

# Adjustment of Obama's Middle East Policy and the Trend of the Region's Hot-spot Issues

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**Abstract:** *There are three dynamics and five attributes for the Obama administration's adjustment in its Middle East policy. The changing Middle East policy highlights the following points: shifting anti-terror battlefield from Iraq to Afghanistan, withdrawing troops from Iraq in a step-by-step manner, taking a positive attitude towards Palestine-Israel peace talks, striving to initiate a face-to-face dialogue with Iran, and settling international disputes by diplomatic means. However, the solution to Middle East hot-spot issues hinges on some uncertain factors which are the most important and most challenging part in the Obama administration's foreign policy.*

**Key Words:** *Obama Administration; Policy Adjustment; Greater Middle East; Hot-spot Issues; Middle East Security Studies*

Currently, the primary issue facing the Obama administration is how to deal with the domestic financial crisis and economic slowdown, and its foreign policy has to serve the task. However, as a superpower, the US should attach importance not only to domestic financial and economic issues, but also to overall diplomatic affairs. The Middle East issues, for instance, are among the thorniest issues that the Obama administration has to tackle with. With the slogan "transformation," Obama succeeded in winning the general election and thereafter carried out a series of adjustment of the US foreign policy, including on the Middle East issues.

## I. Dynamics and Attributes of the Policy Adjustment

There are basically three factors giving impetus to the Obama administration's policy adjustment. First, George W. Bush's Middle East policy had turned out to be a failure in various aspects so much so that the US is trapped in various predicaments. Second, the new administration's policy adjustment originates from Obama's new philosophy of liberalism, which is a sharp contrast to Bush's conservative norm. Third, the US comprehensive national power has declined, and the new administration cannot afford the previous erroneous policy partly due to the impending financial and economic crisis. Obama is forced to re-differentiate the urgent and less urgent issues in the Middle East and reorder them. Objectively speaking, as early as the second presidency of Bush administration, the US Middle East policy had gotten some preliminary adjustment, yet it was tentative, not

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drastic. On that basis, Obama administration carried on that adjustment, which is revealed in the new concept of “smart power” diplomacy. The adjustment features the following attributes.

First, the new administration attaches greater importance to diplomatic and political means, highlighting engagement and dialogue. “Carrot plus stick” was traditionally American diplomatic practice. The Bush administration resorted to force and put “preemptive” doctrine and “regime change” theory into practice, and launched the Afghan and Iraq Wars respectively, causing both regional and global turmoil. The US government not only failed to achieve its strategic goals, but wrecked their national image as well. Hence, Hilary Clinton, US Secretary of State, claimed that the new administration would implement “smart power,” which implied that the comprehensive means of diplomatic, economic and military power as well as legal means would be combined.<sup>2</sup> US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates also stated that, due to American intelligence failure ahead of the Iraq War, the new administration would take a more cautious stance before launching any further preemptive strike in the future.<sup>3</sup> Admittedly, the Obama administration will not abandon its “stick policy” easily, and will inevitably implement sanctions, subversion and even military intervention if necessary. For instance, Obama claimed that America reserved the right to take unilateral action against forces that attempts to undermine US targets<sup>4</sup>, revealing his hard-line foreign policy too.

Second, the new administration tends to coordinate with allies, other big powers, the UN, as well as regional powers, and unilateralism will be confined in its future diplomacy. Secretary of State Hilary acknowledged that the US was not able to solve problems unilaterally, so it needed the international community’s support and coordination. Simultaneously, she stressed that the world could not cope with any problem without the participation of the US, implying that the US would maintain and continue to play a dominant role in international and Middle East affairs.

