

Sharing the Burden in the Middle East

MARINA OTTAWAY

Senior Associate, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

SUMMARY

- The return to diplomatic normality promised by the new administration is not enough to promote U.S. interests in the Middle East.
- The United States should instead share the burden of peacemaking and regional security with Arab countries.
- It should support several of the peace initiatives undertaken by Arab countries and encourage them to take more responsibility.
- It should learn from the Bush administration's failed attempt to build an anti-Iranian alliance and promote broad regional dialogue on a regional security arrangement.
- Sharing the burden is not an abdication of the U.S. great power role, but a better policy to protect U.S. interests.

The Obama administration will face a Middle East where the problems are enormous, U.S. interests have shifted eastward, and solutions are elusive. Major conflicts appear deadlocked: the peace process, political reconciliation in Iraq, and negotiations with Iran. The situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan is deteriorating rapidly. The new administration promises to bring to all these issues a welcome change from its predecessor's attitudes: during the election campaign, President-elect Barack Obama made it clear that he would resuscitate the idea that diplomacy, not force, is the weapon of first resort, and that diplomatic progress requires a willingness to talk to hostile, even rogue, regimes. While this promised return to diplomatic normality is encouraging, it will not be enough. The United States cannot break the deadlock on most

issues without the help of countries of the region, sharing with them the burden and the responsibility. This would not be abdicating the United States' great power role, but rather recognizing changing realities in the Middle East.

The Bush administration approached the Middle East with an inflated view of its power to impose solutions. The outcome has demonstrated the limits of U.S. military and political power. Military power has overthrown Saddam Hussein but not built a stable Iraq, and it has installed a new regime in Afghanistan but not stymied the resurgence of the Taliban; both countries still depend heavily on the presence of U.S. troops. Politically, the Bush administration has demonstrated that an American decision cannot either democratize the Middle East or coax the peace process into life.



MARINA OTTAWAY specializes in democracy and post-conflict reconstruction issues, with special focus on problems of political transformation in the Middle East and reconstruction in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Balkans, and African countries. She is the director of the Carnegie Middle East Program and a senior associate in the Democracy and Rule of Law Program, a research endeavor that analyzes the state of democracy around the world and the efforts by the United States and other countries to promote democracy.

Before joining the Endowment, Ottaway carried out research in Africa and in the Middle East for many years and taught at the University of Addis Ababa, the University of Zambia, the American University in Cairo, and the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa.

Her extensive research experience is reflected in her publications, which include nine authored books and five edited ones. Her most recent book, *Beyond the Façade: Political Reform in the Arab World* (edited with Julia Choucair-Vizoso), was published in January 2008.

While the distorted view of U.S. power in the Middle East was particularly egregious under Bush, previous administrations also saw the United States as the key player in the region, the “indispensable” nation without whose intervention problems could not be solved, as Secretary of State Madeleine Albright claimed. It is this assumption of U.S. centrality that the Obama administration needs to give up, because there are no solutions to any of the Middle East’s problems unless the local players do more themselves.

Shifting U.S. Interests

U.S. security interests in the Middle East have shifted steadily away from the Levant since the end of the Cold War, yet U.S. policy has not. As long as the major threats came from the Soviet bloc, Egypt was the most influential country in the Middle East, the Suez Canal fully retained its strategic and economic importance, and the Levant was the natural center of U.S. security interests. But the main U.S. security interests have since moved eastward, with the major threats now coming from Iraq, Iran, and beyond into Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Yet U.S. policy cannot fully reflect this shift, because the United States remains strongly committed to safeguarding the security of the state of Israel and thus remains enmeshed in all the problems of the area. This poses a real dilemma for American foreign policy. While there is no possibility that the United States will renege on its commitment to Israel and wash its hands of the Arab–Israeli conflict, that commitment is a drain on U.S. political capital at a time when Washington needs help in facing the threats further east. The Palestinian–Israeli conflict continues to consume U.S. diplomatic efforts without a payoff, remains a major irritant in the relation between the United States and Arab countries, and is the root cause of anti-Americanism in the region. The continuing conflict in Lebanon and Syria, with all its complex ramifications, keeps the United States much more involved

in the politics of the Levant than it should be. Washington has become entangled, repeatedly and disastrously, in the sectarian politics of Lebanon, in the relations between Lebanon and Syria, and in the rivalry between Hamas and Fatah in Palestine, all issues of lesser importance than the threats further east.

