro quo on Iran, nor in the Middle East, where pressure on Israel was expected to result in Saudi willingness for “confidence building measures” vis-à-vis Israel.

Iran

Probably the greatest contributor to the perception of the decline in America’s resolve to support its allies in the Middle East – or alternatively the perception of a conspiratorial undeclared shift in American policy from support of those allies – has been the policy of the Obama administration towards Iran. Seemingly unambiguous statements of non-acceptance of Iran’s nuclear aspirations (“unacceptable”, “all options are on the table”) have given way to a perception that the US has already reconciled itself to a nuclear Iran (at best) or even is realigning its interest in the region to accommodate Iranian predominance. From the point of view of the Sunni Arab states, US policy in Iraq, allowing Iran a foothold in that country, acceptance of Hizballah predominance in Lebanon and overtures towards the (relatively pro-Iranian) Muslim Brotherhood movement all indicate that the US sees Iran as the future power in the region.

B. Current Trends and Future Scenarios

1. 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-Qa’ida 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-Qa’ida 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.

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-Qa'ida and the Israeli-Arab peace process.

2. The Iraqi Theatre

The primary aim of American foreign policy in Iraq is to end the war, withdraw US forces and hand the security of the new nation over to Iraqi military forces, based on President Obama's February 27, 2009 declaration on his intention to bring the war to a conclusion following a "responsible drawdown" of American troops from this country. According to this declaration, by August 31, 2010, American combat mission in Iraq will conclude and Iraqi security forces will have full responsibility for major combat missions. At that time, US forces' tasks in Iraq will fundamentally change. US forces will have three major missions: to train, equip and advise Iraqi security forces, to conduct counter-terrorism operations, and to provide force protection for military and civilian personnel. The President has pledged to keep American commitment under the Status of Forces Agreement to remove all US combat troops from Iraq by the end of 2011. There will be no American permanent basis in Iraq, but the US will keep providing training and support to the Iraqi security forces.

On the security level, this aim may be achievable. While conditions in Iraq remain fragile this country has made significant security progress over the past few years, certainly in comparison to the "dark years" of 2006-2007. The Iraq of today is quite different than the Iraq of 2006-2007. The Iraqi government and the Iraqi people have shown extraordinary resilience. In part this is the result of the enhanced capabilities the Iraqi forces now have, and partly this is the result of sheer exhaustion of the Iraqi people and their determination not to go back to violence. The insurgency in Iraq continues to decline and at current levels it does not pose a major threat to the stability of the Iraqi government. Violence has dramatically decreased across the country during the past few years. While al-Qa'ida in Iraq and other Sunni extremists continue their attacks against the government of Iraq, American forces and Iraqi civilians they have thus far failed to provoke the type of tit for tat retributive cycle of violence, of revenge killings that used to take place when Iraq was falling apart and beset by communal civil war.

Iraqi military commanders still believe they will need American military assistance in significant ways through at least 2015. However, with or without a large American presence, a return to the sectarian strife of the years 2006-2007 seems unlikely: the terrorist networks have been devastated although they still have the capability to periodically engage in spectacular attacks; the Shi'a militant groups which were involved in the reciprocal violence against the Sunni groups have for the most part moved into the political process and have stopped targeting government forces; the Iraqi security forces which were not capable of securing their country are much more numerous and capable today than they were in the past, due to the fact that the Americans have lived up to their commitments in the

security agreement. Finally, it seems that Iraqi nationalism and the Iraqi desire for true sovereignty are profound and will survive the American withdrawal.

Shiite militants constitute a continuing concern, especially for American forces in Iraq. Despite some continued activity by Shiite militants their attacks have actually significantly declined, both in scope and lethality since 2008. Moreover, these groups no longer target the central government or the Iraqi security forces. Most of their attacks are directed at Americans, and for the most part their activity is ineffectual. All of these groups have ties to Iran. By leveraging both overt and covert means to influence Iraqi political dynamics Iran hopes to achieve its strategic goal of a weak Iraqi Iranian satrap state. Although most of the Iraqis, including the Arab Shiite community resent Iranian interference, time will tell whether or not Iraqi nationalism will prevail, thus serving as the best response to Iranian influence and hegemonic ambitions in Iraq.

