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## The Abdication of America - The Middle East after America

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### The Institute for Policy and Strategy

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### The End of the Age of America?

The Middle East – like other regions in the world – has gone through eras of projection of influence by external powers, adapting to the balance of power between them. This was the case during the age of colonialism (predominance of Britain and France), the Cold War (competition between the US and the USSR) and the period since the end of the Cold War, during which the US became the sole superpower in the region.

The passage from one era to another, however, is never clearly demarcated and the process of adaptation does not begin only when a new era has been “declared”. Thus, years before the fall of the Soviet Union, countries began to hedge their relations with the two Superpowers, reflecting their anticipations of the future status of the “power market”. Today, the Middle East and other regions of the world are in the throes of a re-alignment which is primarily a response to American policies and actions and reflects the expectation of a power void which will be left with the end of the “Age of America”. The re-alignment of the Middle East will have a profound influence on other theatres and on the domestic and economic interests of the United States and the rest of the West.

### The Strategic Weltanschauung of the Obama Administration

The American Middle Eastern policy under the Obama administration aims first and foremost at reducing American projection of “hard power”, particularly in the Middle East, as part of a fundamental change in US foreign and defense policies. The new American policy has already found its way into six major policy documents issued during the administration's first year - between February 1 and May 29, 2010: (1) the Quadrennial Defense Review Report (QDR); (2) the Ballistic Missile Defense Review Report (BMDR) both issued on February 1st; (3) the Nuclear Posture Review Report (NPR), issued on April 6th; (4) the New START Treaty signed by the Presidents of the United States of America and the Russian Federation (Prague, April 8th); (5) the Washington Nuclear Summit Conference declaration (on April 12th); (6) and the National Security Strategy for 2010, issued on May 29th.

Together, these documents present a comprehensive description of the underlying beliefs held by the administration about how the world works, what threats and potential threats need to be addressed, and how best to address them. The publication of this number of strategic policy documents in such a short time period and in such an early stage of the administration is unprecedented. The documents reflect the world view with which the administration came to office more than an attempt to interpret the events of its first year in office. They reflect a strategic assessment based on the supposition that America has engaged in strategic overreach. They conclude that the solution is a fundamental change in

America's strategic profile. They also reflect an assumption in international affairs of the inherent rationality of all parties that can facilitate conflict resolution through dialogue; a rejection of confrontation, projection of hard power and unilateralism (all of which are seen as having characterized the Bush administration); and an aversion to American exceptionalism and export of values on one hand, and a belief in the intrinsic "rightness" of engagement, consensus and "communities of interests" as a means to solve international conflicts and, on the other hand.

This worldview contradicts in many of its elements key perceptions of the world held by America's allies in the Middle East (and even in the world at large) and creates a gap in the threat perception between the US and those countries. It has several key elements:

1. The NPR views acquisition of nuclear weapons by terrorists (or alternatively the breakdown of a nuclear state which could result in transfer of nuclear weapons to sub-states) as the primary threat to the entire international community, but one that can be best contained by multilateral cooperation on technical measures such as better safeguards, isotope ID and others.
2. The acquisition of nuclear weapons by rogue states and subsequent regional proliferation among other countries (including but not only in the Middle East) is relegated to the status of a challenge that can be contained by traditional cold war deterrence. This position drives 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.
3. An equation between a nuclear Iran and a nuclear North Korea, ignoring the different motivations and strategic environments of the two countries.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, it suggests that further proliferation in the Middle East in the wake of acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran can be contained as was the case in East Asia.
4. The adoption of the thesis that a declared policy of general nuclear disarmament will reduce the motivation of rogue states to acquire nuclear weapons of their own. This thesis implicitly accepts the "third world" claim that the key motivation for the drive of those states for nuclear weapons is the stockpiles of nuclear weapons in the hands of the veteran nuclear powers and ignores the local strategic and cultural motivations.
5. The assumption that extended assurances will suffice to

