

Peace Process and Anti-terrorism: Dual Challenges Facing Obama Administration's Middle East Policy¹

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Abstract: *The negative interaction between the prioritization of anti-terrorism and the marginalization of the peace process forms a heavy heritage of Bush Administration's Middle East policy. Therefore, the Obama Administration now is confronted with a very serious test: how to establish and maintain compatible and balanced relations between peace and anti-terrorism. On the grand strategic level, the key point is whether America can reshape the regional strategic environment of the Middle East or not. Specifically speaking, the possibility of furthering the Middle East peace process is determined by the following items: the US can or can't change the strategic rigidity of its Middle East policy favorable to Israel, adopt some effective measures to make Hamas integrated into the Middle East peace process, and improve its relations with Syria and convert Syria into a constructive role in the Middle East peace process and regional security. On the issue of anti-terrorism, the compatibility between anti-terrorism and peace can be achieved only if the Obama Administration could take overall adjustment on the past anti-terrorism strategy of US, guarantee that the situation of Iraq will not deteriorate, and resolve the Iranian issue in a peaceful manner, so as to avoid being bogged down into endless warfare.*

Key Words: *US; Middle East; Peace Process; Anti-Terror Strategy*

The negative interaction between the prioritization of anti-terrorism and the marginalization of peace process became a very heavy heritage of the Bush Administration's Middle East policy. First, anti-terrorism was identified prior to other issues in the Bush Administration's Middle East strategy. The Bush Administration hastily launched the Iraq War, which actually had no substantial connection with terrorism, soon after anti-terrorist actions in Afghanistan, and became more and more deeply entrapped into the bog of the Iraq War without capability of pulling itself out of such a troublesome entrapment. These warfare and military actions made the Middle East peace process seriously marginalized,

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which could be simply and logically summarized as a repelling and weakening of the peace issue by the prioritization of anti-terrorism strategy and its mistake on its strategic direction. Second, preference and bias for Israel have become an endogenous factor of US strategic culture that is very hard to eliminate, owing to the powerful influence of the Jewish lobby in US domestic politics, and regarding Israel as a US strategic asset in the Middle East. Such bias and preference not only led to a rigidity of US Middle East strategy, but also nurtured the birth and expansion of religious extremism and international terrorism, which could be logically summarized as a strategic rigidity of the US strategy favorable to Israel that both stimulated terrorism and restricted anti-terrorist cooperation between the US and Middle East forces other than Israel.

Even before Obama entered the White House, it was broadly agreed that international anti-terrorism and the Middle East peace process would inevitably be major issues on the top agenda for the Obama Administration's Middle East strategy, owing to the break-out of warfare in the Gaza Strip and the revitalization of the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Obama's administration had to confront a very serious test: how to ease the tension and contradiction between anti-terrorism and peace, the two major issues maltreated by the Bush Administration, and establish compatible and balanced relations between these two issues, so as to achieve the objective of so-called "Restoring to Balance".³ Therefore, this article attempts to make some analysis on the major challenges confronting Obama Administration's Middle East strategy posed by the two major issues of peace process and anti-terrorism, and the mutual relations between these two major issues, taking the US Middle East strategy as the major analytical plot and outline, with some combined analysis on major issues of the Middle East.

I. Change of Regional Strategic Environment and Challenges Facing US Middle East Strategy

When Obama entered the White House, his new administration was confronted with a series of very serious, complicated, and interconnected challenges posed by the fragile situation in Iraq, deteriorating circumstances of anti-terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the thorny Iranian nuclear issue, the

³ Richard N. Haass and Martin S. Indyk, eds., *Restoring the Balance: A Middle East Strategy for the Next President* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008). This book is a research report jointly made by experts of Saban center at the Brookings Institution and Foreign Relations Council of US. Richard Haass, director of the Foreign Relations Council, is the chief of this program. The main purpose of this 300-page research report is to make a comprehensive review over the lessons of the Middle East strategy of Bush Administration and to offer new advice for the new Middle East strategy of the new US president. In addition to a comprehensive macro description of the mistakes of US Middle East strategy and possible adjustment of future strategy made by Richard Haass and other scholars, this report also makes in-depth discussion on six specific items, namely, the issues of Iraq, Iran, nuclear non-proliferation, Arab-Israel conflicts, economic and political development, and anti-terrorism in the Middle East.

intensified Israel-Palestine conflicts, and the serious decline of US prestige and influence in the Middle East region. Therefore, a research report by a US think-tank pointed out that "the president will need to initiate multiple policies to address all these challenges but will quickly discover that time is working against him."⁴ This research report also argued that "the next president will have to reprioritize and reorient US policy beyond Iraq."⁵ Therefore, the foremost mission facing the Obama Administration should be undoubtedly focused on an overall adjustment of policies that could change or even reshape the strategic environment of Middle East, which has become more and more unfavorable to the US.

