From Bush to Obama: a Year of Transition in American Policy Toward The Mediterranean and the Near East

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The eight years of the Bush administration were highly distinctive in terms of American foreign policy priorities and behaviour. A limited set of concerns led by the "global war on terrorism" came to dominate Washington's foreign and security policies. Relations with allies and adversaries were affected by sharper judgments about cooperation and leadership. At the same time, global attitudes toward the US deteriorated markedly. Some of this deterioration could be ascribed to specific policies, above all, the war in Iraq. Other shifts in international perception may be more *structural* in nature, pointing to a fundamental change in the global debate over American power. These forces have been felt strongly around the Mediterranean basin, including southern Europe, North Africa, Turkey and the Levant. The advent of the Obama administration and the prospect of a new look in American policy hold equally significant promise for the region.

Signs of change were already apparent over the course of 2008, driven by the demands of crisis management in and around the Mediterranean –especially in the Levant and the Gulf– and the recalibration of key partnerships with France, Turkey and others. The fact that Washington has never articulated a *Mediterranean* policy *per se* means that much of the change in American behaviour affecting the region is still driven by bilateral relationships and events somewhat beyond Mediterranean shores (Lesser, 2008).

Leaving Iraq

The *surge* of American military presence in Iraq, and a movement toward tentative equilibrium in Iraqi politics, contributed to a general improvement in the security situation across the country in 2008. One exception has been the rise of unrest in the previously stable Kurdish region of northern Iraq. This is meaningful for American interests precisely because this is the area of Iraq where the US presence has been relatively limited, and where stability has been assured through proxies in the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). This is also an area where Turkish interests are heavily engaged, and the extent of US-Turkish cooperation in containing the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) insurgency has been a persistent irritant in relations between Ankara and Washington, a source of friction dating back to the mid-1990s. Over the course of 2008, US-Turkish cooperation against the PKK accelerated based on the provision of actionable intelligence and greater US pressure on the KRG to limit or end the PKK presence in northern Iraq. Cooperation in this sphere is likely to continue as a key facet of US-Turkish security cooperation over the coming year. At the same time, progress toward disengagement in Iraq has made American access to Incirlik airbase in southeastern Turkey important as a logistical hub for operations in Iraq –and Afghanistan.

Normalization of Ties with Libya

The past year saw the formal completion of a protracted process of normalization in US-Libyan rela-

[1] The opinions expressed in this chapter are the author's and do not necessarily represent the view of GMF, its staff or directors.

tions. This was made possible by Libya's payment of the final tranche of compensation to families of the Lockerbie victims in November 2008. This followed Libya's high-profile divestiture of its nascent nuclear and missile programs, a development touted by the Bush administration as a leading success in rolling back Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) proliferation –a significant contribution to Mediterranean security to be sure, but hardly transforming on a regional or global level. The full normalization of relations allowed for the mutual accreditation of ambassadors, the end of economic sanctions and the recovery of Libya's sovereign immunity in the US. All of this can be expected to contribute to an expansion of investment ties, especially in the energy sector. Cooperation on intelligence sharing and counter-terrorism was already well established and dates from the period after September 2001.

The extent to which relations with Washington will become an important facet of Libyan foreign policy remains an open question. Saif al-Islam al-Gaddafi, the reform-minded son of the Libyan leader, visited Washington within weeks of the normalization of relations, but significant foreign policy cooperation could prove elusive as Libya focuses on other priorities with Africa, Russia and Europe. From Washington's perspective, consolidating détente with Tripoli is likely to be seen as a useful part of wider engagement in North Africa, but hardly a top priority in the face of more pressing challenges elsewhere. Continued sensitivity regarding Libya's human rights record in Congress and elsewhere within the American foreign policy establishment will impose further limits on the scope for enhanced relations.

A Ticking Clock with Iran –and an Opening for Détente?