<sup>1</sup> The NPR refers to the two proliferation challenges as follows: "As President Obama has made clear, today's most immediate and extreme danger is nuclear terrorism. Al Qaeda and their extremist allies are seeking nuclear weapons. We must assume they would use such weapons if they managed to obtain them." Whereas al-Qaeda is assumed to be willing to use such weapons, the reference to proliferation of nuclear weapons among states does not make that assumption: "Today's other pressing threat is nuclear proliferation. Additional countries – especially those at odds with the United States, its allies and partners, and the broader international community – may acquire nuclear weapons. ...North Korea and Iran have violated non-proliferation obligations, defied directives of the United Nations Security Council, pursued missile delivery capabilities, and resisted international efforts to resolve through diplomatic means the crises they have created. Their provocative behavior has increased instability in their regions and could generate pressures in neighboring countries for considering nuclear deterrent options of their own. Continued non-compliance with non-proliferation norms by these and other countries would seriously weaken the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), with adverse security implications for the United States and the international community."

stem the tide of nuclear proliferation or will even be feasible in a scenario in which Iran will have become a nuclear power. This assumption ignores the damage that such a scenario will have on American credibility in the region.

6. The downplaying of the possibility that such new nuclear states in the region may actually use their nuclear weapons or that deterrence may fail in an escalating crisis situation. The administration clearly does not accept the view that inherent political, cultural and religious features of the region raise the risk of nuclear confrontation due to escalation in the Middle East in comparison to other nuclear "neighborhoods" (the Indian sub-continent, Europe during the Cold War and East Asia).
7. The emphasis of multi-lateral action by the international community and "isolation" of offenders of the world order as the ultimate punishment. The concept underlying this assumption is that all nations accord a high value to their international legitimacy. Experience with Cuba, North Korea, Iraq and Iran does not seem to bear this thesis out.
8. The downgrading of the war against radical Islamist ideology to one against "a specific network – al-Qaida and its affiliates who support efforts to attack the United States, our allies and our partners" and disregard of the strength of the radical Islamist ideology in the Muslim street and the broad support that the terrorist organizations succeed in gathering.

These principles have been put to the test during the first half of the Obama administration and have been found wanting. Engagement has not succeeded in bringing Iran or North Korea to cease their nuclear programs, nor has it mitigated the bellicosity of the Chavez regime in Venezuela, and its successes vis-à-vis Russia and China have also been limited. This is, first and foremost, due to the perception that America is indeed "speaking softly" and carrying "a big stick", but has neither the present intention nor the future willpower to wield it if and when push comes to shove.

## Real Power vs. Perceived Power

The actual power of a nation is something that only the leadership of that nation can really know. The probability that that leadership will actually employ that power in given circumstances is a question which cannot be answered even by that leadership, as it will depend on circumstances – political and psychological – at that time. Therefore, projection of power does not correspond precisely to real power; it is measured in terms of the perception by friend and foe alike of that nation's power, resolution and willpower. The perception of American power has long been a central component in the security of America's allies around the world. Hence, decline in the perception by US allies of American willingness/capacity to project power holds strategic implications for the security of America's allies.

While this is true in all theatres – from Central Europe to South American and East Asia, it is particularly acute in the Middle East, where American resolve and projection of power have been put

to the test in recent years. Local expectations and opinions as to what the US course of action will be, and not only the actual American choice of action, 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.

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. Objectively, 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, there is a growing perception of the **decline of American power**. In the Middle East, this perception is based on the conventional wisdom in the region 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 hegemon. In Asia (particularly China) and in South America (Venezuela and Brazil) there is a growing perception of America as a declining giant, hollowed out of its essential source of power, which is economic, unable to respond to market challenges

## American Regional Policy

US involvement in the Middle East and the driving force behind most American initiatives in the region since the 1930's have traditionally stemmed from the need to acquire and maintain access to vital economic interests – first and foremost among them – energy resources. The underlying assumptions of this strategic worldview were that:

- The US economy is the bedrock of all American power. Hence, a constraint on US economic activity is at heart, an attack on the US, both hard and soft.
- Unrestrained access to energy sources is essential to the growth and prosperity of the American economy.
- Middle Eastern oil (and possibly central Asian gas) is essential to maintaining sufficient energy sources.
- More recently - the image of the Saudi and Gulf states as "bank vaults" for dollars, available for investment at short notice. This is a growing consideration in the light of the decline of the European economy and of Europe as an actor in the American economy and the competition with China for the Asian market.

With the possible exception of the invasion of Iraq (regarding which there is a debate about the motivation of the administration), the option of American military intervention has been raised over the years only in the face of a direct attack or clear and imminent danger to those interests.

Ostensibly, the threat to US vital interests posed by the

anticipated denial of economic interests and access to energy by a nuclear Iran or the breakdown of the conservative pro-American regimes in the region and their replacement with Islamist governments should be viewed as severe. This, however, will not be so if the administration believes that the threats to the United States can be mitigated by pre-emptive engagement with the forces (Iran and fundamentalist Islam) that are on an inevitable course to gaining power in the region.