At the end of the Cold War, Soviet influence faded away from the Middle East. At the same time the US launched the Gulf War in the name of liberating Kuwait from Iraqi aggression. Such evolution of the Middle East situation created a new international surroundings and regional environment that are unprecedentedly favorable to the US leadership in the Middle East peace process. Under such background, the Clinton Administration formulated its Middle East policy concentrated on "Containing Iraq and Iran in the East and Promoting Peace Talk in the West", and made a series of positive efforts to promote the Middle East peace process. However, at the end of the second administration of Clinton, the Israel-Palestine relations was again trapped into a vicious cycle of "violence against violence", because of the strong dissatisfaction of US on the Palestine National Authority led by Yasser Arafat, the utilitarian manner adopted by president Clinton to achieve Middle East peace process within his stay in the office, and the very negative impact brought by Ariel Sharon's entry into Al-Aqsa Mosque after the drastic change of political situation in Israel. When George W. Bush took into office, anti-terrorism and democracy became the two interconnected objectives of US Middle East strategy, which made Palestine-Israel peace process more and more marginalized in the dual domain of anti-terrorism and democracy.⁶

Such policies were maintained until the Annapolis Conference for Middle East peace process in the second half of 2007. Since the outbreak of the Iraq War, the US Middle East policy was dominated by Iraq issue. However, it has been proved by reality that the costly Iraq War made US Middle East strategy deviated from the core objective of anti-terrorism, and formed an Iraq dilemma that entrapped US into bog of war continuously. Meanwhile the so-called "Greater Middle East Initiative", which aimed at an expansion of democracy all over Middle East region modeled after transformation of Iraq with a system of spectacular objectives, was hastily ended. A more important circumstance is the ignorance on the Palestine issue caused by Iraq War. "For almost a decade, the United States has done little to

⁴ Ibid., p.1.

⁵ Richard N. Haass, Martin Indyk, "Beyond Iraq, a New US Strategy for the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February, 2009.

⁶ Wenzhao Tao, "Studies on Bush Administration's Middle East Policy," *American Studies*, Vol. 4, 2008. http://www.mgyj.com/american_studies/2008/fourth/fourth01.htm.

address the region's principal conflicts and concerns and instead has opened the way for Iran to make a bid for hegemony in Arab heartland." ⁷ Under such circumstances, compared to the situation at the end of the Cold War, the strategic environment of Middle East became tremendously deteriorated and unfavorable to US. "In the past 8 years, Bush Administration did changed Middle East, but at the same time it was also seriously blocked and changed by Middle East, which made it entrapped into strategic embarrassment and dilemma on several aspects." ⁸

As for the newly-established Obama Administration, the US Middle East policy should be reoriented at a reshaping of strategic environment of the Middle East by an overall improvement of US relations with the Arab-Islamic world. On the strategic level, Obama especially emphasized the integrated entirety of US Middle East policy and the importance of reshaping the relations between the US and Islamic World. He pointed out that the US might make enormous progress, if it regards this region as a whole and send a message to the Arab-Islamic world that Americans want to establish a new partnership based on mutual respect and mutual benefits. In his speech in Cairo University on June 4, 2009, he especially stressed the necessity of "seeking a brand new start between US and the Muslim world which is based on a common interest and mutual respect;" ⁹ "we must learn to listen to each other, learn from each other, and respect each other; we must seek a consensus." ¹⁰ On the specific level of policy making and implementation, a series of new policies has been drafted and put into implementation, including some reparation and adjustment on its relations with traditional allies such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, and the regional power Egypt, the enhancement on the proceeding of the Palestine-Israel peace talks, the formulation and determination of a timetable of US withdrawal from Iraq, and even some good intentions sent to radical forces such as Hamas, Syria, and Iran. Its diplomatic practice has also been adjusted. In her first visit to Asia, US Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, paid a visit to Indonesia, the most populous Islamic country. Meanwhile, President Obama visited the Middle East for twice. Furthermore, a series of important US officials has also paid frequent visits to the Middle East, including Robert Gates, US Secretary of Defense; Jim Jones, Assistant to President for National Security Affairs; George Mitchell, the Special Envoy to Middle East; and former US resident Carter. All these efforts indicated enormous efforts made by the US to reshape the strategic environment in the Middle East and to make an overall improvement of its relations with the Islamic world.