Not surprisingly, relations with Iran continued to vex American policymakers in 2008. Not a Mediterranean issue per se, the longstanding friction with Iran over Tehran's nuclear program nonetheless exerts a strong influence over the regional security in the eastern Mediterranean. American partners in southern Europe, as well as Israel, would be among the states most directly affected by an American confrontation with Iran –or serious moves toward détente. Iran's support for proxies in Lebanon and Gaza, and the regime's role in energy supply on a regional and global basis, further underscore the centrality of US-Iranian relations in the strategic environment around the Mediterranean Basin.

The Bush administration left office defying the expectations of many observers that the US would act militarily to "set back the clock" on Iran's nuclear enrichment programme. In its final months, the Bush administration redoubled its efforts to achieve Security Council backing for an additional round of economic sanctions against Tehran. But critical decisions about how to deal with Iran's nuclear ambitions have been left to the Obama administration. The issue of whether and how to open a dialogue with Tehran was a prominent part of the foreign policy debate during the presidential campaign, and Senator McCain was particularly critical of Obama's willingness to open high-level discussions with the Iranian regime. The new administration appears serious about its interest in exploring a strategic dialogue with Iran and has announced the appointment of a special envoy for this purpose. At the same time, the Obama team could well prove as sensitive as its predecessor on the nuclear question, and no more willing to accept the emergence of Iran as a nuclear-armed state. The military option therefore remains on the table, and Washington is likely to seek early signs of Tehran's flexibility on the enrichment issue. American decision-making in this regard will continue to be driven by intelligence judgments about the status and pace of the enrichment and *weaponisation* programmes. The National Intelligence Estimate on Iran's nuclear programmes, released in November 2007, offered the surprising judgment that Tehran suspended its *weaponisation* efforts in 2003. This finding has been interpreted in disparate ways, with some seeing an indication of Iran's caution and, perhaps, interest in remaining a nuclear-ready or near nuclear power for some time to come. Others are disturbed by evidence that, at least prior to 2003, Iran pursued a weapons programmes.

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The Obama administration inherits an approach to Iran heavily influenced by the post-9/11 preoccupation with homeland security and a policy of containment framed essentially in national rather than multi-

lateral terms. The administration is likely to seek a broader regional consensus on the nuclear dispute and other aspects of relations with Iran, including Iraq, Afghanistan, Hezbollah, Hamas and energy security. In 2008, the Bush administration was already exploring approaches to ballistic missile defence that would address the growing exposure of NATO Europe, and especially southern Europe, to Iranian systems. The new administration is likely to move even further in the direction of theatre defences against ballistic missiles of trans-Mediterranean range, with less obvious attachment to the concept of strategic defences based in Central and Eastern Europe.

Crisis and Engagement in the Middle East Peace Process

The past year has seen marked deterioration in Israeli-Palestinian relations and changing dynamics in Washington's engagement in the Middle East peace process. Like most of its predecessors, the Bush administration came very late to the business of active involvement in the process, a product of judgments about the viability of new initiatives and distractions elsewhere. The Annapolis Conference of November 2007 was innovative to the extent that it pushed the multilateral aspect of the process substantially beyond the existing *quartet* structure. It did not, however, succeed in reviving a process severely eroded by political divisions on the Palestinian side and shifting Israeli definitions of what "end of conflict" implies. Many observers saw the shadow of Iran over Annapolis, with Tehran an increasingly central factor in both Israeli and Arab security perceptions. Annapolis was widely seen as "too little, too late." The Bush administration, like the Clinton administration, left office frustrated by its inability to bring about a transforming success, or even to leave its successor with a solid basis for new initiatives.