In practice, US policy in the Middle East focuses on five key inter-related issues – some of them anchored in specific geographical areas, and some with trans-national implications: (1) Iraq (with the implications for future Sunni-Shiite relations in the region and for Iranian and Jihadi influences); (2) Afghanistan (with implications for Pakistan and potential for nuclear proliferation); (3) Iran (with implications for possible nuclearization of the Middle East); (4) al-Qa'ida and (5) the Israeli-Arab peace process.

## Iraq

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. On the security level, this aim may be achievable. The Iraq of today is quite different than the Iraq of 2006-2007. 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. While al-Qaida in Iraq and other Sunni extremists continue their attacks, 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. Hence, with or without a large American presence, a return to the sectarian strife of the years 2006-2007 seems unlikely: the Sunni terrorist networks have been devastated (for the time being); the Shiite militant groups have for the most part moved into the political process; and the Iraqi security forces are much more numerous and capable today.

On the other hand, six months after the March elections, the Iraqi parties have not succeeded in forming a new national government. This is primarily due to Iranian intervention. Tehran has a vested interest in keeping Iraq in a status of limbo until after the first stage of American withdrawal and has succeeded in doing so. The sense of growing Iranian influence and declining American presence feeds the willingness of the Shiite parties to take the Iranian position into account. Another important long-term political challenge to political stability in Iraq is embodied in Arab-Kurd tensions over Kirkuk and other disputed territories, oil revenues and the balance of power between the central government and the Kurdistan regional government. These tensions could lead to a wider conflict. Here too, in the light of the waning of American influence, both sides are turning to Iran and the neighboring Arab states (and Turkey) for support.

The fact that the US itself is not averse to engaging Iran in order to guarantee an orderly withdrawal process raises concerns in

the region of a “grand bargain” based on an Iranian commitment to cooperate in Iraq (and Afghanistan) in return for a softening of the American position on the nuclear issue. Whether or not such a bargain is being contemplated by the administration already does not change the perception in the region that it is likely, and the influence of such an assessment on the positions of the countries of the region. The Sunni countries surrounding Iraq are already developing their own areas of influence and nurturing relationships with groups inside Iraq. 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. Iraq, after the American withdrawal, will become a microcosm of regional struggles at the expense of both Iraqi and wider American interests.

## Afghanistan

The Afghani surge declared by President Obama (November 2009) will not achieve the success of the surge in Iraq. This is due to basic differences between the two theatres. However, 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. The US military has already recognized the futility of achieving the administration’s goals and recommended a shift in focus from nation-building to simply destroying al-Qaida forces in Afghanistan and creating areas of stability under the central government in lieu of extending Kabul’s sway over the entire country.

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. However, a rise in American casualties could cause a shift in American public opinion, 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 even earlier withdrawal, or alternatively, to invest further resources in order to achieve an image of success.

The price of an American “cut and run” strategy in Afghanistan may be high. A resurgence of Taliban influence in Afghanistan will surely revive the Pakistani Taliban and further weaken the regime in Islamabad. A failed nuclear state of Pakistan will have dire consequences for the proliferation regime, nuclearization of the Middle East and the potential transformation of Pakistan and Afghanistan together into a staging ground for Jihadist attacks against the West.

## The Iranian Challenge

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. The outcome of the administration’s engagement policy to date has been to encourage Iran to take more strident and provocative moves towards a nuclear capability. The sanctions regime creates an illusion of action in consensus, but few truly believe that it will achieve the necessary effect.

The case for continuing this policy is primarily the absence of alternatives and particularly the potential consequences of an Iranian retaliation to 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 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 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 to these assumptions, which continue to determine the limits 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.

A major source of differences between the United States and its allies in the region is in the definition of the “nuclear Iran” which must be prevented: 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, stockpiles alone 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 broad anticipation 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 by an optimistic American attitude. The basis for this assessment is the belief that Iran cannot achieve its goals in the region just by announcing 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.

