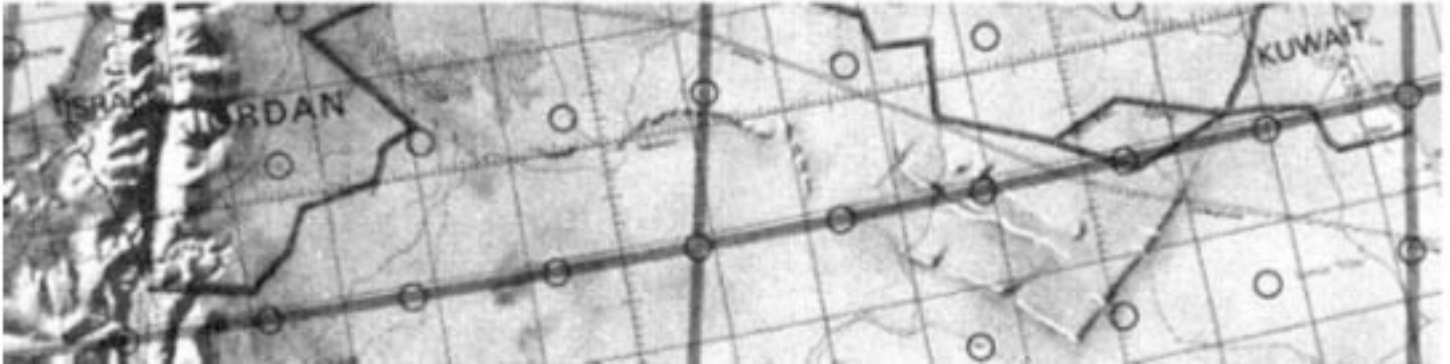


# MIDDLE EAST PAPERS

Middle East Strategy at Harvard



## How Not to Fix the Middle East *by Martin Kramer*

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**“Which area of the world do you consider to be of greatest strategic importance to the United States?”**

Forty-six percent of American international relations professors say the Middle East, in a 2008 [poll](#).

Thirty percent say East Asia including China; a mere six percent name the former Soviet Union. Yet when the same international relations professors are asked which region will be of greatest strategic importance twenty years from now, the Middle East loses its place of primacy: 68 percent predict it will be East Asia, only 11 percent predict it will be the Middle East.

Why? Embedded in this prediction is perhaps the anticipation that China will grow might-

ier. Perhaps there is also an expectation that alternative energy sources will diminish the importance of the Middle East. But no doubt the prediction rides on some expectation that by then, the United States will have fixed the Middle East, so that it no longer generates the kinds of crises that have put it in the cockpit of world politics. Interestingly, these same professors also preferred Barack Obama over John McCain by about ten to one. No doubt they imagine that this shift will begin on his watch, and that his new ap-

proach is destined to shrink the Middle East to its pre-9/11 size on America's horizon. It is arguably for this anticipated pacification of the Middle East that President Obama has already been awarded the down-payment of the Nobel Peace Prize.



One year into this long-term prediction, is there any evidence that the Middle East is shrinking? Hardly. The “war on terror” may have been dropped from the lexicon, but the United States will send 30,000 troops to Afghanistan in addition to the 70,000 now there. There are still almost 120,000 troops in Iraq. Elsewhere, future crises loom. Iran is closer to a nuclear capability, and the diplomacy to prevent it seems stalled. Israel and the Palestinians aren't even in a negotiation anymore, and early mistakes by the administration have made resumed diplomacy even more remote. The Obama administration hasn't found a reset button for the Middle East, and the buttons it is pushing aren't doing much of anything. Obama's Nobel Peace Prize ceremony looms as the potential equivalent of George Bush's “Mission Accomplished” speech just after the fall of Saddam: premature and ominous.

Pundits, analysts and professors of international relations, left, right, and center, are scratching their heads and asking what went wrong. President Obama's supporters obviously expected much more, but everyone anticipated at least a higher level of competence than that of the second Bush administration. Yet here is Harvard's Stephen Walt, an

Obama supporter, on his [blog](#): “I never thought I'd write the following words, but is it possible that Obama's handling of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process might actually end up being worse than George Bush's? It's still too soon to go there, but the

fact that the question even occurred to me ain't exactly encouraging.” On the other side, Elliott Abrams has [called](#) the administration's Middle East policy “a complete failure,” a series of “disasters.” Walter Russell Mead has [written](#) that “the administration dug a hole for itself and jumped merrily in.” As a result, “the Middle East peace process isn't just dead. The decomposing corpse is stinking up the room.” Joel Brinkley, the former *New York Times* correspondent now at Stanford, [says](#) “the administration's Mideast strategy has been nothing short of a debacle, borne of inexplicable naivete.... At this point, it's hard to see how anyone can put the pieces back together again.” These criticisms are focused on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, but it is difficult to find praise for the administration's policies toward Iran and Afghanistan, which have been generally described, by experts across the spectrum, as “dithering.”