The conflict between the need to refocus on the security challenges further east and the continuing drag of the Levant complicates U.S. policy. The Bush administration made a bold and ultimately disastrous attempt to break out of the old pattern and turn its attention eastward—in fact, this was explicitly part of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s strategy. But eventually it was forced to turn back to the Levant and attempt to relaunch the peace process. The assassination of former prime minister Rafik Hariri in Lebanon in February 2005, the election victory of Hamas in Palestine in January 2006, and the war between Israel and Hizbollah in summer 2006 led the Bush administration to re-engage in Lebanon and Syria. It still tried to ignore the peace process, but it was forced to give in, reluctantly, in 2007, resulting in the convening of the Annapolis conference in November. It had no choice: conflicts were festering in the region, and Arab countries, whose support the United States sought against Iran, were making it clear that they would not cooperate willingly with the United States unless it reactivated the peace process.

Sharing the Burden

In addressing old and new problems, the next administration can only hope to achieve some success if it abandons the unilateralism of the Bush administration and seeks to share the burden with other countries, in particular, with regional actors. This is not an ideological choice, an abstract preference for the principle of multilateralism over the projection of national power. It is simply a pragmatic response to two realities: one, the complexity and urgency of the problems with which the United States is faced together with the neces-

sity of addressing them simultaneously, and two, the demonstrated unwillingness of most U.S. “allies” to simply follow the U.S. lead in the greater Middle East, even when they have similar concerns. U.S. leadership has found few followers in the region. Rather than rallying around U.S. policies, Arab countries, particularly those in the Gulf, have undertaken their own diplomatic initiatives and tried to find their own solutions. The new administration needs to work with such countries, rather than dismissing their efforts as irrelevant or, worse, a hindrance.

Dealing With the Peace Process

Accepting a more multilateral approach to the Arab–Israeli peace process would mark a sharp departure for U.S. policy. For years, the United States has portrayed itself as the only country that can broker peace in the Middle East because of its supposed leverage over Israel. For its part, Israel has fully supported this claim. U.S. attempts to monopolize the broker’s role were understandable during the Cold War, when the United States feared that the participation of the Soviet Union on the side of Arabs and Palestinians would greatly complicate the way to peace. It is much less justifiable now, because it leads the United States to ignore and oppose the efforts of regional actors—who are the ones who have to make peace with Israel. Far from furthering U.S. interests and demonstrating U.S. power and influence, monopolizing the peace process puts a huge burden on the United States, while allowing Arab countries to complain endlessly about U.S. inaction, rather than seeking to do something themselves. It also leads to periods of complete stasis when U.S. attention is focused elsewhere. The Obama administration needs to depart radically from the traditional U.S. stance by welcoming and working with peace initiatives taken by regional actors.

Three current Arab undertakings could have a beneficial impact on the peace process: the Syrian–Israeli negotiations, brokered

by Turkey; the reconciliation talks between Hamas and Fatah, in which Egypt is playing the leading role with the agreement of other Arab countries; and the Arab initiative that was first proposed by Saudi Arabia in 2002 and immediately endorsed by the Arab League. It calls upon Israel to return to the 1967 borders, withdrawing its forces from all the occupied territories, including the Golan Heights; to recognize an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital; and to negotiate a just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem. In exchange, Arab states would establish normal relations with Israel and declare the Arab–Israeli conflict over. Properly understood not as a take-it-or-leave-it solution, but as the opening gambit in a comprehensive process of negotiations over territory, refugees, and mutual acceptance, the Arab initiative

The United States cannot break the deadlock on most issues without the help of countries from the region, sharing with them the burden and the responsibility.

offers more than the United States can—the promise of a comprehensive peace, rather than years of serial negotiations with individual countries and organizations.

The Arab initiative remains on the table, and Arab countries periodically try to revive it—in the weeks since Obama’s election victory, a number of Arab officials, including Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, have urged the president-elect to support it. But Arab countries have not undertaken the sustained effort necessary to transform a general idea into a detailed, workable agreement. They finally set up a follow-up committee in April 2007, with members from a dozen countries and the Palestinian Authority. The committee, however, was not empowered to negotiate with Israel, although contact through members that recognize the state of Israel was not ruled out.

