

# New and Old Elements of Power and Politics in the Middle East

Occasional Paper No. 6

A report on three lectures given by the Spring 2010 Fares Center Visiting Scholar Rami G. Khouri as a part of the Fares Lecture Series:

*On-the-Job Training in the Turbulent Middle East:  
Assessing Obama's First Year*

March 10, 2010

Tufts University, Medford/Somerville, MA

*Mosques, Malls, and Monarchs: The New/Old Power  
Balance Inside the Arab World*

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*The Palestinian Exile and the Babylonian Exile: Reflections  
on the Arab-Israeli Conflict After 62 Years*

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*The opinions of the Fares Center visiting scholars are their own and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Fares Center for Eastern Mediterranean Studies.*



## Preface

In the second year of Barack Obama's presidency, the Middle East region continues to be characterized by political transition, conflict, the rise of non-state actors, the expansion of new centers of power, and the sporadic advancement of democracies alongside longstanding autocracies. Ongoing involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, turmoil in Pakistan, the intractable Arab-Israeli conflict, and persistent tensions with Iran continue to determine U.S. foreign policy in the region. Meanwhile, the world has had time to reflect upon the Obama administration's Middle East policy, which many would agree began with positive overtures to the Muslim world following his inauguration.

During the spring of 2010, Fares Center for Eastern Mediterranean Studies Visiting Scholar Rami G. Khouri reflected upon these issues in a series of lectures given at Tufts University. This publication, the Fares Center's sixth occasional paper, summarizes these three lectures. Khouri, a journalist and the first director of the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut, was a welcome addition to our work at the Fares Center. A regular panelist at our annual conference, Khouri offers intellectual insight into and a journalistic perspective of contemporary Middle East politics. We hope that the production of this occasional paper will extend the reach of the analysis Khouri undertook while at the Fares Center beyond the audiences of his lectures at Tufts University.

I have many people to thank for helping the Fares Center welcome visiting scholars each year and for making the publication of our Occasional Paper series possible, including: H.E. Issam M. Fares, founder of the Fares Center and former Deputy Prime Minister of Lebanon; Mr. Fares I. Fares, trustee, and the other members of the Fares Center Executive Committee; Dr. John L. Esposito and the Fares Center Academic Committee; President Lawrence S. Bacow and the Office of the President; Provost Jamshed Bharucha and the Office of the Provost; Dr. Robert M. Hollister and the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service; Dean Stephen W. Bosworth, Academic Dean Peter S. Uvin, and The Fletcher School; Dr. Malik Mufti and the

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Dr. Leila Fawaz  
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# New and Old Elements of Power and Politics in the Middle East

Occasional Paper No. 6

By Rami G. Khouri

This paper explores three key issues relevant to the contemporary Arab world and the wider Middle East region, from the Arab perspective. It addresses broad themes and major trends of change that define the region today, and have done so for some time, focusing on three principal topics: the transformation of the balance of power among actors inside the Arab countries, the impact of the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict on the region, and the status of U.S. policies in the Middle East after President Barack Obama's first year in office. Each of these issues was the subject of a lecture as a part of the Fares Lecture Series during the spring of 2010.

## I. Power Transformations within the Arab World

Three major centers of power, identity, and influence dominate the Arab world today, which I refer to in shorthand as “the mosque, the mall, and the monarch.” The mosque is the religious or tribal identity of people, the mall is the commercial marketplace and everything that goes with it, such as the private sector, civil society and NGOs, and foreign donors, and the monarch is the ruling political power. This contemporary balance of power in fact is also a historical one, reflecting legacies from Byzantine, Islamic, and medieval times.

To understand these centers of power, the Arab world and the Middle East as a whole should be analyzed at five different levels: the individual citizen; society; the state; the region, including intraregional dynamics between such parties as the Arabs, Israelis, Iranians, and Turks; and the world. The global level is especially relevant now that the U.S. army is involved in two wars in the region, and a few people from the Middle East and Asia also

attack targets in the United States and Europe. At all five levels, the Middle East is in a state of tremendous flux. Unlike the static, one-dimensional picture of our region that is often presented in mainstream Western media, the reality is that the Middle East is extremely diverse, complex, and nuanced, and is represented by a wide range of different ideologies, personalities, interests, and countries that interact in many spheres. All of these elements are evolving and changing simultaneously, which we can understand better by identifying the separate dimensions through which governments and others in society exercise power. Ten of these dimensions strike me as particularly relevant across the region.

The first six dynamic issues are those that both local and foreign parties continue to challenge. First, the statehood of countries in the Middle East is being both challenged and altered, as some countries find themselves under stress. Second, the concept of sovereignty, and who exercises it, is changing. Additionally, nationhood in several cases is up for grabs. The issue of identity, at the individual, group, state, and national/regional levels, is also in flux. The concept of legitimacy, at both the local and international levels, is perhaps the single most important driving force now in our region. On the local level, some people question the legitimacy of existing states, and the legitimacy of the people who exercise power in them. At the international level, there is increasing concern about the legitimacy of foreign armies that involve themselves in the region, foreign powers that project their influence through UN Security Council sanctions and through threats from non-Arab countries against Arab countries. The sixth issue is the basic exercise of power, whether by a government, an armed group, a tribal group, a religious group, or a private company. These six issues—statehood, sovereignty, nationhood, identity, legitimacy, and the exercise of power—define the core political dynamics of the contemporary Arab world.