Nevertheless, nowadays the US has almost lost its leadership in the Middle

⁷ See Note 3, p.4.

⁸ Hongxi Yang, *Review on Bush's Middle East Strategy on the 7th Anniversary of 9/11*, <http://www.wyzxsx.com/Article/Class20/200808/49060.html>.

⁹ Obama-Biden Plan, <http://www.brackobama.com/issues/healthcare/>.

¹⁰ *Full Transcript of Obama's Speech in Cairo University*, http://news.163.com/09/0604/22/5B0DLSV40001121M_5.html.

East due to the heavy shadow of the relations between US and Arabic countries after 9/11 and the Iraq War, the rise of an anti-American mood among common Muslims in Islamic countries, especially those in the Middle East region, and the very strong hostility of religious extremism against the US and Western world. Actually, Arab countries to a large extent are entangled in a dilemma between expectations on the US and strong suspect over US motives and capability of involvement into Middle East affairs. Now doubts are concentrated on the following unpredictable issues: Could the US successfully withdraw its troops from Iraq, while at the same time prevent Iraq from falling into a new round of turmoil and prevent itself from falling into the bog of war in Afghanistan when its focus of fighting against terrorism is moved from Iraq to Afghanistan? How can the US handle the thorny issue of Iran, especially how to achieve its strategic objective of preventing Iran from owning nuclear weapons within the current framework of peace? What should the US do to keep a vigil on the anti-Israel and anti-US front established between Iran and Hamas and Hezbollah, which was formed through Syria? How to deal with the relations between US and Syria, the bridge for the communication between various countries of such anti-Israel and anti-Americas front? How to strengthen the anti-terror actions in Pakistan, the pivot between South Asia and the Middle East? How to establish a multilateral international framework handling Middle East affairs? How to view the continuously consolidated role of traditional European allies in the Middle East? Particularly, how to handle the disagreement between European allies and the US? How to handle its relations with Russia which is now returning to the Middle East? How to deal with the rising role of China in the Middle East affairs? All these issues are important factors that cannot be neglected in reshaping Middle East strategic environment by the US.

II. The Pressure and Challenges of Promoting the Middle East Peace Process

The Iraqi War, which was launched by US under the guidance of a strategy based on the prioritization of anti-terrorism, brought little gains to US Middle East policy. Such warfare, the hasty ending of the grand plan of democratic reform in Middle East, and rising hostility of anti-Americanism in that region, have pushed the US into a dilemma that seriously damages its "soft power". Therefore, the promotion of the Middle East peace process and fair resolutions on the Palestine issue and other problems, directly affect the possibility of the creation of a favorable regional environment for its anti-terrorism strategy, the prospect of its reshaping of its image in that region, and even the recovery of its leadership there.

It is advised by US think-tanks that the fundamental framework of peace talks between Israel and Palestine should include the following items: 1) Negotiation on the final status of Palestine: the US should come up with a compromised approach

as soon as possible, determine the principles for the resolution of this issue, and insist on the understanding reached by former President Bush and Israel in their negotiation over the issue of final status. 2) Implementation of Palestine's Commitment on its strengthening of anti-terrorism and Israeli promise of freezing the construction of Jewish settlements regulated in the Roadmap of Peace Process: The new US administration should urge Congress to increase grants to Palestine for the strengthening of Palestine's anti-terror force. Meanwhile it should reach an understanding with Israel and push it to effectively freeze its construction of Jewish settlements on the already drawn border between Israel and Palestine. 3) Improving conditions in the West Bank: The new Obama administration should work to make sure that they are getting sufficient cooperation from Israel and funding from Arab states. 4) Arab states' involvement: the US should attach great importance to the Arab Peace Initiative and the role of Arab League. Particularly, it should urge Arab states to offer financial support to the Palestinian National Authority, and to fulfill their promises to improve their relations with Israel.¹¹ From the point of view of the author of this article, the possibility of realization of the above-mentioned objectives and the prospect of any major advance of the Middle East peace process depend on the answers to the following questions.

A) Could the US shake off its strategically rigid bias for Israel?