The position of the United States regarding all of these plans has ranged from guarded to negative. The United States initially advised

Israel against negotiations with Syria under Turkish auspices. More recently, the U.S. position has shifted somewhat: with the negotiations between Fatah and Israel relaunched at Annapolis making no progress, the possibility of a peace deal with Syria is beginning to look like the only possible positive development. Yet, most American supporters of the Syria option claim that the United States should

Rather than rallying around U.S. policies, Arab countries, particularly those in the Gulf, have undertaken their own diplomatic initiatives and tried to find their own solutions. The new administration needs to work with such countries, rather than dismissing their efforts as irrelevant or, worse, a hindrance.

replace Turkey as mediator, using the old argument that there is no possibility of success unless the United States intervenes. Insisting on U.S. mediation, however, would likely lead to paralysis, because the new Obama administration could not immediately invest a lot in this undertaking and risk failure.

The U.S. position on the Fatah– Hamas reconciliation efforts remains negative. The United States considers Hamas a terrorist organization. Furthermore, it assumes that if the organization were ostracized and isolated, Palestinians would withdraw their support from it and turn to Fatah instead. Unfortunately, there is no evidence so far that this is happening. The Bush administration opposed early reconciliation efforts by Saudi Arabia, which mediated the February 2007 Mecca agreement, leading to the formation of a short-lived government of national reconciliation. Instead, the United States continued supporting Fatah and building up its security forces, contributing to the demise of the government of national unity and the fighting between the factions in May and June 2007. As for the Arab initiative, Washington by and large has ignored it.

The Obama administration needs to encourage all three initiatives. Encouraging negotiations between Syria and Israel under Turkish

mediation would be easy. It would only require a signal to all parties and would not get the new administration entangled in a direct effort that might fail. Declaring support for Arab mediation efforts between Hamas and Fatah would be a more delicate step. It would mark a departure from previous policy and entail some risk. But it could also have considerable benefits if the new administration linked its support for the Arab initiative to a broader understanding with Arab countries about the diplomatic efforts needed in the Middle East. Progress in the peace process has always been stymied by the reluctance of parties to talk to each other. The United States refused to talk to the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) until the 1995 Oslo agreement because the PLO was violent and did not recognize the state of Israel; it will not deal with Hamas now for the same reason. Most Arab countries refuse contacts with Israel because they do not recognize its legitimacy—hence there has been no serious follow-up to the Arab initiative. At the same time, Arab countries have been highly critical of the Bush administration for refusing to deal with Hamas and Iran.

Here is an opportunity for the new administration to break new ground: if it were to accept the idea that Hamas must be part of any peace settlement, support Arab reconciliation efforts between Hamas and Fatah, and engage with Iran, it could insist that the rule about it being impossible to make peace without dealing with one's enemies applies to all. If Arab countries want the United States to take their initiative seriously, if they indeed want peace with Israel, they need to negotiate directly with Israel. The United States can help, but Arab countries must take upon themselves the main burden of moving their initiative from an idea to an agreement.

There is no guarantee of a successful outcome. But even trying a new approach that puts Arab countries in the lead with the United States in an active supporting role would further the moral interest of the United States in Middle East peace, bring about a

much-needed improvement in the relationship between the United States and the Arab world, and do so without hurting the interests of Israel. Israel needs peace and it needs to preserve its character as a Jewish state. There can be no peace without the involvement of all Arab countries, and the preservation of Israel's identity requires a two-state solution—which will vanish as a realistic possibility if it is not acted on very soon.

Protecting U.S. Security: From a “Cold War” to a “Silk Road” Model

U.S. major security interests in the Middle East now center on Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. These security problems fall into clusters: one, centering on Iraq, Iran, and the Gulf countries, has developed as a result of the upsetting of the balance of power between Iran and Iraq by the U.S. invasion and its result: the weakening of both the Iraqi state and Sunni influence within it. The second cluster, comprising Afghanistan and Pakistan, is related to the rise of radical Islamist groups in both countries, which U.S. intervention has so far failed to bring under control. The Taliban is resurgent in Afghanistan but also has strong roots in parts of Pakistan, where it and other radical Islamist groups challenge the power and territorial control of the government. While the two clusters are related to some extent, this discussion only addresses the first directly.