### **Dominance and power**

The explanations for this failure differ, depending on one's politics. Most explanations point to the administration's lack of resolve, or its lack of experience, or its lack of a coherent strategy. Of course, if it were any of these things, the administration could turn the

situation around. It could build up its resolve, gain experience, or cobble together a grand strategy. But I argue that the problem runs much deeper and it is this: President Obama is uncomfortable with the exercise of American power. In the Middle East, where people have very sensitive antennae, they know it, and this is undercutting his own ambitious agenda.

The clearest evidence for this ambivalence about American power can be found in two statements Obama made in major speeches to international audiences. One he made in Cairo, in his speech to the Muslim world: “Any world order that elevates one nation or group of people over another will inevitably fail.” The second he made in New York to the UN General Assembly: “Power is no longer a zero-sum game. No one nation can or should try to dominate another nation. No world order that elevates one nation or group of people over another will succeed. No balance of power among nations will hold.”

Before we ponder how Middle Easterners have read these statements, we should begin by asking ourselves if *we* find them credible. Remember, these assertions are not about the world as it should be, but about the world as it is. Yet is there any doubt that every world order in human history, every long peace, has reflected the success of one nation or an alliance of nations in establishing dominance? Is power really no longer a zero-sum game? Has something primal



changed not only in human history, but human nature, to cancel the relationship between power and dominance? And on what does the peace of the world and its various parts rest, if not some balance of power, which must be constantly maintained?

It could be argued that this is a clever ruse by President Obama, by which, through professions of humility, the United States sheathes its power in a velvet glove. After all, both statements were made to international audiences. But that isn’t how such statements are read in the Middle East. President Obama’s words are read as somehow confirming what many already suspect: that the United States has been wounded and weakened politically and economically, that it no longer punches at its weight, that its decline has begun, and that its President is trying to minimize America’s own shrinking in the world, by dismissing the very idea of dominance. The velvet glove is indeed a ruse—not because it conceals a fist, but because it’s empty.

### **Post-American world**

Why do they already suspect it? In the Middle East, people have been carefully noting the creeping declinism that now permeates the liberal internationalist and realist foreign policy elites. Obama was famously photographed carrying Fareed Zakaria’s book, *The Post-American World*. Such signals are read avidly in the places that depend on, or resist, American power. That photo sent them scurrying to understand just what

it might mean. They would have learned that while Zakaria believes that economically the United States might benefit from the rise of the rest, “in purely political and military terms, of course, there will be some relative U.S. decline because that kind of power is more zero-sum in nature.”

The Middle East in particular got a strong whiff of American declinism from Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations. Haass has not gone into the administration, but he is representative of the consensus that frames it. In 2006, Haass wrote the following, in a widely read article on the Middle East: “The American era in the Middle East... has ended.... The second Iraq war, a war of choice, has precipitated its end.... The United States will continue to enjoy more influence in the region than any other outside power, but its influence will be reduced from what it once was.” I was in Washington at the time, and I recall how many Middle Easterners quoted this back to me and asked if I believed it to be true.

In 2008, Haass was even more specific: “It is an open question whether the United States can stop Iran’s nuclear progress, cobble together a viable and independent Iraq, broker peace between Israel and Palestinians, or promote reform and guarantee stability in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. U.S. ability to do such things in the past was never total, but whatever it was then, it is less now.”

Whatever it was then, it is less now. This is today the liberal internationalist and realist consensus, and this is where we come to the fundamental contradiction in administration foreign policy. The administration promised it would bring all its weight to bear on re-

solving the region’s conflicts. Yet at the same time, it mumbled that United States had lost a lot of weight. The administration promised to do more—including resolving some of the most intractable conflicts in the Middle East—even while saying, quite openly, that America must resign itself to doing less.

In a paradoxical way, this message harks back to the infamous Bushism, “bring ’em on.” In 2003, as the Iraqi insurgency got underway, Bush made this taunt: “There are some who feel like the conditions are such that they can attack us there. My answer is bring ’em on.” This came to be regarded as a piece of foolish bravado (although it obviously did not provoke the insurgency). But is post-American self-deprecation really any different? Isn’t it effectively an open invitation to America’s adversaries, and even its allies, to elude, evade, defy, and confront the United States?