As is known to the entire world, the US has offered enormous support to Israel, and taken a one-sided bias for Israel in the Palestine-Israel conflicts for a long term. Based on considerable data and information, some US scholars have admitted that "US has offered an unprecedented support to Israel", and "US relations with Israel have occupied a core position in its Middle East policy". They argued that "it was the unchangeable support by the US to Israel and its related effort to expand democracy in the entire region that exasperated common people in Arab-Islamic world and threatened the security of US itself". They further pointed out that the "problem of terrorism for the US to a large extent was incurred by its close relations with Israel", and that the "Israeli lobby has already influenced the core of US Middle East policy and successfully persuaded US leaders to support continuous Israeli oppression on Palestinians and to regard Iran, Iraq, and Syria as adversaries of US, which were actually regional opponents of Israel."¹²

It has been proven by the reality that the US must shake off its strategic rigidity formed by its long-term Israel policy if it really wants to do something positive on the Palestine-Israel peace process. The bias for Israel should be abandoned and a more balanced stand should be adopted on the Palestine-Israel

¹¹ See Note 3, pp.20-21.

¹² John J. Mearsheimer, Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy*, <http://mearsheimer.uchicago.edu/pdfs/A0040.pdf>.

conflict. It should influence Israel by a dual mean of persuasion and pressure, so as to promote the pragmatic resolution on such troublesome issues as the division on territories of Palestine and Israel, status of Jerusalem, returning of refugees, and the dispute over the Golan Heights between Israel and Syria. Only in this way could the US reshape its image in the Arab-Islamic world and eliminate the toxic soil that nurtures the hostility and hatred of religious extremism and international terrorism.

Compared to the Bush Administration, the Obama Administration since coming in office has somewhat modified the past stubborn attitude toward Israel, and has exerted some pressure on Israel. Now it seems that the basic resolution of the Obama Administration on this issue has been locked on a "Two States" approach. Obama clearly pointed out in his Cairo address that "the plight of Palestinian people is unbearable. US will not betray the legitimate will of Palestinian people to pursue dignity, opportunity, and establishment of their own state." He also emphasized that Israel should respect the right of Palestine to survive, and that the US does not recognize that it is legitimate that Israel keeps on constructing Jewish settlements."¹³ However, on the Israeli side, the ruling coalition based on right wing parties and organized by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has continuously denied the "two-state" approach, and repeatedly reasserted the non-separation of Jerusalem and continued expansion of Jewish settlements, with a request of a preliminary solution to the Iranian nuclear issue before any solution to Israel-Palestine conflicts.

Netanyahu demonstrated a willingness to accept the "Two States" approach stressed by Obama in his speech made in Cairo University when Netanyahu made a speech on his foreign policy. However, he attached many stern preliminary conditions to his acceptance of Obama's "Two States" approach, such as the demilitarization of Palestine, adoption of necessary measures for a guarantee of Israeli security, and permission for the "natural growth" of the current Jewish settlements; meanwhile he stubbornly persisted in a tough stand on the issue of returning of Palestine refugees and the status of Jerusalem. At the same time, Obama's new policy on Palestine-Israel relations has also been boycotted and criticized by domestic conservatives in the US, especially the pro-Israel groups. In order to maintain a balance, Obama also put an emphasis on the strategic importance of Israel, which was also reflected in his Cairo speech. When talking about Palestine-Israel relations, Obama first stressed the "impregnable union of US and Israel."¹⁴ Before his Cairo speech, Obama had also made repeated explanations that the starting point of the US Middle East policy is a guarantee on the security of Israel, emphasizing that "Israel is the most powerful one of our allies in this region, also the only country in this region where a democratic system

¹³ See Note 10.

¹⁴ See Note 10.

has been established.”¹⁵In consideration of such background, generally speaking it is very hard to change the US strategic rigidity of its bias for Israel, although Obama has imposed some pressure on Israel for some issues such as freezing the creation of new settlements in the West Bank.

B) Could the US integrate Hamas into the Middle East Peace Process?

A very serious division occurred inside Palestine, between the Palestine National Authority that has ruled the West Bank, and Hamas which has controlled the Gaza Strip. Being repelled and blocked by the US, European Union and Israel, Hamas now becomes a very troublesome barrier to the real reconciliation between Palestine and Israel, because it has insisted on a very harsh stand of violent opposition against Israel, and has frequently launched suicide bombings and rocket attacks. There are several factors leading to such a situation. The external reason is the hostility demonstrated by the US and Europe. After 9/11, the US and EU declared Hamas as a “terrorist organization”, froze its funds deposited in banks, and began to pose a policy of containment and exclusion on Hamas, which actually helped Hamas to win popular support and gain a success. In January of 2006 when Hamas came into office, the US raised three preliminary conditions to Hamas in exchange for its recognition of the Hamas government: denial of terrorism, admission of the right of survival of Israel, and acceptance of international agreements already signed by Palestine.¹⁶