Next to Iranian involvement, the greatest long-term political challenge to political stability in Iraq is embodied in Arab-Kurd tensions over governance in Kirkuk and other disputed territories, over oil revenues and over the balance of power between the central government and the Kurdistan regional government. If not adequately addressed Arab-Kurd tensions could lead to a wider conflict. Arab-Kurdish accord is, therefore, no less critical for an orderly and successful American withdrawal than the security situation. However, American influence on this axis is also waning and both sides are turning to Iran and the neighboring Arab states for support.

It is important to note that the timing of the drawdown was timed to take into account of the Iraqi political calendar; that is to have a slower pace of drawdown in 2009 and to allow military commanders to make decisions about that pace, to get through the elections and the government formation period with a significant number of troops before the more dramatic drawdown happens in August 2010.

To date all the American successes in Iraq were due to the military presence. The transfer of responsibility (for example for the police training program for the Iraqi security forces) to State Department raises the question whether soft diplomatic power without a robust military backup can perform these tasks. The fact that the US diplomatic presence in Iraq is being cut down along with the military withdrawal seems to indicate that "soft" resources will not be allocated in place of the military power. This too feeds the perception of American disengagement from the theatre and the need to search for alternative powers.

The Obama administration will not prolong the duration of a military presence in Iraq unless there were far-reaching developments such as a direct and unequivocal military threat on Iraq by Iran or a mega terrorist attack against the American mainland with its roots in Iraq. Modifications to the withdrawal may be affected also by ostensible stability of the Iraqi government that will be formed. In the absence of a stable regime, it would be difficult for the Obama administration to implement the withdrawal by the November 2010 senate elections and to ignore the Iraqi timetable.

Under these circumstances, the US may 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 the latter. 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 delegates such as Muqtada al-Sadr and others. The US may encourage this trend as a preferable alternative to Iranian influence.

3. The Afghan-Pakistani Theatre

Afghanistan

The main goals of the US as defined by the Obama administration are as follows:

- To disrupt terrorist networks in Afghanistan and degrade any ability they have to launch international terrorist attacks against the US or its allies.
- To promote a more capable and effective government in Afghanistan that better serves the interests of the Afghan people and which can provide for its own safety and stability with minimal external support.
- To develop competent Afghan security forces to take primary responsibility for counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism efforts.
- To increase the involvement of other nations and the UN in achieving these objectives.

In the light of these goals, current conditions and conditions for a successful US policy in Afghanistan-Pakistan theatre is entirely different from those in Iraq:

- Afghanistan has never been a full-fledged state in the practical sense of the word, but rather a concentration of tribes. Hence, a solution to the Afghani problem will necessarily have to take into account the tribal ethnic regional leaders. Agreements must be reached with the tribes, especially in the Pashton area, which has become the backyard of the Taliban.
- Hamid Karzai's government is weak by any criterion, 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. Since the beginning of the Western intervention in Afghanistan the production of heroin is eight times higher than before, and approximately 80 percent of these drugs go to Europe.
- The Taliban presence throughout the entire region has strengthened. According to recent figures, the Taliban has a permanent presence in 72 percent of Afghanistan, up from 54 percent only a year ago.

- The military force allocated is not enough to manage a strategy of counter-insurgency (COIN), which according to American combat doctrine, requires three times the force than that allocated. 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 absence 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 the American forces and operating against them.
- The Islamic groups in Afghanistan do not include only al-Qa'ida 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 founder of Pakistani nuclear program. The religious radicalization among Pakistani officers is becoming clearer in recent years, for many in Pakistan think that the real enemy is not radical Islam but India.

The Afghani surge declared by President Obama (November 2009) will not enjoy the success of the surge in Iraq. By declaring that the American troops will start their drawdown from Afghanistan in mid-2011, the administration has sent a message to all the actors in the theatre that the present military effort is temporary and if they can ride it out, the American agenda will eventually fizzle out. The US military has already recognized the futility of achieving the administration's goals and recommended a shift the focus from nation-building to simply destroying Taliban and al-Qa'ida forces in Afghanistan.