Four other factors also contribute to whether the countries of the Middle East are stable and orderly. First is the issue of citizenship—the rights and responsibilities of citizens. Many citizens of Arab countries feel that their rights and responsibilities are not clear to them, or that the state does not always acknowledge or respect these rights. The second issue is the accountability of

power. While individuals exercise power, they do not necessarily accept or institutionalize accountability for their power. A growing contingent of the public demands that those who exercise power, including governments, militias, opposition groups, foreign armies, the UN, and others, be held accountable. The third issue concerns human development needs, such as education, health care, food, housing, and jobs, which are often referred to as issues of “dignity.” Fourth is concern for security and stability given the insecurity present in many parts of the region caused by the actions of local, regional, and global actors, including terror and criminal groups, long-term occupants, foreign invaders, and others.

These four issues—citizenship, the accountability of power, human development needs, and security and stability—join the six that I mentioned above to provide a comprehensive overview of the forces that drive change in this region today. Most of these issues are interlinked in a cycle of attitudes and actions. The notions of statehood and governance in our region have been erratic—they have neither failed nor excelled, but have been inconsistent, largely because the key factors mentioned above often do not coexist successfully. If statehood, sovereignty, power, identity, legitimacy, and nationhood do not function together neatly—as they do in a relatively stable country like, say, Switzerland or France—the result is a situation like that in many parts of the Arab world today, where people strive to restructure their relationships with power and identity in a more satisfactory manner. This explains why, since the 1980s, this region has been evolving in a much more open and dynamic way.

In the previous 50 years, while economic development and state-building steadily progressed, existing power structures remained relatively static throughout most of the Arab world. After the end of the Cold War, due to aspects of the basic political economy of this region, control over society slightly loosened and a liberalization process occurred in the late '80s and early '90s. This process, which was quite dramatic, was the result of various factors: economic and political concerns, external pressures, the lagging of economic growth behind demographic growth, financial pressures on individual families and their budgets,

the rising cost of living, inflation, and limited job opportunities, among others. Examples like the liberalizing of media systems in Yemen, Sudan, or Jordan, where dozens of newspapers and magazines were quickly established, reflected increased societal demand by people to express themselves. When the chance became available to them, people rushed to participate in more open media, to set up political parties and non-governmental organizations, and to vote in elections, among other actions that were a part of this limited but real liberalization process that ran its course for a decade following the mid 1980s.

This transformative process represented a liberal opening, not democratization, not a complete change in the power structure. It created new dynamics in society, the most important of which was that it allowed people to express themselves openly and relatively freely. For the first time in the modern Arab world, Arabs began to gather insights into what ordinary people thought, through elections, polls, the mass media, NGOs, and political parties. The most significant driving force of this liberalization process at the time was a shift in the basic political economy of the region. Tens of millions of ordinary families were feeling significant stresses on their ability to meet the basic necessities of life. This state of affairs was quite widespread across the region. Excluding the 15% of wealthy Arabs in the oil states or at the top of the non-oil states, most people in the Arab world were low-income or poor, and have remained so. The economic stress on individual families was most likely the single biggest driving force causing people to challenge their governments, to demand change, or to request a transformation in the way that power was exercised. Two examples illustrate this more clearly.

For the entire population of the Arab world between 1980 and 2001—the pivotal turning point in modern Arab history—the gross domestic product per capita (in current prices) actually declined from \$2,612 in 1980 to \$2,469 in 2001. If we exclude the 15% of Arabs who are wealthy, and adjust these figures for real income and purchasing power, the average real per capita income in the Arab world may have been closer to \$1,000 then. Another example is even more striking. In Jordan, while per capita GDP in current dinar terms increased from 528 dinars to 1,076

dinars between 1985 and 1995, if these figures are adjusted for foreign exchange value changes and inflation, per capita income in adjusted, constant dollar terms dropped from \$2,244 to \$908 over this period. In other words, a 59% drop in the real dollar-denominated purchasing power of the average person in Jordan occurred during that decade. This shows the magnitude of the changes that affected many ordinary families across the region, and the stress they experienced.

When these financial concerns are combined with other factors—political dynamics, lack of democracy, long-term Israeli occupation and colonization, invading foreign armies, and other troubling issues—it provides a better understanding of why this region has been so volatile and violent of late. Over the past several decades, some distinct trends help us to understand why this region is evolving as it is.

First, this is the only region in the world that remains collectively non-democratic. There is not a single credible democratic government system in the Arab world, where power alternates between different people and parties through a free election. Second, the Arab states are weak in many ways. There has been an intense focus on security systems so that many Arab states have great longevity and durability, because the ruling elites—whether monarchies or republics—tend to stay in power a long time. Yet the ability of the central state to deal with many aspects of daily life is not always strong, and thus others in society move in to assume control over some of the traditional functions of the state. Third, as different groups have emerged to challenge prevailing power structures in various ways, the issue of mixed legitimacy has affected the many power structures in the region.

The fourth major trend is the huge demographic stress on our region. The per capita income stagnation, or in some cases regression, mentioned above should be understood in the context of an Arab world that from the 1930s to the 1980s had developed in a rather impressive way, with noteworthy state-building and the provision of basic services combined with equity in many cases; this was especially the case in urban areas, where many people felt that their lives were improving, as they enjoyed increased access to schools, hospitals, jobs, and telephones. The demographic stress

of the last 30 years is not just the result of population growth outstripping economic growth. It is also due to the young nature of the population, with over 60% under the age of 30 across the region, and the predominantly urban nature of the population (60% on average, double what it was in the 1930s). The Arab region has experienced a massive change in three generations—from a middle-aged or elderly, largely uneducated, mostly rural population in the 1930s to today's largely urban, reasonably well-educated, very young population—but without any significant political outlets for expression or participation that can actually change state policies, and with stubbornly constrained job prospects. This change in political demography and political economy has significantly impacted the region's political evolution.