However, Hamas refused to accept the pre-conditions raised by the US. Therefore, the US in return refused to admit the legitimacy of Hamas and established a coalition with Israel for an attempt to isolate and even overthrow the elected Hamas government. Such measures flared up conflicts between the two factions of Palestine, and frustrated the Palestine-Israel peace process once again. At the same time, the US still adopted a partial and one-sided support to the Palestine National Authority led by President Makmoud Abbas, further intensifying the internal division of Palestine. Moreover, Hamas was excluded from the 2007 Annapolis Conference, and was neglected by all the documents reached on that conference as well as the US-Israel-Palestine triple-party mechanism.

It is proven by reality that the US must pay attention to the existence of Hamas no matter how radical it is. How to integrate Hamas into the peace process has become a bottleneck that needs to be resolved for the realization of peace in the Middle East. First, the international community, including the US itself, should recognize the legitimate status of Hamas and its deserved position in the

¹⁵ Pierre Tristam, “Barack Obama’s Middle East Policy”, <http://middleeast.about.com/od/usmiddleeastpolicy/me0712021.htm>.

¹⁶ “Press Briefing by National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley on President’s Trip to the Middle East,” May 7, 2008, *Washington File*, May 9, 2008, p.5.

Palestine-Israel peace process. The past history has demonstrated that isolation, containment, blocking, and sanctions against Hamas will not force it to change its stand, only resulting in intensified conflicts and a deteriorated atmosphere of peace talks between Palestine and Israel. Second, the US should make joint efforts together with the whole international community to realize a mutual admission between Israel and Hamas so as to create beneficial conditions for future talks between Palestine and Israel. Finally, the most crucial point is that the US should take joint efforts with the rest of the international community to end the divided state of Palestine and to close the deep rift between Hamas and the Palestine National Authority. In brief, "in order to promote the Palestine-Israel peace process, the US president should take joint endeavors together with Arab states to integrate Hamas into the peace process and eliminate its harassment on this process. It is not possible for a divided Palestine to reach any real and serious agreement with Israel. Even if such an agreement could be reached, it is very difficult to be implemented."¹⁷

Before Obama took power, some famous US think-tanks, such as the Brookings Institution and US Foreign Relations Council, had already advised him to pay great attention and attach great importance to the status and role of Hamas. They had advised Obama of a mechanism of Egypt, Israel, and Palestine National Authority to handle the relations with Hamas, and a possibility of the participation of Hamas in the 2009 general election under the pre-conditions of ceasefire, international supervision,¹⁸ and agreement of Hamas on a really free and fair election. Since Obama became President, the US attempted to change the tough policies adopted by the Bush Administration, such as isolation and "targeted killings", and to seek to improve its relations with Hamas. It is reported by some media that Obama openly demonstrated his hope to establish a dialogue with Hamas, and former Secretary of State James Baker also proposed that Hamas could be granted rights to participate in negotiations. In March 2009, Hilary Clinton suggested in her visit to the Middle East that the US would accept the Palestinian Coalition Government, including Hamas, so long as Hamas admits Israel's right to exist.¹⁹

However, in his Cairo speech, Obama also stressed that "Hamas must end violence, admit the agreements already signed in the past, and recognize Israel's survival rights,²⁰ which are the same as the three conditions raised by the former Bush Administration. Inside Palestine, very little progress has ever been made on the reconciliation negotiations between Fatah and Hamas, which is mediated by Egypt. To some degree, this means so far little effect has been obtained from the

¹⁷ See Note 6.

¹⁸ See Note 3, p.22.

¹⁹ Jun Yang, "Hilary's Visit to Middle East: A Preheating for Engagement Policy," *People's Daily*, March 11, 2009.

²⁰ See Note 10.

implementation of US tactics of establishing and operating a triple-party mechanism of Egypt-Israel-Palestine National Authority. Therefore, as for the current relations between the US and Hamas, only very weak signs of the improvement of bilateral relations have occurred, and no substantial progress has ever been made. Therefore, Obama is still confronted with a very serious challenge of how to conciliate Hamas and through which channel or method to integrate it into peace process.

C) Could the US reconcile its relations with Syria and promote the Syria-Israel negotiations?