Worse was to come. The Israeli intervention in Gaza in November 2008 presented the new Obama administration with an immediate problem of crisis management in Arab-Israeli relations at a time of pressing challenges in other areas, from the economy to Iraq and Afghanistan. The timing of the Gaza crisis required an early response, and the Obama administration moved quickly to demonstrate its commitment to the process with the appointment of former Senator George Mitchell, a seasoned negotiator widely admired for his contribution to peace efforts in Northern Ireland. The choice of a respected figure from outside the established cohort of Middle East policymakers and advisors points to a preference for patient confidence building rather than sweeping new initiatives. In all likelihood, the new administration is no more optimistic than its predecessor about the near-term prospects for a two-state solution, and the overwhelming scale of the economic crisis probably precludes the early, active involvement of the President in the process. Protracted political uncertainty in Israel further complicates the near-term outlook for engagement in a process critical to stability in the Mediterranean and the Middle East –and increasingly vital to European and US security.

Recalibrating Relations with Turkey

The history of US-Turkish relations has been characterized by recurrent tensions alongside strategic cooperation. Many Turks are inclined to see the Clinton years as a lost "golden age" in bilateral relations. The Clinton years, too, saw some significant differences over northern Iraq, Cyprus, human rights and other issues. But the period since 2003 has, by any measure, been one of extraordinary suspicion and tension in relations between Ankara and Washington. The deterioration in Turkish public attitudes toward the US in recent years has been among the most dramatic anywhere in the world, and especially striking in a NATO context.[2] Differences over Iraq policy, and especially the Kurdish issue in northern Iraq, have been at the heart of bilateral tensions, reinforced by rising Turkish nationalism and a deep suspicion regarding American intentions in Turkey's neighbourhood, including the Black Sea and the Gulf. To an extent, friction with Washington has paralleled Turkey's troubled relations with the EU in recent years.

The 2007-2008 period witnessed substantial improvement in the bilateral relationship at policy level, if not yet at the level of public opinion. Enhanced cooperation against the PKK and Washington's continued interest in promoting Turkey as an alternative to Russia in energy transport have been at the heart of the enhanced bilateral agenda. Over the past year, and after some early scepticism, the Bush administration

[2] See *Transatlantic Trends: Key Findings 2008* (Washington: German Marshall Fund of the United States).

also developed a more positive view of Turkey's role as a facilitator in Israeli-Syrian talks. Ankara's involvement in this track of the peace process is by no means new, but the full extent of Turkey's role is now more openly discussed by all sides. With the advent of a new administration in Washington, and the prospect of an Obama visit to Turkey in the context of the April 2009 Alliance of Civilizations meeting in Istanbul, observers on both sides are hopeful that relations can be recalibrated, even if significant differences persist on the Palestinian issue, Iran and other questions.

In the spring of 2008, in the face of significant political pressure, the Bush administration succeeded in preventing Congress from passing a symbolic "Armenian Genocide" resolution. The resolution is a perennial irritant in bilateral relations, and could provoke a serious rift in a relationship already strained on other fronts. If a resolution along these lines is passed –and the Obama administration will confront this issue early in its term– Ankara could well respond by suspending American access to Incirlik airbase for non-NATO uses.[3]

The Revival of Franco-American Relations –and Mediterranean Implications

The marked improvement in Franco-American relations since the election of President Sarkozy has significant implications for American interests and policy, not least in the Mediterranean. These, and the potential for more transformative cooperation in the future, have been especially visible over the course of 2008. Two aspects of this shift are worth noting. First, France's commitment to rejoin NATO's integrated military command, announced in 2008, is widely seen as a tangible demonstration of more direct French engagement in transatlantic security affairs. This comes at a time when Washington's interest in a more expeditionary approach to alliance strategy elevates the role of France as a willing and capable partner, in contrast to more apparently reluctant allies. The consequences of this shift would be felt most directly in the Levant and the Mediterranean where France is already a capable and engaged actor.

Second, French leadership in the new Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) gave rise to a surprising amount of interest within the American foreign policy community. This has been in sharp contrast to the Barcelona Process prior to UfM, which was largely ignored, even by American specialists. To be sure, a substantial amount of this interest could be ascribed to the "Sarkozy effect." But the practical, project-oriented character of the new initiative struck a chord with American observers. It would not be surprising if the Obama administration seeks ways to cooperate with France and Mediterranean partners in the context of UfM, even if direct participation is unlikely.