The fifth trend is widespread environmental stress on areas including coastal water aquifers, underground water, and arable land, and issues such as urban air quality and other environmental concerns that are getting much worse in many cases because of the burgeoning urban trends. The sixth trend is the widening of income disparities, as our region becomes less and less equitable among its own people. The inequitable distribution of economic wealth has resulted in significant tension within Arab societies. Across the region, pockets of order, law, security, modernity, and high-speed Internet exist next door to pockets of poverty, lawlessness, crime, unmet basic needs, and lack of the rule of law. These two very different worlds co-exist simultaneously, engendering resentment.

The seventh serious trend is the continuing movement of foreign armies into Arab lands, including the armies of Israel, the United States, Britain, and occasionally Turkey (into northern Iraq), as well as the indirect military influence of other nations like Iran. The eighth issue has been the cumulative and intense ramifications of the unresolved Arab-Israeli conflict, the single biggest force for radicalization and destabilization in the region at the political level (whereas youth demographics and family-level needs are the most important radicalizing force in the socio-economic realm). The ninth issue is the sense of injustice felt by ordinary people all over the region. People feel that they are not treated fairly by their own governments, regional powers, foreign

powers, economic forces, the media, armies, security services, or other actors and forces. The tenth major trend is the very erratic application of the rule of law, in addition to the limited role judicial systems play in the Arab world.

These driving forces that shape this region today result in clear consequences, which I group into another set of distinct issues. The first is the widespread fear and vulnerability of ordinary people due to economic stress, political exploitation, the presence of foreign armies, internal terrorism, and a sense of marginalization or even helplessness. The second is that our region today is defined by numerous conflicts in which many different local and foreign parties employ violence. Where the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Cold War once were the primary conflicts of the region, at least a dozen major conflicts plague the Middle East today, and all parties—governments; opposition, terrorist, and criminal groups; and foreign armies alike—employ violence. The third consequence is fragmentation, as orderly, centralized societies with strong central governments that were engaged in a process of nation-building have fragmented and polarized to make room for new power groups. The fourth element is the alienation of youth. Many young people today do not petition the system for justice or redress of grievance, but rather go off and do what they can to serve themselves, often challenging the powers that they feel oppress them. Some alienation combines with self-assertion by young people through various means, including criminal or military groups, terrorism, private sector venture capital groups, NGOs, political parties, or education—a range of positive, negative, and neutral ways that young people can engage in their societies. Fifth is the development of what used to be called “non-state actors,” which perhaps are better termed “parallel state actors.” Groups like Hizbullah, Hamas, Muqtada al-Sadr’s followers in Iraq, the Muslim Brothers in Egypt, some tribal groups in Iraq, and others often have become so strong that they act in parallel with the government. In some cases these actors are stronger than the state, as evidenced by Hizbullah’s military power. As another example, the Muslim Brothers in Egypt proved more efficient than the Egyptian government in dealing with assistance to disaster victims.

The sixth consequence is that ordinary citizens turn to other identities beyond the state to meet their needs, including religious, tribal, ethnic, and professional identities, some of which are being radicalized. The four key players across the region—the Iranians, Israelis, Arabs, and Americans—over the last 30 years have all shifted to the right and become more militant. We see this shift reflected in many Sunni Muslims, Arab Shiites, Iranian Shiites, Israelis, and even with the U.S., which, alongside some Europeans, displays a more militant posture in the region, comprised of both waves of invading troops and the expansion of military bases and links with local security services. The seventh consequence is that the many regional conflicts and the foreign players in the Arab world have coalesced into a new regional Cold War, with some parties close to the Islamists, Iran, Syria, nationalists, and allied forces, and other parties close to the U.S. and conservative Arab regimes. These two broad camps have fought each other in many ways over the last decade and essentially reached a draw because they are evenly matched, legitimate, and enjoy both local and foreign support. The eighth important consequence is a widespread sense of defiance and resistance by many different people who no longer docilely accept mistreatment and instead resist their own governments, rival domestic groups, neighboring occupying powers, foreign armies, or global corporations. For example, in recent years all of the major regional players—the Turks, Israelis, Iranians, and Arabs—have openly defied and resisted the U.S. in various ways.

These factors shape an ongoing transformation that involves identity, statehood, the exercise of power, interactions with foreign armies, and other key issues. At the internal level, the power, reach, and in some cases even the legitimacy of the central government is slowly fraying at the edges. Occasionally, governments completely collapse, like Somalia. Or, as the cases of Algeria, Palestine, Lebanon, Sudan, Kuwait, and Yemen have reflected in recent decades, the power, reach, and impact of the central government contracts to various degrees, in favor of several new centers of power, including the private sector and multinational corporations; armed groups, militias, resistance groups, and some criminal groups (all of them “people with guns”); the Islamists—

the single biggest new power and identity group across the region; and, tribal and neighborhood groups (usually the least visible of the new power centers).

The state is not disappearing; it remains the most influential military and economic actor in most places, but is no longer the sole, dominant power. It now shares the stage with other actors. Sovereign states also exhibit multiple legitimate authorities within their territories, resulting in multiple centers of authority, service delivery, and legitimacy acting together. In increasingly fragmented, polarized, and atomized societies, these multiple authorities emerged because no single authority could address the needs of all the different people in poor urban neighborhoods, suburban regions, isolated mountain areas, and the places in between. Much service delivery is being increasingly market-driven (e.g., water, cell phones, medical services, education, and transport) as the private sector provides basic services that years ago were primarily government monopolies.