### **Saying no to America**

This has been the pattern across the Middle East. In regard to Israel and the Palestinians, the situation was hardly promising for a grand opening anyway, given the change of government in Israel and the deep divide among the Palestinians. Still, it is telling that no party in the region even hesitated to say no to the new administration, effectively shrugging off Obama as a lightweight. The Israeli government at least sugared the pill, when Prime Minister Netanyahu uttered the words “two states,” even while rejecting a total settlement freeze. The Saudis, who unlike the Israelis actually got a visit from Obama, gave him a medal, but described his proposal that they make some token gesture of normalization toward Israel as “immoral.”

And Mahmoud Abbas came to Washington and gave an interview saying he did not share any particular sense of urgency with the Obama administration: “I will wait for Israel to freeze settlements,” he said. “Until then, in the West Bank we have a good reality... the people are living a normal life.”



The situation is not much different in the case of Turkey. Admittedly, the relations between the United States and Turkey deteriorated dramatically during the Bush years. But Obama went to Ankara and Istanbul on one of his first foreign visits precisely to reverse the trend. There he said everything a Turk could possibly have wanted to hear, about Turkey’s importance to the West and the United States. And since then, Turkey has skipped out of a NATO exercise, preferring one with Syria, and has openly pulled away from Israel, which it had befriended precisely as a way to draw closer to the United States.

And so far, I have only mentioned America’s clients and allies. What of America’s adversaries? They were to be “engaged” through the extension of an outstretched hand—Iran at the top of the list. “Engagement” with Iran has comprised all sorts of ingenious proposals to allow the Iranians to grasp that outstretched hand and climb down from the nuclear tree without loss of face. In one such negotiating round, Iran’s negotiators actually seem to have accepted a deal—shipping out

low-enriched uranium to Russia and France—but Iran’s leaders then rejected it, and since then have floated all sorts of proposals that one diplomat has described as “more a no than a yes.”

In Iraq and Afghanistan, insurgents and the Taliban have welcomed the new administration by putting it to the test, in the apparent conviction that Obama isn’t prepared to wage Bush’s

wars, and that if he tries and his heart isn’t in it, it is just a matter of raising the costs to send the United States toward the exits. If it has been difficult for the enemy to do that in any dramatic way, the perception is that it is because of the resolve of America’s generals not to lose, rather than the President’s own grit.

### **Leaving a vacuum**

None of this makes for a picture of a Middle East which is shrinking in strategic significance. To the contrary, it is obviously not responding to the alternative approach. The American tendency is to lay the blame on the locals, for not following the script. Tom Friedman expressed characteristic frustration in a recent column. The Obama administration, he fumed, should give Israelis and Palestinians a scolding like James Baker’s 1990 public scolding of Israel. (Baker, it will be recalled, announced: “When you’re serious, give us a call: 202-456-1414,” the White House phone number.)

But this misplaces the source of the problem, which is in the White House itself—a White House that seems to Middle Easterners to lack seriousness. To tell them, for example, that “power is no longer a zero-sum game” is simply not serious. The Middle East is the cradle of zero-sum-game conflict. To tell them that “no balance of power among nations will hold” is not serious. No one in the region can even imagine anything that could possibly replace balance of power. Remember, this is perhaps the only part of the world where Henry Kissinger was universally admired (despite being a Jew). When Roger Cohen writes in the *New York Times* heralding “Obama’s bold quest for a new Middle Eastern order,” people in the Middle East shake their heads ruefully. The new Middle East is 1990s-speak, it has no purchase in any regional capital. Here they want to know just one thing: Is the United States determined to maintain its primacy in the region, or is it resigned to the Middle East going post-American? Because if it is the latter, a zero-sum scramble will ensue to establish a new balance of power.

We have already had one U.S. policy that sought to transform the Middle East by ending zero-sum gamesmanship. That was the Bush Doctrine, or democracy promotion. In the domestic politics of most of the countries of the Middle East, power has always been a zero-sum game, which is why it is never shared. The Bush administration was criti-



cized (indeed, I criticized it) for thinking that the United States could promote democratic transformation—that it could overturn the zero-sum culture. Lots of Obama’s supporters made the same criticism. Yet here they are, now in the White House, imagining they can transform Middle Eastern regional politics by overturning the zero-sum culture. It is the same doctrine, just applied to a different level of power.