Third, the new administration endeavors to better its image in the Arab-Islamic world. After the 9/11 attack, President Bush claimed that the US would launch a new Crusade against “Islamic Fascism,” targeting at Islam in anti-terror campaign. The Afghan and Iraq Wars as well as the US’ partiality to Israel stimulated waves of anti-American sentiment in the Arab-Islamic world. At his inauguration, Obama stressed that, in face of the broad Muslim world, America would explore a new road to progress on the basis of common interest and mutual respect. After he was elected President, he showed his goodwill to the Arab world when he was interviewed by Al Arabia. Obama said apologetically that America used to make indiscreet remarks or criticism from the very beginning, so in the

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<sup>2</sup> Hilary Clinton, “The US Attempts to Strengthen Its “Smart Power,” *Xinmin Evening News*, January 14, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> “The US Will Be More Cautious in Launching a Preemptive Strike in the Future,” *Reference Information*, March 14, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Xuecheng Liu, “Obama Administration’s Diplomatic Framework and the Trend of Its China Policy,” *International Issue Studies*, No. 2, 2009.

future, it would learn to listen to different opinions from the very beginning.<sup>5</sup> This kind of gesture was quite rare in the American diplomacy of the past.

Fourth, the US will attach great importance to the solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. For a long time, the Bush administration ignored the crucial position of the Palestinian issue in the mindset of the Arab-Islamic masses, and neglected Palestinian people's rights to restore their national values, being indifferent to their strong desire to recover their occupied lands. Instead, the US showed consistent partiality for Israel, which stirred up great dissatisfaction of the Muslims and their governments. However, on the third day of his Presidency, Obama said he would take an initiative to bring peace to Palestine-Israel region, and strive to end Arab-Israel conflict. Later on, he nominated former Senator George Mitchell as his special envoy for the Middle East affairs, showing his urgent need to solve the Palestine-Israel conflict.<sup>6</sup>

Fifth, the new administration strives to spread American democracy, liberty and values steadily. The Bush administration put forward his "Greater Middle East Initiative", and argued that the lack of democracy is the root cause of the Middle East to fall into the hotbed of terrorism. However, democratic reform had, inevitably, challenged the status and existing interests of the ruling parties in the Arab countries. Consequently, the Initiative was not only opposed by many Arab people, but also was resented by various governments in the area. Obama is not ready to abandon the dissemination of American democracy and value. Nevertheless, the reality has told him that the blind implementation of "democratic reform" could only push Islamic radicals to the national leadership. Without the support of the current Arab ruling parties, the enforcement of US Middle East policy will encounter overwhelming obstacles. As a result, Western democracy and values could only be spread gradually, based on specific national conditions. Compared with democratic reform, maintaining congenial relations with the moderate Arab countries seems to be more essential to America's national interest.

## II. The Hot-spot Issues Remain the Key to Obama Administration's Diplomacy

The Obama administration's Middle East policy is currently in the process of readjustment, which might be revised in accordance with the new international situation. In spite of that, the framework is just over the horizon.

First, the focus of US anti-terror war has been transformed from Iraq to Afghanistan. The new administration has publicized its plan to withdraw troops from Iraq and strengthen its force in Afghanistan. On one hand, Obama wants to honor his promise in the general election campaign; on the other hand, he would like to lessen the burden of military expenditure in Iraq. Moreover, the adjustment

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<sup>5</sup> "The US will no longer make indiscreet remarks or criticism," *Xinmin Evening News*, January 28, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> "Obama Attempts to Shake off the 'Shadow' of Bush," *Jiefang Daily*, January 24, 2009.



results from his perception of the new situation. The security situation in Iraq is improving, while the Taliban is recovering and staging a comeback in Afghanistan, and the latter has become the main battlefield for the anti-terror campaign. Yet, the US military department was cautious in assessing the Iraq situation, and convinced that the security situation was still very fragile and was far from satisfaction. It could not be excluded that the situation might be worse off in the future. Hence, it was inappropriate to withdraw troops in a rush. The US current plan to withdraw troops is actually slightly different from Obama's previous promise to finish the process within 16 months, which might have been influenced by the military generals. Before the plan was publicized, the US and Iraq reached an agreement with the US promising to sell \$5 billion-worth heavy weapons to Iraq to strengthen the Iraqi military capability. Obama's administration might be convinced that the arms sale deal would stabilize Iraqi situation, deter Iran and help the US control the region. Since the onset of Iraq War, as many as 4259 American soldiers have been killed, 35 thousand injured, and as much as \$700 billion spent. The US would not give up its control of Iraq easily.