The result is that three major groups now work together to govern Arab societies. These include the combination of tribal and religious groups (identity-based groups), the commercial marketplace, and the political authority, comprised of the ruling political regime and its security forces, the army, the *mukhabarat* intelligence agencies, the police, and others. These three groups I have summarized as “the mosque, the mall, and the monarch.” This recent power arrangement in our region is also an ancient one that dates back to the Islamic and Byzantine eras, where power was exercised by a similar combination of religious, political, and commercial forces. This circumstance generates a certain balance of power with two important dimensions to it. It allows for a sharing of the pie, rather than one group hoarding power. It also creates a process of checks and balances, which is important because it may reflect a novel form of self-determination by ordinary people in the region that was largely denied them when their states were formed after 1920. The process of national self-determination in which large numbers of citizens take part in defining themselves and deciding how power is exercised may be emerging through the division of power among these three groups. As well, because these three groups perform a kind of checks and balances on each

other, no one group dominates; consequently there is more freedom of expression through means such as the mass media, political fora, elections, and NGOs. These three power centers are not necessarily antagonistic. In Lebanon, Hizbullah and Saad Hariri sit together in the central government, and Hamas and Fatah in Palestine at one point formed a united government.

With increased diversity and freedom of expression, we can understand better what ordinary people feel and want. There is more clarity to people's demands, which is the first step to something that has never really existed in the modern Arab world: genuine politics. What we may be witnessing in our day is the birth of politics in the Arab world—the contestation of power in the polis, in the city, where groups of people in an urban setting challenge each other but also make deals, form coalition governments, go to elections, fight and then make truces, and, ultimately, find a balance of power that provides a certain stability. Until the day when we can move to that important step of transcending our lack of democracy, this power-sharing mode provides a workable system that may be more sustainable and stable than anything the Middle East has experienced in the last half-century.

## II. The Arab-Israeli Conflict and its Repercussions

In the wider context of the issues and forces that define the Middle East, the Arab-Israeli conflict remains the single most disruptive force in the region, and its ramifications become continuously more complex. These ramifications include links with Iran, the rise of Hizbullah and Hamas, popular discontent within Arab societies at Palestinian refugeehood and Israeli colonization of Arab lands, and the radicalization of Salafi groups, among others. Clearly, resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict is critical for wider stability and progress in the Middle East.

It is helpful to consider three time frames when examining this conflict. The first is biblical time, which is measured in the eras of entire peoples, over centuries. The second is temporal or secular time, which is measured in decades or the life spans of political regimes, approximately 30 to 60 years. The third is current political time, meaning events that drive politicians in real time today. These three time frames can span thousands of years, or just weeks at a time. One must examine all three simultaneously to fully understand the dynamics at play in the Arab-Israeli conflict today.

In biblical time, both the Palestinian people of today and the Hebrews of ancient times, in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, experienced exile. The current Palestinian exile is 62 years old. The Babylonian exile was—depending on how you read the historicity of the Bible—around 48 to 55 years long. The Palestinian exile has now lasted longer than the Babylonian exile of the Hebrews. The relevance of this point is about what happens to people in exile. When an entire people—or a majority of them—are forced into exile, the experience becomes central to the formation of national identity and cohesion, and even possibly to national ethics. The sense of being a single people that belong together, in a sovereign state or on a certain piece of land, is often forged in exile. This happened during the Babylonian exile, and is happening now during the contemporary Palestinian exile. The responses of both peoples are similar in many ways.

The critical operative aspect of biblical time is that people who are detached from their land express a longing for and a belonging to their land, a wish to return, a will to return, an insistence that one day they will return. This biblical-time dynamic is also defined by a battle that has cosmic elements, including prophets and the participation of the divine. Biblical-time protagonists see themselves engaged in an existential struggle, not just a struggle to return to a specific land or to have their rights affirmed. They see their fight as one for universal values that are bigger than a single person or a single group of people—values of justice, national rights, individual rights, universal human ethics, and so forth. It is not surprising that Israelis and Palestinians today claim specific lands and rights, but also make their cases in sweeping existential terms. Many Israelis and supporters of Israel see the conflict in the wider context of the Holocaust, genocide, Islamic extremism, the threat of messianic rule with nuclear weapons, Nazism, and other such threats. Palestinians also adopt existential criteria when they speak about their rights and Palestine. They see their struggle as one against colonialism, imperialism, Orientalism, racism, Islamophobia, Western double standards, and imperial duplicity, among other concerns.

In biblical time, Israelis and Palestinians, both of whom feel that they are victims, vulnerable and fighting alone, wage a struggle to survive. The result is an epic fight to survive that is measured in generations, in centuries. In both ancient texts and contemporary biblical-time battles, there are feats of heroism and barbarism at the same time, often committed by the same people. Miracles and massacres take place side by side, while prophets and war criminals walk in the same land. Tales of suffering and redemption define the same people, along with defeat and victory. Finally, the weapons of warfare for people who wage battle in biblical time are not primarily military, but include human assets of patience, introspection, resoluteness, self-assertion, and physical and moral resistance. In the end, one hopes and waits for divine intervention to help achieve the ultimate antidote to exile, which is return, repatriation, and sovereignty, a narrative that is deeply etched in both the Jewish and Palestinian experiences. In many ways, Palestinians today, in the 62nd year of their exile, behave

almost identically to the way that various Hebrew, Jewish, and modern Zionist groups acted during their millennia of active or denied nationhood, in particular responding to the trauma of exile with different instruments of struggle.

In the contemporary conflict, these two peoples behave like warriors in biblical time, prepared in certain cases to carry out cruel acts of barbarism that will not solve the problem. The conflict is becoming more intense while the nature of warfare is becoming more severe—as Israel’s last two wars in Gaza and Lebanon indicate. Neither side shows signs of giving up; rather, both show greater willingness to fight and a greater technical proficiency to wage that fight, with major regional or international powers supporting them.

Examining the conflict in temporal or secular time—essentially the period since 1991, when serious negotiations were launched in Madrid—we see many attempts to negotiate a peaceful, permanent, comprehensive peace agreement, without any success. Bilateral agreements between Israel and Egypt and Israel and Jordan represent an important lesson on how to achieve a comprehensive and lasting peace agreement that addresses the core needs of both parties. This has not occurred in the Israeli-Palestinian case.