Toward a Mediterranean Policy?

The response to the UfM anticipates in some respects the likely future drift of broader US policy toward the Mediterranean and the Middle East, elements of which were already visible in the final year of the Bush administration. One aspect of the new look is a declining emphasis on democratization and transformative interventions, diplomatic or military, and greater emphasis on traditional human rights concerns and south-south cooperation in the Maghreb. In key respects, this represents a return to regional policies such as the "Eizenstat initiative" developed in the Clinton administration as a response to developments in Algeria and elsewhere around the Mediterranean. With Europe, American development and security programmes will likely give increasing priority to regional integration and cooperation, including energy and infrastructure initiatives (Hufbauer and Brunel, 2008). Climate change and the environment are also clearly on the agenda for the new administration, and some of these new policy interests will surely find their way into Washington's regional policies in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. As an example, there is increased official and commercial American interest in new solar and other renewable energy initiatives in North Africa, along the lines of those in the Mediterranean Solar Plan.

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[3] Perhaps 70% of the supplies for operations in Iraq use Turkish ports and airfields, including Incirlik.

Maritime security is another likely priority for the future, an interest already discernible in the second Bush administration. Counter-terrorism and energy security concerns in the Mediterranean and the Gulf are part of this equation. The sharp rise in piracy in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean has also spurred attention to maritime security as a multilateral issue. This will also have important implications for the Mediterranean to the extent that shipping avoids the Red Sea route and thus deprives Egypt of significant revenue from the Suez Canal. Linkages of this kind can be expected to reinforce the already strong US interest in maritime security cooperation, including cooperation with southern European and southern Mediterranean partners.

American interest in the functional issues that dominate the Mediterranean agenda, from energy security to counter-terrorism and from migration to the environment, has certainly increased over the past few years. In North Africa, American military engagement has been affected by the creation of United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) in 2007 (it became a fully independent unified command in 2008). The experience of the past year underscored the reality that AFRICOM headquarters are likely to remain in Germany for some time to come. Regional states, including partners in North Africa, have been reluctant to encourage an AFRICOM presence on the ground, and even more reluctant to see the command's headquarters move across the Mediterranean. Over time, AFRICOM could prove useful in addressing many of the security issues flowing from sub-Saharan Africa northward to the Maghreb and the Mediterranean.

Pressing challenges in Afghanistan and around the Black Sea in the wake of the Georgia crisis have kept NATO focused on these issues. But with the launch of NATO's reflection on a new strategic concept set to begin in earnest with the April 2009 NATO Summit, it is likely that US strategists will pay greater attention to security issues emanating from the south and the Mediterranean aspects of Alliance strategy. A greater French role in NATO could also encourage a shift southward in American thinking about transatlantic strategy. The return of Russia to a modest level of defence-related activity in North Africa and the Levant (e.g. defence sales to Algeria and proposed naval bases in Libya and Syria) and the growth of Chinese commercial and political involvement in the region have also heightened American attention to Mediterranean developments over the past year.

One aspect of American strategy that has not changed, and is unlikely to change, is the absence of a "Mediterranean policy" per se. The US has been a Mediterranean power for over two hundred years. But in contrast to Europe, there is no tradition of Mediterranean consciousness and engagement. Intellectually and bureaucratically, Washington has pursued a bifurcated approach, with quite separate policies toward Europe, including southern Europe and Turkey, on the one hand, and North Africa and the Middle East on the other. The various tracks of the Middle East peace process have rarely if ever been described as Mediterranean challenges in the American foreign policy lexicon. With the exception of military commands such as the Sixth Fleet, there is no element of the American foreign and security policy structure with a specific Mediterranean mandate. This approach complicates but does not preclude the emergence of a more deliberate policy toward the region as a priority for a revived transatlantic relationship. The development of a more concerted approach to problems around the Mediterranean Basin –regardless of terminology– may be a key test of transatlantic relations with a new administration in Washington.

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