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 by the administration as an accomplishment. Nevertheless, the war in Afghanistan might be prolonged without any resolution or tangible achievements. 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.

The Pakistani government and military are deeply concerned that the American effort in their theatre is limited by a timeline dictated by US domestic politics. The perception that the US is not in the theatre for "the long haul" has a destructive effect on the efforts to break the military and political resolve of the enemy. According to certain estimations, it will take 5-10 years of American presence and 15-20 years of American support in order to build a nation in Afghanistan. State-building processes

are extremely long since they necessitate a change of culture, not only military, political and economic reforms.

Pakistan

The proximity of Pakistan to Afghanistan means that the consequences of American foreign policy in Afghanistan will have a profound impact on Pakistan. Because of Taliban and al-Qai'ida sanctuaries along the border, in South Waziristan and in Baluchistan, the situation in Afghanistan cannot be stabilized without neutralizing those sanctuaries. Furthermore, the stability of Pakistan and the need to keep it firmly in the American camp is arguably one of the most vital foreign policy challenges facing the US today. Should Pakistan become seriously destabilized or radicalized, the fallout would affect a wide range of American and Western interests: terrorist threats to the US and others, the stability of the Indian sub-continent (including the danger of nuclear confrontation) and the potential for breakout of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East far beyond what has been seen until today.

Hence, the US goals in Pakistan are:

- To maintain a democratic civilian pro-Western and stable Pakistani government.
- To effectively address the terrorist threat within its borders, primarily by expanding Pakistan's own CT capabilities and by creating a level of control in areas previously under insurgent sway to prevent their return.
- To enhance economic stability through economic aid.
- To increase and support cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

These goals however suffer from a lack of consistency and consensus within the American military and political establishment. Senator John Kerry, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has led a chorus of dissenting voices, which Vice President Biden had come close to joining, objecting to the surge in Afghanistan on the grounds that a campaign against the militants from Afghanistan will only drive them into Pakistan, further destabilizing that government and making its military challenge more formidable. The use of American troops to attack targets in Pakistan has become a source of contention and there is genuine disagreement within the Pakistani government over the missile attacks. There are concerns in Congress that there are no adequate strings tied to ensure that economic aid goes where it is needed and will be most productive. The Pakistani leadership voices constant concerns regarding the longevity of the US commitment to the theatre. These concerns make the leadership more susceptible to domestic considerations which must take into account the radical Islamic camp.

4. The Iranian Theatre

The issue of Iran's nuclear program is by far one of the most critical international issues that current and even future American administrations may face. The administration's engagement policy has been counter-productive to date, insofar as it has encouraged Iran to take more strident and provocative moves towards a nuclear capability. The efforts to put a sanction regime in place have also failed and are being replaced by more modest goals, directed at creating an illusion of action without any real belief that such action will have any effect. The arguments that the attempts at engagement have

enabled the US to build international consensus for greater pressure on the Iranian regime is no longer taken seriously in the region or in Washington.

The case for continuing this policy is primarily the absence of alternatives and particularly the implications of a military strike. The argument against military action (or even threat of military action) is based on the assessment that such action will be met with a broad Iranian response that will be catastrophic for the region, generate upheavals in moderate states, ignite a war between Iran and the Gulf States, cause a steep rise in energy prices, endanger American troops in Iran and Afghanistan and give the Iranian regime the opportunity to make short thrift of the “Green Revolution” opposition. This assessment is applied by the administration also to the implications of an Israeli strike. The Obama 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 Hizballah and Hamas. Ostensibly, a credible Israeli threat against Iran would serve the US as pressure against Iran. However, the administration fears that even the perception of US support for Israeli action would lead to severe reactions in the Muslim world, would damage friendly regimes and inspire terrorist activities against the US.