In March 2009, Obama declared its new strategy toward Afghanistan, stressing that the US clear-cut goal is to sabotage, combat and defeat al-Qaeda to guarantee the security of America and the international community. Originally it was decided that the US would surge by 17 thousand soldiers. Later on, four thousand more were added. Besides, the new strategy contains the following points: in the next five years, the annual aid of \$1.5 billion will be provided to Pakistan to better its economy, stabilize the Afghan political situation, and strengthen its capability and motivation to support US anti-terror campaign; efforts will be made to train Afghan security force, which will reach 134 thousand by 2011, and the police force will rise to 82 thousand; ideally the Taliban will be undermined, and armed forces willing to reconcile will be integrated; endeavors will be made to develop the economy, ameliorate people's livelihood and destroy the basis of pro-radical forces in Afghanistan; the US will keep contact and cooperation with local governments and leaders of the tribes. It is obvious that the US is determined to fulfill its dream in Afghanistan.

Second, on the one hand, the US is taking a positive stance in facilitating Palestine-Israel and Syria-Israel peace talks. In early March 2009, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton paid a visit to the Middle East, and declared at the conference of Gaza reconstruction that the US would offer \$900 million aid to Palestine. Considering that the US is being trapped by the world-wide financial crisis, this should be regarded as a generous gesture symbolizing that the US has attached great importance to Palestine-Israel peace process and aimed at leaving a favorable impression in the Arab world. Despite the above US gesture, Benjamin Netanyahu, the new Prime Minister of Israel and the leader of Likud, is opposed to the founding of an independent Palestinian state. Hilary Clinton insisted that the two-state scenario should be "inevitable," and the founding of a Palestinian state also should be in conformity with Israeli interests. She even openly criticized the Israeli effort to

build more settlements. Undoubtedly, the new US Middle East policy has formed a sharp contrast to that of the Bush administration. On the other hand, although she was firm to promote the Middle East peace process, she reiterated that the US would continuously guarantee Israeli security; the US resolutely supported only Mahmoud Abbas, the leader of Fatah, and combated Hamas continuously. Secretary Clinton reiterated that Hamas must stop its violence, recognize Israel, and accept all agreements signed on the previous Palestine-Israel peace talks. Otherwise, America would not negotiate with it, nor would Hamas be allowed to use the international grant. Although according to some media, the US and Hamas have reportedly contacted, she remained tough toward Hamas in public. Undoubtedly, the Obama administration has adhered to the old policy at the Annapolis conference, but now it is more active and serious to support the peace process. Different from the previous presidency, Obama's administration encouraged Syria and Israel to restart peace talks. During her visit to the Middle East, Clinton declared that two special envoys would be sent to Syria, partly for the sake of wedging Syria-Iran alliance. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said his government was willing to restart peace talks with Israel if the US was willing to act as a mediator.

Third, the Obama administration stressed that it was willing to start a direct dialogue with Iran and settle their bilateral disputes through diplomatic means. The Bush administration regarded Iran as one of the "Axis of Evil" tri-parties as well as an arch-enemy of the US, and charged that it was pursuing the development of nuclear weapons. The US exerted sanctions and subversion on Iran, and even threatened to launch a military strike. Iran has maintained a hard-line policy and has never compromised publicly. The intense bilateral relations frequently pushed the Gulf region onto the verge of war. After being elected President, Obama held out "the olive branch", saying that if the Iranian President loosened his fist, the US was willing to offer his its hand. On March 20, 2009, on the eve of Iranian New Year, Obama delivered a positive message again that, he was willing to make it clear that despite the serious difference between the two nations, the US government was committed to settling all existing problems by diplomatic means, and was ready to establish a constructive partnership among America, Iran and the international community.<sup>7</sup> Domestically, the Iranian government has already reached a consensus on carrying out dialogue with the US, and it welcomed Obama's remark. The Iranian government also argued that Obama administration must take actions to make up for their previous mistakes.<sup>8</sup> On March 21, 2009, Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Khamenei, the supreme religious leader, said that there was no change of policy towards America. Nevertheless, if the US took an initiative, the Iranian attitude towards the US would change accordingly.<sup>9</sup> But