Since 2001, the United States has tried two approaches to protect its security in this area. The first has been to rely on its superior military power to eliminate threats. This approach led to quick initial victories in Afghanistan and Iraq, but has since left the U.S. military bogged down in both countries and increasingly involved in cross-border incursions into Pakistan. As a result, the military is now stretched thin. Under these circumstances, attempting a military solution in Iran now would not only be politically inadvisable but also extremely dangerous, if not outright impossible.

The United States has instead resorted to different approaches toward Iran. It has tried to stop Iran's uranium enrichment program by backing—less than wholeheartedly—European attempts to negotiate with Tehran and by seeking broad international support for more onerous sanctions. It has also tried to build a Cold War–like alliance with Iran's neighbors. So far, neither policy has succeeded.

Trying a new approach that puts Arab countries in the lead with the United States in an active supporting role would further the moral interest of the United States in Middle East peace.

The alliance policy has failed because Iran's Arab neighbors, though fearful of Iran's power, do not want confrontation with it. In Iraq, the predominantly Shi'i government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is supported by Iran as well as by the United States. Members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and other Arab states are nervous about Iranian power and the possibility that Tehran might foment or at least inspire their own Shi'i populations to demand more equal rights. But no matter how much they fear Iran, they do not want to side openly with the United States. Even Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait, which allow U.S. bases on their soil, have demurred.

In 2006–2007 the United States made its most open attempt to build an anti-Iranian alliance with the GCC countries, Egypt, and Jordan—the so-called GCC+2. Despite numerous attempts by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and other high officials, the countries involved resisted. Interestingly, the country that was most willing to side with the United States and take an openly anti-Iranian position was Egypt, the most distant and least vulnerable. GCC countries took the opposite tack of building up their ties to Iran, inviting Iranian officials to attend GCC and other regional meetings, and making it clear that they saw Iran as an integral part of any regional se-

curity arrangements. At the same time, GCC countries continued to bolster their armaments and overall defense capability, although relying not just on the United States but on other suppliers, including France and Russia.

The alliance policy has failed because Iran's Arab neighbors, though fearful of Iran's power, do not want confrontation with it.

The United States has no choice but to continue diplomatic efforts to halt the Iranian nuclear program, engaging directly with that country. It already seems a foregone conclusion that the Obama administration intends to do this. At the same time, the new administration needs to abandon the Cold War–like strategy of building an anti-Iranian alliance anchored, controlled, and given its military

strength by the United States. Although Arab countries have shown great enthusiasm about Obama's election, the changing of the guard in Washington does not alter the fact that the Gulf countries remain extremely vulnerable to attack by Iran and have no interest in provoking one—they are in the same position as Finland during the Cold War.

A more promising alternative is to encourage Arab efforts to include Iran in a regional project, taking a page from the so-called “Silk Road” approach followed by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The SCO, which includes China, Russia, and the Central Asian republics, was set up to avoid a struggle for influence over Central Asia between China and Russia, promoting instead cooperative region-wide relations, not only political but economic—hence the “Silk Road” reference. Iran and its neighbors could also benefit from

Box 1 ■ Iran and the GCC Countries: A Sample of Recent News

GROWING ECONOMIC TIES

- Trade between Iran and the GCC countries increased five-fold in the 2000–2007 period. The UAE accounts for over 70 percent of the total (*Middle East Times*, November 24, 2008).
- Bahrain Prime Minister calls for increased cooperation with Iran in oil and gas (*Bahrain Tribune*, November 24, 2008).

GUARDED POLITICAL SUPPORT

- GCC secretary general visits Tehran and declares, “We support Iran's nuclear program, which is completely peaceful.” The meeting also discussed the possibility of setting up a joint Iran–GCC security organization (*Asia Times*, November 4, 2008).
- UAE and Iran sign a memorandum of understanding to set up a joint committee to discuss bilateral relations (*Kahleji Times*, October 30, 2008).