## Al-Qaeda

A leitmotif that has characterized the Obama administration has been outreach to the Muslim world. President Obama came to office at a time when relations between the US and the Muslim world had reached a nadir and he saw himself as particularly suited – as one who was brought up as a Muslim and lived in a Muslim country - to rectify them. As part of this policy, the administration refuses to acknowledge any link between Islam and the phenomenon of Jihadi terrorism (to the extent that the administration refuses to use the terminology of “Jihadist” on the grounds that “Jihad” in Islam is a personal moral struggle) and presents the latter as an aberration with no real link to “true

Islam” - individual acts of personal violence and not part of a wider phenomenon.

Furthermore, the engagement policy also dictates outreach not only to bone fide moderates and mainstream Muslims, but also to the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates and “moderate” Taliban elements on the Sunni side and Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi proxies of Iran on the Shiite side. The rationale for such engagement is rooted in (1) a tacit belief that these parties are not irrevocably anti-American but respond to America’s actions, policies and rejection of dialogue with them; (2) belief that preemptive engagement of these movements will neutralize their radicalism and anti-western positions; (3) and unwillingness to invest the necessary soft and hard power in order to perpetuate the “old guard” of pro-American regimes in the region.

The insistence on ignoring the religious motivation and broader religious legitimacy of the Jihadi phenomenon is very much out of sync with the concerns of the pro-American Muslim regimes which see the main problem in that very legitimacy. The strategy of using sanitized terminology as a means to woo the radicals from their fundamental religious, cultural and political hostility to the values that America represents (at least in their eyes) will ultimately fail.

## Relations with Israel and the Israeli-Arab Peace Process

The key area in which the administration sees a need to project active involvement in the region is the Israeli-Arab Peace Process. The administration has, in essence, accepted the claim that the “Palestinian problem” and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are the “core issue” of the Middle East and the key cause of instability in the region and that this conflict could be solved were it not for Israel’s obstinacy. 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. The result is an American policy vis-à-vis the peace process which is more Palestinian than that of the Palestinians. Washington demanded a total cessation of settlement activity, including in East Jerusalem when the Palestinian leadership itself did not, and joined the demand that Israel subscribe to the NPT. The voices heard from those close to the administration charging Israel, the Jewish lobby and even Jewish figures within government with subversion of strategic American interests in the region in favor of Israeli interests both reflect the true opinion of those individuals and serve as a lever for restraining Israel. The presentation of a fundamental conflict of interests between the US and Israel in regards to Iran exacerbates this narrative.

The efforts of the administration to distance itself from Israel and to present an “even-handed” or even pro-Palestinian stance, however, have not significantly improved the chances of a peace settlement. The decline in the perception of American power was evident in the long refusal of the Palestinian leadership to American requests to renew direct negotiations. As American

presence in the region wanes, the Palestinians and the Arab regimes will have to take into account growing domestic radicalization as a severe constraint against moving forward in the peace process.

By distancing itself from Israel and by lowering its profile in the Middle East in general, however, the administration also distances itself from influence on the peace process. 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, buttressed by a perceived decline in US economic pre-eminence. 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 erosion of Israel's deterrence will have, in turn, a detrimental effect on that of the United States.

The Obama administration – backed up by parts of the US military establishment – views Israeli military action against Iran as fraught with negative consequences for American interests. Paradoxically, this view contradicts the expressed interest of many of America's Arab allies in an immediate (and military) solution to the Iranian nuclear program. Whether such action – if it takes place – will achieve its goals or not and whether the doomsday scenarios of Iranian responses will take place or not, an Israeli attack will certainly be exploited by the administration to create a crisis with Israel in order to demonstrate non-complicity in the attack.

## Implications for the Strategic Position of the US

The perception in the Middle East of a future “de-Americanized” region is not baseless. 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. Until then, the US will be constrained by its Iraqi agenda to refrain from any serious crisis with Iran, lest it retaliate in the Iraqi theatre. In the ACPAK theatre, without (the unlikely) investment of sufficient 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. There are grounds for the scenario that 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 would affect the stability of

this country and its willingness to cooperate with the US and signal the decline of American power in yet another area. From the point of view of the Sunni Arab states, US policy in Iraq, allowing Iran a foothold in that country, acceptance of Hezbollah 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.

The future of American interests in the Middle East – and the interests of America's allies in the region – hinge primarily on the outcome of the efforts to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear status. If Iran is perceived as having crossed the nuclear threshold it will have “won” against the pressures of the international community. It will become a model for radical movements throughout the Muslim world and will be on its way to achieving its desired hegemony in the region. As long as this threshold has not been crossed the US government can claim success of its engagement policy – at least as a holding tactic. Delaying Iran's crossing the threshold however does not delay the process of decline in the willingness to rely on the United States. The cumulative impression of American reluctance to confront Iran out of fear of Iranian reprisal exacerbates the concerns in the region that the pro-Western countries will not be able to rely, when the chips are down, on the United States.