Syria has had very close ties with Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas of Palestine, and has a territorial dispute with Israel on the Golan Heights. So it played a very important role in current Middle East politics that cannot be ignored. It has been proven that the Bush Administration's isolation and punishment policies toward Syria have failed, which not only led to a joint front established by both Syria and Iran against US pressure, but also pushed Syria to act as a bridge between Iran and Hamas. Meanwhile US policies are also regarded as an external factor that stirred up the Israel-Lebanon conflict in 2006.²¹ So the new US administration must pay adequate attention to Syria: to improve its relations with Syria, launch Syria-Israel negotiation, seek for a complete resolution to Golan Heights issue, take advantage of Syria's influence towards Hezbollah and Hamas so as to create conditions for the resolution of problems of Palestine and Lebanon, open a negotiation with Iran so as to undermine the real basis of "Shiah Crescent" formed by Iran, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon.

As for the issue of how to manage its relations with Syria, US think-tanks have raised two pieces of advice: first, the US should abandon its policy of hostility towards Syria, and make an overall improvement on its relations with Syria. The real basis of such a measure is the sustained diplomatic relations between the US and Syria, which is not a relationship of purely hostile confrontation. US measures of softened persuasion and inducing have had some effect in recent years, and Syria itself also has a demand of improving its relations with US and getting out of the plight of being isolated internationally. But the most important prerequisite of such improvement is that the US should abandon its policy of hostility and oppression against Syria. This is "because Syria will not abandon its strategic relations with Iran unless it knows that normalized relations with the United States are forthcoming."²² Second, the US should pay more attention to the role of Turkey, its close ally, in the process of possible improvement of Syria's relations with the US and Israel, at the same time the US should also try to eliminate Syria's concerns

²¹ Degang Sun, "Analysis on the Semi-Union Relation between Syria and Iran," *Arab World Studies*, No.6, 2006.

²² See Note 3, p.18.

through its improvement of its relations with Iran.²³ Third, the reconciliation and negotiation between Syria and Israel should be promoted so as to resolve the Golan Heights issue and realize an overall reconciliation.

Some points of such advice have been reflected in Obama's Syria policy. Soon after his entry into the White House, Obama sent a congressional delegation to visit Syria. Meanwhile, George Mitchell, US Special Envoy to Middle East, paid several visits to Syria and met Syrian president. In April 2009, during his visit to Syria, he also presented a specific approach for the resolution on the dispute between Syria and Israel, which suggested a two-stage resolution to the Golan Heights, the core issue of Syria-Israel relations. This approach suggested that a Syria-Israel Joint Management Institution should be established for a cooperative development of economy and tourism promoted by both parties in that region. One-third of Golan Heights should be constructed into a natural conservation area or a peace park that is open to citizens of both countries without the request for visa. The purpose of this stage is to establish trust between the two parties. Then the second stage begins, which means a beginning of overall and enduring peace between Syria and Israel and the return of the Golan Heights to Syria from Israel.²⁴ In June 2009, four years after the recall of US ambassador to Syria, a new US ambassador has been dispatched to Syria so as to recover bilateral relations between the US and Syria. The Syrian government also adopted some stern measures to restrict activities of Hamas leaders in Syria, so as to express good will to the US. At present, it is quite likely that Syria-US relations will continuously improve, and some substantial achievement will be made on the Syria-Israel negotiation, which might become an illuminating spot of Obama's Middle East diplomacy, because both the US and Syria have a demand of improving their bilateral relations, and the hostility between Syria and Israel is much simpler and weaker than that between Israel and Palestine.

III. Challenge of the Adjustment of the US International Anti-Terrorism Strategy

Since 9/11, the Middle East peace process has hibernated for a very long term because of the prioritization of anti-terrorism in the US strategy of security and diplomacy. However, a series of facts, such as the fruitless end of "Greater Middle East Initiative", the revitalization of terrorist forces, the rise of Iran in the Middle East, and the turbulence in Iraq, all prove one thing: the failure of Bush's Middle East policy. Only through an overall adjustment of the US anti-terrorism strategy, a

²³ See Note 3, p.16. Some American scholars think that Turkey may become a mediator in the negotiation between Syria and Israel due to Turkey's close relation with Israel and its demand of disintegrating Syria-Iran union through its own influence on Syria.