This apocalyptic assessment regarding Iranian reactions to a military strike is fed by various circles in Washington and is deeply flawed. The Iranian military capability to close the Straits of Hormuz or to attack American interests in the Gulf is limited. So is the Iranian subversive and terrorist capacity to ignite the Sunni Arab world in response to an attack on its nuclear project (deeply feared by the Sunni world). However, there is little or no challenge within the US administration of these premises, which continue to determine the borders of US policy towards Iran.

Internal events in Iran are also conjured by the administration 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. Some observers argue that the Iranian regime will change or the Green Movement will take over in a year or two and therefore, the best way to deal with the Iranian nuclear threat is to wait. These argue that although the changing of the regime in Iran will probably not bring about a liberal democracy, there might be a rise to power of “religious democrats” who have an interest in restoring Iran’s international legitimacy and would prefer good relations with the West over perseverance with the nuclear program.

It is also not clear what the administration defines as a “nuclear Iran” which it seeks to prevent: is it Iran with a nuclear bomb which has done a test? Is it Iran with a bomb in a basement? Is it Iran with enough for one bomb and a proven capability for one bomb? Or is it an Iran with stockpiles of enriched uranium for a large amount of weapons and half a year away from breakout or sneak-out? It seems (though there is no formal definition by the administration on this issue) that the American definition is the first – an Iran which has completed weaponization and testing of a weapon. For most of the countries in the Middle East, both Israel and the Arab countries, the latter would be seen as an Iran which has already crossed the nuclear threshold, *de facto*.

The administration also seems to believe that Iran does not really intend to break out with a military nuclear capability but will suffice with being a “threshold nuclear power” along the lines of the

Japanese model. This assessment leads it to redefine its objectives regarding the Iranian threat: 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 assessment though does not seem to hold water. There is a broad agreement in the region that Iran will not stop at a threshold status and the states of the region will be driven by this assessment and not be an optimistic American attitude. The basis for this assessment is that Iran cannot achieve its goals in the region just by projection of such a status. These goals – driving the US out of the Gulf, imposing hegemony on the countries of the Gulf, having immunity for subversive action – can only be achieved by actually having a weapon capability. The "threshold assumption" may have fit the Iranian policy a few years back. Today, given the present balance of power between the more circumspect "old guard" and the IRGC leadership, the possibility of a policy of reaching the threshold and staying there is highly unlikely.

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.

Failure in preventing Iran from even nearing the nuclear threshold will intensify the drive of other states in the region for nuclear weapons. The American promises of extended deterrence will not be credible after the US has failed to fulfill its promise to prevent Iran from going nuclear. A stronger Iran will also make it more difficult for the countries in the region, challenged by radical forces, to acquiesce to the level of strategic collaboration with the US to implement such a deterrence policy. In any case, the Sunni Arab states would probably demand that American promises of extended deterrence would probably include guarantees against Israel and efforts to disarm Israel as well as Iran. This situation will most likely affect the non-proliferation efforts far beyond the Middle East. High demand for nuclear technology in the region will encourage the opening of the dams of nuclear proliferation from Pakistan and North Korea, and even Russia and China.

Under such circumstances, the Gulf States - Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain – would most likely find themselves under the pressure of a nuclear Iran to withdraw agreements for services to the American navy. These Gulf States will have no choice but to recognize Iran's status as a local "superpower" in light of the image of the US as a "patron" who is unable and unready to defend their interests against Iran. Syria, Iran's ally, will have little compunction in sending the most advanced missiles over to Hizballah. Hamas, Iran's proxy in Palestine will feel that it has a longer leash. After all, the perception will be that Israel cannot do anything with Iran having the bomb.

5. Al-Qa'ida

Unlike the three other “geographical” theatres, al-Qa'ida is a worldwide phenomenon. Consequently, success against the organization in one theatre does not guarantee victory in the fight against al-Qa'ida. Another successful attack of al-Qa'ida 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-Qa'ida 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-Qa'ida, 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 made against al-Qa'ida. 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.

6. 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.

C. Summary: Implications for the Strategic Position of the US

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 keep US forces in Iraq 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 Gulf States. 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 in the face of Iran may result in a partnership of interests with Israel, perhaps even beyond that.