This segues into real time, to the politics of today. Where are we now in the Arab-Israeli conflict? Time is a crucial element in the conflict and in attempts to resolve it. Presently, five “clocks” are running simultaneously, five processes that exert pressure on both sides. The first is the ten-month partial freeze on some of the settlements that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared in 2009. Second is Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad’s plan to build the infrastructure of a Palestinian state within two years. The U.S. is spending some \$400 million to train and support the security contingencies of this plan. Third is the declaration by the Arab League to support the “proximity talks” for four months only. What happens after this period is unclear, but setting a timetable is better than keeping a failed process open-ended. Fourth are the November 2010 midterm elections in the United States, always an occasion for pro-Israeli lobby groups and other special interests to exercise their influence

on American policy in the Middle East. The fifth “clock” is the slightly turbulent dynamic between Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Obama, and between the Israeli and American governments more generally. It is unclear where this relationship is heading, but the relationship reflects deeper attitudes and policy positions that touch on all of the critical elements of substantive negotiations, including Jerusalem, settlements, statehood, security, and refugees.

This current dynamic, including its confrontations and face-offs, does not take place in a vacuum. It reflects decades of earnest attempts to negotiate a comprehensive peace, without success. One consequence of this has been a growing religiosity on both sides and the increasing impact of religious sentiment, including in the U.S. and the wider Arab-Islamic region. External actors, such as Iran, have added complexity to the issue. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is the oldest and most destabilizing conflict in the region, but a series of other conflicts, tensions, and active wars in the Middle East, most of which are linked together in one way or another, have joined it.

Actions undertaken by all sides, including Arabs, Israelis, and external mediators, can help to explain the stalemate that has persisted since the Oslo Process of 1993. The single most important impediment to progress, in my view, has been a conceptual failure in how we try to resolve this issue. The main approach, which the U.S. has previously supported, has been the acceptance that the ironclad security of Israel must be assured in perpetuity with no ambiguity, and then the Arabs will have a chance to negotiate for their rights. Essentially, the U.S. is telling Hamas today: Accept the conditions we lay down, stop fighting Israel, recognize Israel, and then we will speak to you—but without giving Hamas the same level of assurance that Israel receives before talks begin. This one-sided focus on the primacy of Israeli security over the mutual rights of Israelis and Palestinians has been a deep and fatal structural flaw in the peace process. If the Obama administration seeks to recalibrate the U.S. position as a truly impartial mediator among Arabs and Israelis, and to be perceived as such by both sides, addressing this flaw would be very significant. It is relevant to recall that the only two negotiations that have suc-

ceeded and endured, the Egypt-Israel and the Jordan-Israel agreements, did so because they addressed the rights of Israelis and Arabs equally and simultaneously, without assigning priority to one over the other.

Today, there seems to be broad consensus on the need to negotiate a two-state solution, but without agreement on the specifics. New elements continue to enter the picture. Last year, Prime Minister Netanyahu said that Israel must be recognized as a “Jewish state,” even before negotiations can begin. The precise meaning and implications of this have never been clarified. The role of Iran for some is problematic. The emergence of Hizbullah and Hamas since the early 1980s, which fought the last two wars with Israel, is a new reality. Israel’s main threat today does not come from Arab governments or armies; it comes from either non-state resistance and Islamist groups or, in the case of Iran, a non-Arab party. The passing of time complicates the negotiating process by introducing new players, elements, demands, and dynamics.

One concern today is that the Israeli-Arab national conflict may be transforming into a battle between Jewish colonial assertion and Islamic resistance. If this becomes a primarily religious conflict that is defined in terms of survival and resistance, and is calibrated in the existential terms of the biblical time mentioned above, it will inevitably lead to much more intense fighting and destruction, in Armageddon-type conflicts.

Six dimensions of the Arab-Israeli conflict today are most relevant. The first is the United States’ role as a mediator, and the efficacy of that role. The second is the ongoing U.S.-Israeli relationship, especially in light of new tensions between them given the wider context of American strategic concerns in the Arab-South Asian region and how these are impacted by the Arab-Israeli conflict. The third issue is the nature and direction of Arab-Israeli negotiations, and whether the proximity talks can progress toward direct negotiations that address the core issues for both sides. The fourth issue pertains to Israel’s policies and behavior, especially on the colonization of occupied Arab lands and the siege of Gaza. The fifth reflects the policies of the Arab world, and how it engages in war or peace. The Arab peace plan is a very courageous and solid plan, but the Arabs are unable to

activate it beyond making statements; they are waiting for the world to help. The sixth issue is Iran, its links to the conflict, and its perceptions in the region.

Real changes are underway in many of these areas. We are at a moment of historical reckoning now, where temporal time, biblical time, and real-time politics time have converged, generating intense diplomatic activity and renewed American interest in mediation. The core problem from the Palestinian side is the refugee status of the Palestinians, which is not sufficiently discussed. To end this conflict we must return to where it began. The Arab-Israeli conflict did not start in 1967; it started in 1947-48. The exile and consequent refugeehood of the Palestinians is the critical consequence of that moment. If the diplomatic process begins discussing refugees in a serious way, alongside mutual recognition, it will demonstrate that this process is progressing in earnest. Until this occurs, we may witness a historic moment marked by new activity, but it will not culminate in success until we reach a decisive moment when decent men and women sit down and resolve this conflict by addressing Israelis and Arabs as human beings that have equal rights to be implemented simultaneously.

