

NEW TRENDS IN US POLICY UNDER OBAMA: PROMISES AND PERSPECTIVES*

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- (1) On assuming office, President Obama signaled three main objectives regarding the Middle East: **
 - (a) Repositioning American policies and attitudes vis-à-vis the Arab and Muslim world;
 - (b) Vigorously restarting the Israeli-Palestinian peace process;
 - (c) Reorienting US policy vis-à-vis Iran from confrontation to engagement.

- (2) In his Cairo speech Obama launched an extraordinary attempt to reach out to the Arab and Muslim world. Regardless of what one thinks about Bush's policies in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as about his approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict, the prevailing *perception* of US attitudes among Arabs and Muslims has been that they are generally anti-Arab and anti-Muslim. In his Cairo speech Obama magisterially announced a totally different approach, based – in his words – on respect and not demonization. Even those – in Israel, and probably also in Cyprus - who viewed some of his statements as somewhat unnecessarily fawning, the fact of the matter is that they did help in turning around some of the anti-American feelings among Arabs and Muslims. This is by itself important and welcome – though until now there is very little to show that the speech has had a real impact on practical attitudes and policies in the Arab and Muslim world.

- (3) This is immediately obvious in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Iraq, Obama's policy appears to be a continuation of the one adopted during the last year of

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** The focus of this paper is on the two first aspects.

Bush's presidency (guided by Gates) of slowly withdrawing from Iraq, without really being able to stabilize the country – certainly not to democratize it. In Afghanistan, Obama insisted during the campaign and the first months of his presidency that the US needs to send 50.000 more troops to Afghanistan (i.e. to escalate). He failed to get NATO countries endorse this approach or promise more troops (even not the UK). In the last weeks, Obama seems to retract and is now in the midst of a reassessment. But he is on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, he appears to realize that Afghanistan has never been a coherent polity and any attempt to force on this country of tribal/ethnic loyalties a central government has failed in the last century – and the problematic elections and delegitimization of the Karzai government have not helped; on the other hand, Obama is under pressure from his own handpicked commander (McChrystal) to send more troops. Whatever he decides, he will be criticized and may, in any case, fail. The Nobel Peace Prize has only complicated matters and somewhat narrowed his options. Whether Afghanistan will be Obama's Vietnam looms ominously over his presidency.

- (4) In the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, the outcome till now – beyond rhetorics and some photo-ops at the UN – has been meager. Obama's Mideast special representative, George Mitchell, who was supposed to inaugurate an overall peace structure, has been drawn into not very successful negotiations about details (e.g., building for natural growth in the Jewish settlements in the West Bank), and has until now failed even in bringing the two sides to the negotiating table. His task has been made even more difficult by the election of a right-wing government in Israel under Netanyahu – as well as by the fact that the official Palestinian Authority has lost control of Gaza, where a *de facto* Hamas government seems to have stabilized its hold. Nor has the US succeeded in moving Saudi Arabia to take a more pro-active and conciliatory approach vis-à-vis Israel.

- (5) It should be added, however, that even the more moderate former Israeli government under Olmert and Livni, which has negotiated with the Palestinian Authority for two years, has failed to overcome the deep gaps between even the most moderate Israeli and the most moderate Palestinian positions. The outlook at the moment is not promising. Perhaps moving from an illusory aim of conflict resolution to a more realistic approach of conflict management may be more helpful.
- (6) Beyond these immediate impediments, it seems that the Obama administration has overlooked the limits of American power – in the Middle East, as well as in other conflicts (Cyprus, Kosovo, Bosnia). The US is extremely powerful when there is local political will: in such a case, a robust and sophisticated US administration can help clinch an agreement: this happened in 1978-9 (Israel-Egypt), in 1993 (Israel-PLO) and in 1994 (Israel-Jordan). When both sides are willing, the US can help bring negotiations to a positive outcome. But when there is no local political will, or if one side is unwilling, the US is more or less impotent in bringing recalcitrant horses to the water (the 2000 Camp David meeting between Clinton, Barak and Arafat; or the Bush Road Map or Annapolis process). The failure of the Annan Plan in Cyprus, or the unresolved situation in Kosovo, show that there are clear limits to US power when at least one side feels that a proposed plan runs against its own interests.
- 7) Obama's rhetoric has been lofty and inspiring: but the harsh realities on the ground – in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as Israel-Palestine – suggest that good intentions are not enough, and more realistic approaches may in each case be needed, beyond preaching. If the Obama Administration will be able to formulate such policies, it may be too early to judge. But until now the jury is still out.