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<sup>7</sup> "Obama Attempts to 'Construct' a New US-Iran Relations," *Jiefang Daily*, March 21, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> "It Is not Enough for America to Change Its Policy on Words, and It Must Be on Deeds," *Jiefang Daily*, March 22, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> "The Situation in Afghanistan Has Attracted Great Concern Again," *People's Daily*, January 22, 2009.



actually, several days before Obama made that remark, the US declared that it would extend sanction against Iran for one more year. Moreover, the spokesperson of US State Department reiterated that Iran must abandon its nuclear program and stop financing terrorist groups. It seems that the two sides are both willing to negotiate, but they are waiting for the other side to take initiative to “loosen his fist.”

It is self-evident that the Obama administration’s Middle East policy adjustments are mainly about the means and tactics, not strategic targets. These targets include: controlling the whole region, maintaining the US dominant position, guaranteeing that the US core interest would not be challenged, enhancing anti-terror campaign, preventing proliferation of WMDs, and disseminating American democracy. The US has always regarded Israel as the pillar in implementing its Middle East strategy, and the US pro-Israel stance will remain unchanged. Virtually, the adjustment in Obama’s Middle East policy does not aim at giving up the area, but better serving its strategic target. In accordance with the US media, the top agenda of the Obama administration can be generalized into “one center, two wars and three focal points.” In other words, economic rejuvenation is the US’ central task and primary agenda, and Obama’s foreign policy must center on the major objective; Afghan War and Iraq War are two conundrums that the US has to face and address seriously; the three focal points are the Palestine-Israel Conflict, and the Iranian as well as DPRK’s nuclear issue. All the above hot-spot issues are from the “Greater Middle East Region” except DPRK’s nuclear issue, composing the major challenges of the US diplomacy. Afghanistan is now viewed as the very frontline of US anti-terrorism; the promotion of Palestine-Israel peace process, the withdrawal of troops from Iraq and the maintenance of Iraq is conducive to the improvement of US national image in the Arab-Islamic world and the remission of anti-America sentiment in this region; handling the US-Iran relations is the key to tackling terrorism, preventing proliferation of WMDs and safeguarding the US dominant position in the Middle East.

### **III. The Hot-spot Issues in the Greater Middle East are also Conundrums Facing the New Administration**

The Greater Middle East hot-spot issues are so complex in essence that they are analogized as “hot potatoes.” The US launched its anti-terror war in Afghanistan eight years ago, yet up to now, bin-Laden, the terrorist tycoon, is still at large, and the Taliban force has not been eradicated. Recently, the Taliban has come back, and the territory it controls or impacts has been enlarged from 54% in 2007 to 72% in 2008 in Afghanistan. In early 2009, Taliban force attacked three departments of Afghan government, including the judicial department, which shocked the nation and the region. The US declared its intention to increase troops from 34 thousand to 66 thousand. Moreover, the Obama administration requested that NATO and EU members should come to aid Afghanistan, but received almost no positive responses. Undoubtedly, the US cannot go alone without Afghan