### III. On-the-Job Training: Assessing President Barack Obama's First Year

The first year of the Obama administration's Middle East foreign policy is worthy of assessment. It touches on three key factors that define the region: the Arab-Israeli conflict, the nature of domestic power and governance in the Arab states, and the role of major foreign powers. The Obama administration started off with a dramatic bang—literally in the first days in office—setting a new tone by articulating the rhetoric of its policy and recalibrating several relationships. Central to this process was outreach to Muslims and toward Islam, a “hug-a-Muslim” policy that sought to project respect and realism. For the U.S. president to articulate this policy so openly and publicly on TV, for example by speaking directly to the Iranian people, was very powerful. It signaled that change was at hand.

Another significant step was the appointment of George Mitchell as special envoy to Middle East peace-making, which immediately revealed President Obama's intentions and priorities. President Obama followed this appointment with calls for freezing Israeli settlements and requests for the Arabs to make gestures of normalization to the Israelis. Again, his actions signaled a clear, more even-handed American approach. President Obama also asked Israel to increase the flow of humanitarian goods to Gaza. While doing so falls short of asking for full implementation of international law and standards of morality, it was nevertheless a step forward at a time that followed months of silence from Washington regarding the situation in Gaza during the Hamas-Israel war. Other novel moves included discussing reestablishing ties with Syria, recalibrating the negotiating posture with the Iranians, and sending Ambassador William Burns to Geneva to talk with Iranian officials to get the nuclear negotiating process on track.

Taking a slightly lower profile on Lebanon was an intriguing part of the Obama policy that has not been sufficiently appreciated. The withdrawal from Iraq continued apace, in a rather low-key manner, while in Afghanistan the policy was to ratchet up the U.S. presence and “win” the war. The weapons of mass destruction (WMD) non-proliferation and “war on terror” policies continued

largely without significant change, although President Obama also signaled that he wanted to fight terrorists while simultaneously looking to negotiate with those who would lay down their arms, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan. These were signs of a growing realism, maturity, and pragmatism on the part of the American presidency.

In becoming U.S. president at this time, President Obama was faced with many challenges in the Middle East simultaneously, most of them interconnected in some manner, including: terrorism, WMDs, democracy promotion, and concerns related to Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Yemen, Iraq, Sudan, Palestine-Israel, and Afghanistan. The challenge for the U.S. was not only to devise a coherent and realistic policy for the Middle East, but to weave together a series of coherent policy approaches to different conflicts and issues in a way that either made sense or made progress, or both, ideally. The Obama administration's track record in the Middle East after the first full year suggests a mediocre and mixed performance.

The early months of the administration provided the promise of a more coherent and integrated regional approach to the different issues at hand. Yet many aspects of President Obama's approach remained unclear after the initial months of incumbency. Regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict, it was not clear when the rhetoric would transform into policy. It was not clear whether the Obama administration would prioritize international or domestic issues (domestic concerns including the economy, health-care reform, and other sectoral policies, as well as the political pressures of various special interest groups and lobbies, including pro-Israeli, oil, Christian fundamentalists, and others). It was unclear how the Obama team would respond to the pushback that they received from the Arabs who rejected the appeal to normalize relations with Israel and the Israelis who rejected the total freeze on settlements but offered instead a partial freeze in some places for a limited period of time.

President Obama was not explicit on how he would reconcile the rhetoric of reaching out to Muslims and Islam with policies that addressed the realities of life for Muslims in Islamic majority countries—in other words, how to translate rhetoric and principles into policies and diplomacy. How would one reconcile the

pressure on Iran with the engagement of Iran? What was the real red line for the U.S. in Iran: was it spinning more centrifuges, or the percentage of uranium enrichment, or obtaining delivery systems for potential weapons? It was not clear whether the U.S. would make potential regional trade-offs, such as on Lebanon and Syria, Iran and Israel-Palestine peace talks, or democracy and liberalization in Saudi Arabia or Egypt in relation to security cooperation. President Obama added to the ambiguity when it came to how religion and politics intersect, a dynamic that the U.S. government and the American people seem baffled by. They often ascribe too much attention to religious issues when the real problem is political or national in nature.

The “hug-a-Muslim” policy dramatically demonstrated intent, but the policy’s implications over time were unclear. Many people in the Islamic world responded positively and genuinely to President Obama’s approach, but they were also waiting for the follow-up. A year later, in most cases, they are still waiting. President Obama recognized the tensions that exist between the U.S. and many Muslims or Muslim-majority countries, but he did not quite know what to do to address this concern beyond emphasizing that he respects Islam, which is an honorable and welcomed sentiment, but falls short of policy.

In the initial stage of the Obama presidency, several things were striking: the emphasis on the Arab-Israeli conflict, the emphasis on the Iranian issue, and the effort to separate these two issues. Unlike Prime Minister Netanyahu, the Obama team did not want to conflate the two issues, but rather sought to deal with them separately. The Arab-Israeli conflict was a priority, but perhaps not necessarily urgent. Washington understood that resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict would have significant and positive impacts on so many of the other challenges that the U.S. faced in the region. Yet it was not urgent enough for the president personally to devote to it the necessary time. The past 40 years have confirmed that serious progress on major foreign policy issues—especially Arab-Israeli diplomacy—only occurs when the U.S. president is literally in the room. President Obama went halfway. He prioritized the conflict, appointed Mitchell, spoke out, and took a strong, clear position on settlements and normalization, but he did not go so

far as to give it personal attention. This is partly because of the plethora of other challenges facing him at the time.

Finally, during the first year of the Obama administration, the U.S. was initially weak on understanding the linkages between the different conflicts and tensions in the Middle East. Most people in the region, on the other hand, completely embraced these linkages and operated on the basis that, for example, they could only take America's democratization efforts seriously if the U.S. was also serious about implementing UN resolutions, or addressing issues like the rule of law and human rights consistently across the Middle East. Many people in the region did not embrace U.S. efforts because of the frequent contradictions and inconsistencies in U.S. policy from one country to another.