That doesn’t mean the United States can’t make some progress—if it appears like what Osama bin Laden once called “the strong horse.” Bush senior did that after the Kuwait war, when he convened an international conference at Madrid, and he got some traction, even with a Likud government in Israel. Bush junior gave his democracy speech six months after what appeared to be a decisive victory in Iraq, and he got some traction in the form of democratic “reforms” and “openings” by authoritarian states. Middle Eastern states bend in response to displays of power, although as soon as they perceive weakness, they snap back to default position.

The problem with the Obama administration is that it is trying to outdo Bush senior and Bush junior—to effect dramatic transformation—without having displayed *any* power, and indeed, while openly declaring an aversion to its use. True, it has learned from the mistake of the Clinton administration—don’t delay big plans to the last moment, when you

are at your weakest—but it hasn't understood just how crucial it is to appear comfortable with the exercise of *all* aspects of American power. There was very little of that in the Cairo speech, which was filled with too much apologizing, and which ended up having no appreciable effect. Leslie Gelb, who used to run the Council on Foreign Relations and has a different take than Richard Haass, has authored a book, *Power Rules*, urging that Obama give a different kind of speech now, reassuring the Middle East that the United States is still the guarantor of order (especially vis-à-vis Iran). Even Jimmy Carter wound up giving such a speech, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. But the likelihood of Obama persuasively delivering that message to the Middle East seems remote.

In the meantime, the stronger regional powers—let us call them “middle powers”—are already positioning themselves to fill any vacuum left behind by the United States. Israel, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia—they are beginning to elbow one another, stake out their claims, define their spheres of influence, and test one another's resolve. The most dangerous elbowing involves Iran. If Israel and the Arab states come to conclude that the United States might acquiesce in a nuclear Iran, they will interpret that as proof positive that the United States is in retreat. Each player then will do what it must do, in a situation reminiscent of Europe 1914. Roger Cohen's exact words were that an Iran agreement would be “a first step in Obama's bold quest for a new Middle Eastern order.” The corollary is that a failure to reach an agreement could be a first step toward a new Middle Eastern disorder. Indeed, nothing else

in the “peace process,” Iraq, or Afghanistan could go wrong with consequences as far-reaching as failure vis-à-vis Iran.

### **Salvage operation**

Forty years ago, in 1969, the late J.C. Hurewitz pondered what went wrong in the lead-up to the June 1967 war.<sup>1</sup> The list was long, and Soviet provocations were high on it. But at the top of the list, he put what he described as the weakened position of the United States. The United States had stated many times that it was firmly opposed to the use of force or the violation of boundaries, and that it supported the independence and territorial integrity of all the states in the Arab-Israeli zone. President Johnson had reaffirmed this on many occasions in May and June 1967. “Yet,” wrote Hurewitz, “as the principal guardian of peace in the Middle East, the United States did not successfully inhibit either the Arab action or the Israeli reaction that brought on the war.” For Hurewitz, this was above all an American failure. Now that the documents are available, we know how American prevarication over the Straits of Tiran completely unnerved Israel. When the guardian of the peace is thought to be weak or feckless or distracted, the “middle powers” take things into their own hands, with unpredictable results.

That is the present hazard. I have been deliberately thin on specific policies. I don't take a stand on the number of troops needed in Afghanistan, or how many apartments fit the definition of natural growth in the West Bank, or how soon after production Iran should be required to ship out low-enriched uranium. My concern is that the answers to

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<sup>1</sup> J.C. Hurewitz, “Policies Outmoded: Arms Race in the Middle East,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 8, 1969.

all these questions will become moot, if the United States is perceived as just one more “influential” player in a post-American Middle East—because I believe that the United States, far from “sowing crises” in the Middle East, is a bulwark against crises worse still.

Which is why it would be irresponsible just to hand out the White House phone number and walk away. In 1953, J.C. Hurewitz wrote the following of the Middle East: “We have to make up our minds either to abandon altogether our objectives in the Middle East with full appreciation of the strategic implications

of such a decision—or to undertake to salvage them with greater vigor imagination and resolution than we have exercised before.”<sup>2</sup> “Salvage our objectives”—this seems to me just the right way of framing a realistic agenda for the Middle East. The Obama administration won’t bring salvation to the Middle East, but it can still pull off a salvage operation. This may not seem to rise to the level of a Nobel Peace Prize, but in the Middle East, it has been awarded for a lot less. ••

This lecture was delivered on November 16, 2009, to the Columbia University International Relations Forum (CUIRF).

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<sup>2</sup> J.C. Hurewitz, *Middle East Dilemmas: The Background of United States Policy* (New York: Harper, 1953), p. 255.