neighboring countries' support and coordination in its military action. The most essential neighbor is Pakistan, a nation with an unstable and complicated domestic situation. The central Asian states, such as Kyrgyzstan, demanded that the US close its military base in that nation, which might exert a far-reaching impact on logistics of US-led anti-terror troops in Afghanistan. That State is called "Cemetery of Empires," for Great Britain and former Soviet Union had tried in vain to conquer it and declined after that. Mr. Smith, a British military leader in Afghanistan, admitted lately that the NATO force could not win a war in Afghanistan. In 2002, Lieutenant General Deron, the commander of "Python Campaign," stated that sending more troops to Afghanistan is tantamount to sending more targets to be attacked. The situation in Afghanistan is more complex than that in Iraq because tribes there are more powerful, each attempting to do things in separate ways. There are so many precipitous mountains and there is such a complex terrain in Afghanistan that advanced American weapons can hardly display their magical power. Located at the crossroad of the Middle East, South Asia and Central Asia, Afghanistan's internal situation hinges on the surrounding regions. The US war in Afghanistan is bound to be arduous and long-lasting.

In the future, Iraq will remain to be full of uncertainty. With American being troops withdrawn, it is hard to estimate whether Iraq will achieve stability or to sink into turmoil, but few observers are optimistic. After the American troops began to withdraw, violence has already come back to Iraq, and it is not unlikely for "al-Qaeda" to recover the nation. Iraqi Kurds have enjoyed high autonomy, but it is undecided whether they could restrain their own independence and maintain the *status quo*. Moreover they are struggling with the Sunnis and Shiites for the dominance of oil resources in the North. The Sunnis and Shiites, who have controlled Iraq before and after the Iraq War respectively, have never stopped rivaling each other for power. It is estimated that contradictions inside the Shiites and between different parties will have new developments. At the sixth anniversary of the Iraq War, the Shiite Jaish al-Mahdi, led by Muqtada al-Sadr, organized a demonstration, demanding that American force withdraw from Iraq. The anti-American force not only exists, but also plays an important part in inter-ethnic, inter-religious group and inter-party conflicts. The Obama administration's practice of providing heavy weapons to Iraq may turn out to be a double-edged sword. Once violence or conflict erupts, these heavy weapons probably will worsen the conflict. For example, supposing that the advanced weapons fall into anti-American force's hands, it will be nothing but a nightmare. Besides, there is little progress in Iraqi post-war economic reconstruction, and people's lives have not reached the pre-war level yet. Their dissatisfaction will be the source of chaos and instability. There is no denying that the neighboring countries have their respective interest orientations, and not all of them are willing to keep pace with America in stabilizing Iraq. It is still



too early to predict whether the rise of Iranian influence in Iraq is a fortune or calamity to America.

At the end of 2008, Israel invaded Gaza. Over 1300 Palestinians were killed and 5500 injured, which might deepen Palestinian hatred to Israel and further stagnate Palestine-Israel peace process. Later on, during the general election, the Israeli right wing won 65 seats among 120 seats in the Knesset. Benjamin Netanyahu, the leader of Likud, was invited to form a new cabinet by President Peres. Netanyahu does not accept the founding of an independent Palestine state, nor the principle of "Land for Peace," which is quite different from that of Obama administration. During her visit to the Middle East, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton urged that Israel should coordinate its foreign policy with the US. Despite the fact that the US is partial to Israel, it will not tolerate it to undermine American effort to accelerate the Middle East peace process. The Israeli Labor Party has promised to participate in Netanyahu's administration. According to the agreement they reached, the new administration at last promised to carry out peace talk with Palestine, which might be a result of US or EU pressure. Yet, inside Palestine, Fatah and Hamas are still in a state of disunity. During Israeli military campaign in Gaza, Abbas-led Fatah held an ambiguous attitude, and actually their prestige declined for that. Although America firmly backs up moderate Fatah, Israeli right-wing's tough policy has helped Hamas to magnify its support. The Arab countries have endeavored to facilitate reconciliation of Fatah and Hamas, so that they could establish a united and consolidated government, enhancing their status in negotiation with Israel. Thanks to their mediation, the two sides reached consensus on such issues as hosting simultaneous elections of Chairman of the Palestinian National Authority and legislators, and on the reform of armed forces, but fundamental disputes remain, particularly on the points of the guiding principles and constitution of the united government as well as on the means of the legislative election. If the two parties cannot fulfill consolidation, it is unlikely for the Palestine-Israel peace talk to go smoothly. Moreover, the external factor cannot be neglected. For instance, the US and Israel regard Hamas as a terrorist group and make great effort to contain it. During his election campaign, Netanyahu promised that he would overthrow the Hamas administrative machine in Gaza. Iran, the primary supporter of Hamas, is also opposed to Palestine-Israel peace talks publicly. If the peace process remains in a state of stagnation, violence and conflict between Palestine and Israel will be inevitable, and the vicious cycle of violence-peace talk-deadlock of peace talk-violence can never be broken.