BUT SOME BILATERAL TENSIONS

- Outrage in Bahrain following an editorial in the Iranian press by Hussein Shariatmadari, adviser to Ali Kahmanei, stating that Bahrain is an Iranian province and that its people want to return to the motherland (*Middle East Now*, July 12, 2007).
- Natural gas exports from Iran to the UAE halted because of a dispute over contract (www.UPI.com, November 7, 2008).
- UAE challenges Iran on control of Abu Musa and other islands (*International Herald Tribune*, November 2, 2008).

an initiative that seeks to avoid inflaming differences and instead explores areas where cooperation is possible. The initial goal should not be to establish a formal organization like the SCO. Rather, it should be to convene meetings of Iran and its neighbors to explore common interests and areas of disagreement. This cannot be a U.S. initiative and it does not need to be. Several Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia and Qatar, have already taken steps to bring Iran into regional meetings, and they have also tried to play an important peacemaking role in the region. Saudi Arabia led the efforts at reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah until the responsibility was transferred to Egypt by an Arab League decision. More recently, Saudi Arabia has started looking beyond Iran, seeking to open a dialogue with some members of the Taliban. Qatar negotiated a solution to the standoff in Lebanon between the two rival political coalitions and has given signs of aspiring to play the role of peacemaker on a larger scale. U.S. encouragement of a regional initiative would simply push on an open door.

The “Silk Road” option would not be a substitute for the United States’ own diplomatic contacts with Iran, nor obviate the need to maintain pressure on that country to stop its development of nuclear weapons—if this can still be done. Nor would it represent an attempt to reach an improbable grand bargain on all outstanding issues. Rather, it would be a means to decrease tensions in the area and the danger of confrontation in the Gulf at a time the United States can ill afford another conflict there. Rather than taking upon itself the burden of defending members of an anti-Iranian alliance against their much more powerful neighbor, the United States should encourage the countries directly affected by the rise of Iranian power to mobilize their own efforts.

The new administration’s capacity to further U.S. interests in the Middle East and to advance the peace process will depend to a large extent on its willingness to share the burden with the countries of the region. U.S.

insistence on being at the center of every peace initiative and anchoring every security arrangement is not serving it well—it has led Washington to suffer repeated diplomatic defeats in the peace process, making it more difficult to protect U.S. security interests. Nor does a policy insisting on U.S. centrality serve the cause of peace in the Middle East. The peace process has become an intermittent

A more promising alternative is to encourage Arab efforts to include Iran in a regional project, taking a page from the so-called “Silk Road” approach followed by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

affair that proceeds or halts depending on the U.S. political cycle and thus on the president’s availability for a high-profile initiative. Arab countries complain endlessly about U.S. inaction while doing little themselves. Israel banks on Washington’s support to avoid taking steps that will be inevitable in the long run.

The new administration needs to rethink the U.S. role in the politics of the Middle East, abandon the assumption that it must be at the center of every initiative, build on what the regional countries are trying to do, and, in the process, encourage them to take more responsibility. At a time when American solutions appear deadlocked and the new president will have to concentrate his attention on the economy, sharing the burden provides a way forward. ■

The Carnegie Endowment normally does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views presented here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Endowment, its officers, staff, or trustees.

© 2008 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. All rights reserved.

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing cooperation between nations and promoting active international engagement by the United States. Founded in 1910, Carnegie is nonpartisan and dedicated to achieving practical results. Building on the successful establishment of the Carnegie Moscow Center, the Endowment has added operations in Beijing, Beirut, and Brussels to its existing offices in Washington and Moscow.

RESOURCES

Visit www.CarnegieEndowment.org/pubs for these and other publications.

The New Middle East, Marina Ottaway, Nathan J. Brown, Amr Hamzawy, Karim Sadjadpour, and Paul Salem (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008), http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/new_middle_east_final1.pdf.

The New Arab Diplomacy: Not With the U.S. and Not Against the U.S., Marina Ottaway and Mohammed Herzallah, Carnegie Paper no. 94 (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008), http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/cp94_ottaway_regional_diplomacy_final1.pdf.

Sunset for the Two-State Solution, Nathan J. Brown, Policy Brief no. 58 (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008), http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/pb58_brown_sunset_final.pdf.

Syrian–Israeli Peace: A Possible Key to Regional Change, Paul Salem, Policy Brief no. 70 (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008).

Iran: Is Productive Engagement Possible? Karim Sadjadpour, Policy Brief no. 65 (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008), http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/us_iran_policy.pdf.

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT

FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

1779 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036



FOREIGN
POLICY
for the Next President