²⁴ <http://world.people.com.cn/GB/9655208.html>.

prevention of re-deterioration in the Iraqi situation, a refrain from being bogged down into a new trap of warfare in Afghanistan, and a carefully operated resolution on the issue of Iran, could the Obama Administration set up a compatible relation between peace and anti-terrorism that prevents a new anti-terrorist war or regional war and supports the Middle East peace process. However, it is noted that Obama has agreed in December 2009 to send 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan and the European Union has agreed to send an additional 7,000 troops. In terms of its overall anti-terrorist strategy, the US adjustment is reflected in the following aspects:

First, the US has replaced its tough anti-terror policy of "Preemptive Strike" and "Transformation of Middle East Regimes" with a strengthening of anti-terrorist capabilities of the Middle East countries and construction of relevant institutions. US anti-terrorism experts Daniel Byman and Steven Simon have suggested that the new President should make counterterrorism an integral part of his Middle East strategy, but it need no longer be the major driver of that policy. They suggested that the new administration should focus on strengthening local capabilities to fight terrorism, and consolidate institutional construction in those "failed countries".²⁵ The Obama Administration has already abandoned the slogan of "global anti-terrorist war" and instead emphasize that "the Iraqi event reminds us that as long as there is a possibility, the US should choose resolutions through diplomatic means and establishment of international consensus."²⁶

Second, the US is now adopting a more pragmatic policy in the Middle East, so as to get the strength of ethics. Experts such as Richard Haass thought that the Bush Administration's policy of democratic transformation of the Middle East already resulted in seriously negative outcomes, and argued that the U.S should "recalibrate its Middle East political reform agenda". They pointed out that the new President "will need to strike a more sustainable balance between American interests and American values. Given the situation of the region at the moment, it would be better to support a long-term, evolutionary democratization process in which the United States emphasizes the value of strengthening civil society and reinforcing the institutions of democracy." The core of such assertion is to ease the tension between the US and the Middle East and Islamic countries that has been brought by Bush's policy of "democratic transformation". Furthermore, they put their hope of democratic transformation on the "younger generation" of the Middle East. In their opinion, the two issues with the highest urgency should be the closing-down of Guantanamo prison and a prioritization of the Palestine issue, while a mission that costs a longer term should be the establishment of a wholly new order in the Middle East full of peace and much more tolerance.²⁷ Obama

²⁵ See Note 3, pp.187-216.

²⁶ See Note 10.

²⁷ See Note 3, pp.11-12.

thinks that democracy is still an important issue in the US Middle East strategy, but at the same time "it is not right for a state to impose its political system on another state."²⁸

Finally, the US should reestablish the multilateral international framework for anti-terror cooperation. Joseph Nye pointed out that Bush's unilateralism policy had already exhausted American soft power resources, and offered three suggestions for the recovery of American soft power: a policy adjustment to seek an approach of political resolution in Iraq; much more effort to promote the Middle East peace process; and a closer cooperation with allies and international organizations.²⁹ Anti-terrorist expert John Brennan said that the US government must fundamentally redefine anti-terrorism, and replace the so-called "anti-terrorism war" with a campaign that concentrates on national capacity and powers of various aspects, so Washington must combine military strikes with more sustainable soft power means such as its influence of economy, diplomacy, and economy.³⁰

The most outstanding change of the specific tactics of Obama's anti-terrorism policy is reflected in the eastward transition of its focus of anti-terrorism from Iraq to Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, the biggest problem now confronting the US is how to avoid a negative interaction between Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The mainstream of public opinion of both the international community and US thought that the trouble in Iraq was still very serious although the overall situation of security in Iraq had been greatly improved. US scholar Steven Peter maintains that "serious challenges to security still existed", the Al Qaeda and the Mahdi Army led by Al-Sadr still had the capability of recovery, and the current political process was still very fragile and limited. He argued that the divided and immature political system with very inadequate institutionalization made any political reconciliation very difficult, and the increase of US military presence in Iraq was the major cause that led to the improvement of security situation in Iraq. In his opinion, the most crucial decision that new president should make is how and when to withdraw US troops from Iraq.³¹ He further explained that the challenges confronting the new President of the US included the problems of refugees, Kurd issue, and the handling of the regional elements around Iraq.

Upon his entry into the White House, Obama already determined that all the US troops should withdraw from Iraq. Simultaneously, he strengthened the anti-terrorist actions in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Nevertheless, the US is now confronted with a series of challenges: on the one hand, the US must ensure an overall stable situation in Iraq so as to refrain Iraq from being again trapped

²⁸ See Note 10.

²⁹ Josef S. Nye, Jr., "America Must Regain Its Soft Power," *IHT*, May 19, 2004, p.8, <http://www.cp.org.cn/show.asp?NewsID=538>.

³⁰ <http://world.people.com.cn/GB/9820791.html>.