After a year in office, the Obama administration recognized the failure of its initial policy of demanding that Israelis and Arabs make concessions on settlements and normalization. It responded not with a clear, deep policy, but with another mechanism that requires careful scrutiny: the "proximity talks" in which Mitchell is shuttling back and forth between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Few people expect major results from these talks, but it is important to recognize what they do represent: phase two of President Obama's policy. We now know that the Obama response to the initial pushback his team experienced in the Middle East is to keep pushing on, though trying a different strategy. Several aspects of this seem worthy of analysis. There is direct, high-level, and persistent involvement among top leaders on all sides, including meetings with the president, the deployment of the vice president to the region, and Mitchell moving between Palestinian National Authority (PNA) President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

These negotiations are occurring in the wider context of the five concurrent timetables mentioned earlier, which is unprecedented. However, while the U.S. is deeply involved and invested in the proximity talks, we do not know the American position on the key issues under negotiation. Perhaps the most important potential result of the proximity talks is that they might reveal the American position on these issues, including Jerusalem, refugees, and settlements, and the principles that the U.S. stands for.

We have heard from the U.S. only that it wants to work towards a comprehensive, permanent resolution of the conflict, leading to two states living side by side. The U.S. must reveal where it stands on these issues, chiefly because until it does most people in the Arab world will not accept it as a fair and impartial mediator. Thus a priority for the U.S. is to regain its credibility and legitimacy as a negotiator with both sides, which it has lost in the eyes of the Arabs by being so supportive of the Israeli position in the past. American efforts at evenhandedness are typically carried out in a low-key manner; however, these efforts seem to be more prevalent under the Obama administration than previously. The nature, intensity, and timeliness of the U.S. intervention are significant developments that are still unfolding. We should watch their ramifications carefully.

The Netanyahu position is another fascinating element. Prime Minister Netanyahu has gained political strength at home for standing up to U.S. pressure, but he is also hemmed in to a greater extent than previously. He has fewer options at his disposal because the U.S. rejected nearly all of the positions that he proposed. Prime Minister Netanyahu hoped the U.S. would drop the Israeli-Palestine issue in the short term and deal with Iran first, but the U.S. refused, claiming that it must deal with both. He suggested that the parties discuss an “economic peace” and put political agreements on the backburner, but the U.S. insisted on addressing “a political horizon.” He wanted the U.S. simply to help the Fayyad plan and build Palestinian capacity, but the U.S. rejected that idea and insisted on trying to negotiate a comprehensive peace accord. The Israelis demanded that the Arabs offer normalization gestures first as confidence-builders, but the U.S. asked Israel to freeze settlements simultaneously. Prime Minister Netanyahu wanted unconditional talks, but the U.S. said there had to be some agreed upon conditions, which Israel only partially met with the limited moratorium on certain settlements. He also ultimately accepted, in a vague manner, the two-state solution, which he had never accepted before. The Israelis and Americans now regularly and very publicly push back against the demands of one another, a novel state of affairs worth monitoring for what it might portend.

While PNA President Mahmoud Abbas remains weak in the section of Palestine that he governs, he is still the president and people must deal with him. PNA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad remains relevant because of his plan to build the infrastructure of the Palestinian state. Yet neither of these personalities seems likely to possess the necessary tools for achieving the breakthrough in negotiations that Palestinians are looking for. Hamas remains a major player but it is not directly involved in the diplomatic process, a critical issue that the U.S. must address soon. The majority of Arabs remain on the sidelines, passively monitoring the process. Europe is equally passive, forgoing a role that is commensurate with its power and influence. Russia and China potentially could have greater involvement due to the roles they play with regard to energy, Iran, arms supplies, and the Security Council. All in all, the regional picture a year after President Obama took office is quite different from what it was when he assumed office.

The Iranian-West/UN negotiating process is another dynamic, still-unresolved, issue. The U.S. has not convincingly engaged the Iranians. Instead, it continues to deal with Iran in the same way that it has dealt with Arab countries in the past. But Iran is not an Arab country, to whom it can issue threats and ultimatums, lay down markers, and expect a compliant response. Iran represents a new style of resistance, defiance, and engagement that is largely baffling to Europeans, Americans, and Israelis. The Iranians—and the Turks, as well—represent the novel phenomenon of a strong, self-confident Muslim-majority country in the Middle East that demands to be treated according to international law, whether in reference to enrichment of uranium for peaceful purposes or the application of UN resolutions. The U.S. does not seem comfortable dealing with this kind of attitude in its policy-making.

Other parts of the Middle East are also in flux, and will continue to challenge the U.S. and other foreign powers to respond with clear, sensible policies. The situation between Syria and Lebanon is evolving differently than it was a year ago. Solid Syrian rapprochement with former foes is redrawing aspects of the diplomatic map of the Arab world. The situation in Yemen has become dramatic in recent months, but little has changed there despite its dropping out of the media limelight; the same underlying ten-

sions, pressures, vulnerabilities, and forces for radicalization and fragmentation persist, without serious policy responses domestically or from abroad.

One of the core problems inhibiting U.S. efforts to forge a sensible set of policies in the Middle East is its broad inability to understand the relationship between religion, identity, resistance, and politics. These relationships often translate at the national level into a willingness to stand up to or defy the U.S. in certain instances, as has been the case with Turkey, Israel, Syria, Iran, and others. The U.S. is uneasily coming to grips with the reality that in the last ten years or so, its “side” has lost in virtually every conflict marked by an ideological or armed struggle between groups that were close to Iran and Syria and others supported by conservative Arab governments, Israel, or the U.S. The 2009 Lebanese elections were the only major exception, and part of the reason the Hariri group won over the Hizbullah-allied forces may have been that the U.S. played a relatively low-key role in the process.