The US-Iran dialogue is probably only a question of time. The US requested Iran to "loosen its fist," but did not refer to the implication of such a loosening. Compared with that, Iran asked the US to correct its mistakes, and put forward some specific requirements. On March 22, 2009, Iran demanded that the US should unfreeze Iranian funds in American banks, abandon its hostile attitude towards Iran on the international arena, and stop standing by Iranian anti-government



sects. It is unknown whether the US will meet their demand.<sup>10</sup> According to some media, the US and Iranian diplomats have already contacted each other twice in Lebanon, which is obviously a preliminary talk for official bilateral negotiations in years to come. Since the two countries' bad relations have lasted for three decades, it can hardly be normalized in a short period of time. The Afghan and Iraq War launched by the US have not only wiped off two Iranian arch-enemies of the Taliban and Saddam regimes, but also helped Iran to expand its influence in Iraq. Nevertheless, Hamas and Hezbollah, backed up by Iran, are regarded by the US as terrorist groups; Iran's old enemy, Israel, is the pillar for the US to enforce its Middle East strategy. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has repeatedly warned that "Israel must be wiped off from the map." Israel is also very worried about the Iranian nuclear program.

Iran reiterated that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes, but the West community holds that it aims at developing nuclear weapons. Boasting rich oil and natural gas resources, Iran has never hidden its ambition to be a regional power. In 2008, the US Ministry of Defense considered to launch a pre-emptive strike against Iranian nuclear facilities, and finally had to abandon the project due to Bush's opposition. Apart from military means, the Bush administration resorted to other ways to exert pressure on Iran, but could not force it to give in. The structural contradiction between Iran and the US can hardly be mitigated, nor can the two sides compromise their respective principles. Nevertheless, it is also worth noting that they have some converging interests, such as combating Taliban forces and "al-Qaeda." The Obama administration highlighted that it would strive to settle disputes through diplomatic means and dialogue, which ought to be welcome. In any case, dialogue and negotiation are better than confrontation and war. On the condition that the US and Israel reduce the possibility to launch a war against Iran, the Middle East situation will stop deteriorating. The international community pins a high expectation on possible achievements of US-Iran negotiation.

To sum up, there are so many interests in the Middle East and this region is so crucial to US global strategy that Obama's administration cannot afford to give up on the Middle East. At present, some of the hot-spot issues in the region are caused by America, such as the Afghan War and Iraqi turbulence; others are linked with the US, such as Palestine-Israel conflict and Iranian nuclear issue. The US can barely sever its link with these regional issues. These hot-spot issues will remain essential and difficult points in the Obama administration's foreign policy. Neither can the new administration wash its hands in front of these problems, nor can it solve them easily. The academia is awaiting the US reaction and response to these problems.

On June 4, 2009, President Obama gave a speech, "A New Beginning" at the University of Cairo, in which he stressed 7 areas of tension between the US and the

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<sup>10</sup> "Iran Puts forward Specific Conditions for Dialogue with the US," <http://world.people.com.cn/gb/1029/4236/9011118.html>(2009-03-23).



**Muslim world, but also he emphasized the possibilities for cooperation, leading toward mutual peace and security for the region.**