³¹ See Note 3, pp.27-58.

into a bog of vicious escalation of civil war when the strategic focus of anti-terrorism is moved away to Afghanistan and Pakistan; on the other hand, the US must strengthen the effect of anti-terrorism in Central and South Asia while at the same time avoid being trapped into another bog of warfare of anti-terrorism. Although US has got some anti-terrorist achievement in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the overall prospect still does not deserve too much optimism. Some US think tanks even thought that stabilizing and reconstructing Afghanistan would be a long-term mission that at least would cost ten years. Meanwhile, more and more severe explosions happened in Iraq that incurred numerous deaths, after US troops have presently withdrawn from Iraqi major cities, which implies that the security situation in Iraq was still so serious that any optimism seemed to be groundless. Such a situation also posed a very serious challenge to the scheduled withdrawal of troop from Iraq.

Another important factor restricting US anti-terrorism strategy and its peace policy in Middle East is how to improve its relations with Iran. The tension and confrontation between the US and Iran is an important heritage of Bush Administration. In addition to the long-term confrontation between the US and Iran brought by the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979, anti-terrorism and nuclear issue have become the major factors leading to their confrontation. After 9/11, Iran adopted a stand and even some substantial measures of supporting the international anti-terrorism, but the US regarded Iran as "the most active supporter of international terrorism in the world", put it on the top of the list of "Ten Largest Terrorist States", and even listed it as one of the "Axis of Evil" later.³² When Bush was in office, the US imposed serious pressure on Iran by means of sanctions, while at the same time it threatened to implement preemptive strike strategy to destroy its nuclear capability many times, or even promote an overthrow of the Iranian regime.³³ But ironically, it was the two anti-terrorist wars launched by the US that subverted the regimes of Taliban and Saddam Hussein and removed the geopolitical adversaries obstructing Iran's rise. Restricted by various domestic and international factors, the Bush Administration could not put into implementation its original plan of military strikes on Iran. On the contrary it was trapped in a dilemma by the diplomatic campaigns launched by Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad that combined both tough stands and soft postures.

When handling the Iranian nuclear issue, Obama stressed that a direct contact with Iranian leaders through diplomatic channel would be more effective and helpful to the resolution of this issue than pure strengthening of sanctions. A research report presented by some US think tanks maintained that direct contact with the Iranian government for a change of Iranian manner, which was also called

³² Zugui Gao, "Analysis on Bush Administration's Iran Policy," *West Asia and Africa*, No.3, 2004, pp.46-47.

³³ Interview of the Vice President by Richard Wolffe, *Newsweek Magazine*, The Vice President's West Wing Office: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/01/20070128.html>

a “pathway to coexistence”, would be an inevitable choice of the US. This is because neither a military strike nor a support to Iranian internal reform could effectively overthrow the Iranian regime. On the contrary, such measures will only stir up Iranian revenge towards the US military presence in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and even push Iran to pose some influence on Hamas and Hezbollah through the channel of Syria, which may further the Israel-Palestine peace process. The report pointed out that the new US President should show some respect to the legitimate national interests that the Iranian government pursues. As for the Iranian nuclear issue, this report advised a multilateral mechanism including the US and Iran, which could be similar to the six-party talks for the North Korean nuclear issue.³⁴ Obama also emphasizes that “there are many issues that need discussion between our two countries, and we are willing to promote the exchange between our two countries on the basis of mutual respect without any conditions attached.”³⁵

It is certain that there is some possibility of making great breakthroughs in the US-Iran relations after a long-term confrontation between the two countries for 30 years since the Iranian Islamic Revolution. It is also certain that the possibility of a war launched by the US against Iran can be reassuringly discredited. Currently, US-Iran relations are still in a stage of mutual probing and intricate mutual gaming. Now contact plus pressure is still the major means of the US Iran policy. On the one hand, the US demonstrated its willingness to resolve their disagreements through diplomatic channel and to establish a constructive relation with Iran, with a suggestion that the US would not seek an overthrow of the current Iranian government, and that Iran can peacefully use nuclear energy. On the other hand, the US still warned Iran of possible serious sanction if it refuses to make any changes. Although both parties showed some good intentions and expectations for an improvement on their bilateral relations since Obama took office, generally speaking, there is no major breakthrough so far. Just as some think-tanks pointed out, the Iran issue was perhaps the most troublesome problem facing Obama during the implementation of his Middle East strategy. The future result of the US Middle East strategy will be directly determined by the prospect of a resolution to the Iran issue and the possibility of an improvement on Iran-US relations, which is a test to Obama’s wisdom, because Iran has an enormous influence on the issues of Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel-Palestine peace process, and even the whole situation of the Middle East.

³⁴ See Note 3, pp.59-92.

³⁵ See Note 10.