The U.S. speaks more softly these days about promoting democracy in the Middle East. Democratization remains an American principle but not an active element of its foreign policy beyond giving money to small groups or civil society NGOs or for training sessions, which have minimal impact. Similarly, reaching out to the Islamic world remains a rhetorical policy that is very sensible in its own right, but still lacks clear policy implications. The concern for the U.S. should be that a large number of Muslims—three out of four in the Arab world—feel the U.S. is a threat to Islam itself, not just to individual Muslims, because of its policies in Palestine, Pakistan, Iraq, Afghanistan, and other lands. The U.S. thus faces significant impediments to integrating its Islam-friendly policies with what it is actually doing on the ground. The biggest problem may be American refusal to engage with key Islamist parties in the region, including Hamas, Hizbullah, and the Muslim Brothers, who represent powerful forces and in places are becoming dominant ruling parties.

U.S. policies in the Middle East after the Obama administration’s first year paint a picture that is comforting on one level because the U.S. has clearly recognized that it needs to change some of its policies and has summoned the wisdom and courage

to make those changes. I would give President Obama very high marks for his initial intentions and adjustments, the rhetoric that signaled a new tone and a new direction, and the limited changes of some policies. The problem is that the Obama administration has not followed the initial promise of change with sufficiently rigorous and clear policies on the ground. We are approaching a moment of truth of sorts, particularly due to the five running “clocks” and the continued impact of both the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Iranian issue.

Critical issues that the U.S. must address through its Middle East foreign policy include: 1) What is the U.S. position on Arab-Israeli final status peace negotiations, and what does the U.S. actually think would be a fair and realistic resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in terms of refugees, Jerusalem, settlements, borders, and related issues? 2) How can the U.S., the West, and the UN system deal with the Iranian challenge in a way that is commensurate with both international law and morality and the political reality that the Iranians are already enriching uranium? 3) Who determines Middle East policy for the U.S.? Is it the majority in Congress that is deeply shaped by the influence of assorted lobby groups, or is it the president? Is there a clear, coherent American policy for the Middle East? 4) What is the role of the U.S. in the region? Is it simply a dispassionate mediator that can try to help people solve their problems and disputes, or is it an active protagonist on one side fighting against other local parties?

The U.S. is in the awkward position now of having essentially marginalized itself from many significant diplomatic processes in the Middle East. It is a very active player in the region, due to its military presence, financial commitments, political influence, Security Council resolutions, sanctions, threats, enticements, and other assets a global power can utilize. But its influence is often limited because many if not most people in the region defy, resist, and occasionally actively fight the U.S. if they feel that is in their best interest to do so—for these people neither respect nor fear the U.S. The Obama administration understands this and seems to have tried to recalibrate its rhetoric and its policies in a manner that would allow it to regain both the respect and the influence that it should have as a global power.

President Obama as an individual has had three major defining characteristics in his life: he was a law student, professor, and lawyer; he was a community organizer; and finally, he was a state and national politician. Those three occupations represent quite different spheres and personalities. We do not know which of these identities will ultimately emerge in Barack Obama as president. In his first year, he learned much on the job, and maintained a strong focus on domestic issues. In the Middle East he has offered many initiatives, but also experienced many setbacks and impediments. As phase two of his Middle East policy develops, we may soon learn which version of President Obama will dominate policy there. Will it be the politician who is tough, makes deals and compromises, succumbs to pressures, threats, and enticements, and is willing to make any deal to remain in power? Will it be the law student and professor who insists on implementing the rule of law, anchored in principles of justice, equality, and accountability? Or will it be the community organizer, who mobilizes people, challenges unjust authority, works to address grievances, and tries to build a better society by harnessing people power to change society from within by using the rule of law and other means?

The U.S. president does not have unlimited time to learn on the job in this situation. Many people in the region—governments, movements, and individuals—have bypassed the U.S. already and essentially moved on to do what they think is right according to their own interests. This is not a happy or stable situation. The Middle East is in great stress, marked by violence, tension, disparities, conflict, and war. Dynamics within the region are shifting constantly, as new power centers and players emerge, and new power relationships take hold. These transformations have been developing for decades and reflect three critical loci at the domestic, regional, and global levels: domestic governance and political economy in the Arab states; regional conditions closely aligned with the Arab-Israeli conflict; and the nature of intervention by foreign powers, now closely tied to Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan. Actors at all levels must fundamentally reassess their policies and adopt more constructive ones if the region—and its relations with global powers—can expect to emerge from its current cycle of chronic tension and ongoing violence, into a more mutually satisfying pattern of national self-interest anchored in regional stability and prosperity.



## The Fares Center for Eastern Mediterranean Studies

The mission of the Fares Center for Eastern Mediterranean Studies at Tufts University is to create an academic environment for the promotion of greater understanding of the rich heritage of the Eastern Mediterranean, and of the significant challenges that this region faces at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The Fares Center acts as a major focus for cross-regional and cross-cultural analysis, providing a forum for the articulation of a broad diversity of viewpoints in the belief that this will serve as an effective means of conflict resolution.

The main countries concerned are Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, and the neighboring countries of Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Iran, Iraq, Israel, and Turkey, together with any other country or region of the world whose history and politics affects them. The region's history and its pivotal role in world politics have attracted the interest of scholars concerned with fields as diverse as the origins of writing and the beginnings of modern science. In focusing on the Eastern Mediterranean, the Fares Center is a rich source of current information and data on the area, encouraging the consideration of policy issues from an international perspective.

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The Fares Center sponsors academic symposia, conferences, and seminars that enhance its commitment to cross-regional analysis and to the encouragement of a diversity of voices from within and from outside the region. It publishes occasional papers and the proceedings of workshops and conferences on the history, culture, and international relations of the region.