Failure to prevent Iran from nearing the nuclear threshold will certainly intensify the drive of other states in the region for nuclear weapons. The increased demand for nuclear materials and know-how will probably induce increased supply. The prime suppliers of these will be Pakistan and North Korea – two nuclear nations which may become failed states on short notice. The possibility of a “melt-down” in these countries may bring the elements responsible for the nuclear program to enter the market. Increased demand would probably bring Chinese and Russian companies back into the market. Increased supply will most likely induce additional demand, with countries in the Middle East and other regions speeding up their nuclear programs to take advantage of the market. The assumption in Washington that American promises of extended deterrence will stem the tide of proliferation to other countries, as it did in East Asia ignores the damage that the credibility of such guarantees will have sustained after the US has failed to prevent Iran from going nuclear. The willingness of the regional parties to rely on American assurances has already declined and will decline further once Iran achieves even a nascent nuclear status. It is doubtful that the US will be able to provide the high profile military deployment necessary to back up such assurances. Difficulties will come both from domestic American considerations and from domestic pressures in the region, with America's allies facing Iranian-fed and Islamist opposition to close security relations with the US.

The administration may attempt to balance the perception of having abandoned its Arab allies by selling them advanced weapons – a step already initiated vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia, Egypt and some of the Gulf States – and by the argument that the withdrawal from Iraq, and eventually from Afghanistan will ultimately enhance America's operational flexibility and hence its deterrence vis-à-vis Iran. However it is not likely that the

conservative Arab regimes will be satisfied by such a claim and it is unlikely that reinforcement of their strategic capabilities will provide them with the level of confidence they would need to challenge Iranian aspirations. In any case, the Sunni Arab states would probably demand – at least for domestic reasons - that American promises of extended deterrence include guarantees against Israel and efforts to disarm Israel as well as Iran. Thus, certain steps that may be taken by the administration to counter-balance the decline in American projection of power may have an adverse effect on Israel's deterrence posture.

The strategic – indeed historic - implications of a nuclear Iran should ostensibly galvanize the countries of the region into action. However, in light of the perception that the United States is withdrawing from the region, many of the regimes therein are already accommodating themselves to the new “neighborhood strongman”. This is evident in the behavior of Qatar, Oman and even Saudi Arabia itself. Iran will probably take advantage of this period of Arab strategic inferiority to cement its hegemony in the region. A prime example may be by renewing its call for “leaving the security of the Gulf in the hands of the Gulf countries themselves” - a euphemism for Iranian hegemony without American or British presence. In this demand, Iran will be able to leverage the fact that the very failure of the US to prevent Iran from going nuclear and the regional image of the Obama administration as conciliatory towards Iran will diminish any faith that the countries of the region may have in American guarantees. The Iranian ability to employ subversion will also make it difficult for those regimes to continue to rely on the “infidel” to defend them against (Muslim) Iran. Other consequences will be felt in the heart of the Middle East; the chances of weaning Syria out of the Iranian orbit and promoting stability in Lebanon, where Iran's surrogate – Hezbollah – has already become the key power broker will become even slimmer. Hamas, Iran's Palestinian proxy will feel that it has a longer leash. The chances that the Palestinian Authority will be willing to take bold steps towards a peace agreement with Israel will also wane.

For the Wahhabi regime of Saudi Arabia, which was born as an anti-Shiite movement, Iranian (i.e. Shiite) hegemony is a nightmare come true. At the same time, secular conservative Arab regimes such as Egypt and Jordan 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. 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.

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. 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, more radical 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; deterioration of the internal situation in Pakistan; significant progress in the Iranian nuclear program; the future of Yemen as a base of al-Qaida in the region, and major terrorist attacks originating in one of the countries of the region. US policy towards the Middle East may also be overturned by developments in the relations with Russia, China and North Korea.

Politics – like nature – abhors a vacuum. The conscious disengagement of the United States from the role it played since the mid-1970's as leading power in the Middle East will open the door wide for other players – local ones like Iran that will seek regional hegemony and global ones like Russia and China. The United States can still reverse the trend by re-drawing its lines in the sand and re-evaluating of global re-positioning.

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