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### Shifting Washington's strategic focus

By WALEED SADI

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US President Barack Obama ran his campaign for [the White House](#) on a platform of sweeping change to his country's domestic and foreign policies. So far, he seems to have stuck to his guns on these promises, especially on the domestic scene, most recently by lifting the ban on [stem cell research](#).

Obama's vision for change, however, is constrained by the severe global and US recessions and the domestic and international financial crisis that has brought down several major US and international banks. The higher than expected unemployment rate in the US and the failure of several stimulus packages to shake the US economy from its torpor have forced the new president to focus more on the domestic scene than on foreign affairs.



US soldiers stand guard in eastern Afghanistan. [file] Photo: AP

No wonder then that Obama has been outshone until now by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on the foreign scene. Clinton has traveled the width and breadth of the world since the new administration assumed office, promoting the US foreign policy agenda. The inward looking perspective of the US president has somewhat undermined the promise of change on foreign issues.

Despite this, Obama did commit his administration to an accelerated withdrawal of [US soldiers](#) from Iraq, albeit not at the promised pace. Improvement in security conditions in Iraq has made it possible for Obama to live up to his election promise of an early withdrawal, if only to bolster the US military presence in Afghanistan.

Judging by the tone and content of the declared policies of some of Obama's key advisers who supported his bid for the White House right from the start, Obama's perspectives as far as the Middle East and southwest Asia are concerned are pretty clear. One key adviser and possible mentor for the new president on Middle East affairs is Dennis Ross who endorsed Obama's bid for the presidency of the US out of a deep conviction that he would be a breath of fresh air for his country.

ROSS HAS SAID enough and written sufficiently on the perspectives of the new president to make us cognizant of where Obama might be heading when it comes to the Middle East and the adjacent region to the east. We know by now that Obama has made

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Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan the center of his focus in the Middle East and the neighboring regions. His decision to disengage from Iraq is intended first and foremost to engage in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. That's where the center of gravity has now shifted for Obama's foreign policy.

Redeployment in Iraq therefore means a more forceful US military presence in Afghanistan, where an additional 17,000 US troops will be deployed soon, especially in the south of the country where the Taliban insurgency is picking up steam. US military strategists have also convinced Obama that Afghanistan and Pakistan are two sides of one coin and are therefore organically linked as far as US efforts to defeat terrorism and extremism from that part of the world are concerned. Pakistan, US military experts have long concluded, serves as a sanctuary for Taliban militants. The Taliban cannot be defeated in Afghanistan unless these sanctuaries are eliminated or rendered useless.

Obama appointed Ambassador Richard Holbrooke as his special envoy to both Afghanistan and Pakistan out of recognition that the defeat of terrorism must be conducted on both the Pakistani and Afghani fronts. In deference to his promise to be open minded on engaging the enemy, Obama has said he would engage moderate elements within the Taliban movement, something Afghan President Hamid Karzai enthusiastically welcomed.

Yet US engagement in these nations has not diverted US attention from Iran, with its links to Middle East conflicts on the Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese fronts. Obama has long endorsed the proposition that a nuclear Iran poses a threat not only to Israel but also the US, hence the decision to deploy additional US missiles in Eastern Europe.

OBAMA'S FOCUS in the Middle East, for the time being at least, can therefore be classified as security-oriented rather than predicated on the advancement of peace processes between Israel and neighboring Arab countries, including of course the Palestinians. There is enough evidence to corroborate the growing conviction that the new president believes that an imposed settlement on the Arab-Israeli fronts will not make sense, based on the rationale that an imposed peace is no peace at all.

Obama subscribes to the need for engagement with the parties to the Arab-Israeli conflict on condition these engagements are waged without illusion, meaning without too high expectations. He seems to believe that conditions on the ground are not favorable to lasting peace deals between the parties and that this hostile environment to peace arises not only because Palestinian ranks are in disarray and the domestic Israeli scene is not much better, but also because of a lack of propitious conditions in Afghanistan and Pakistan on the one hand and Iran on the other. In other words, peace in the Middle East must be preceded by peace and stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan and the end of the Iranian threat.

True to his promise to engage even the fiercest opponents of his country, Obama is keeping the door open for direct talks with Iran not only for the sake of talking but also out of a deep conviction that the conflict with Iran is solvable. There are presidential elections in Iran in June when the incumbent Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad will face stiff competition from moderate candidates and therefore may not win reelection. In addition, the leadership hierarchy in Iran is such that the center of power lies with the ayatollah system and not in the hands of the head of state. The US, meanwhile, is promoting the idea of extending a nuclear umbrella to the countries of the region in a bid to convince Teheran that the acquisition of nuclear weapons will only bring it more hardship and neither clout nor hegemony in the region.

Against this backdrop, the Middle East process can expect to "enjoy" a respite until conditions in Southwest Asia are more secure and stable. However, this brings its own dangers, and it is not surprising to see that Israel has stepped up the pace of settlement building on Palestinian land to effectively foreclose any peaceful option in the area.

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*The writer is a former Jordanian ambassador to Turkey and the UN and other international organizations in Geneva. He is currently a columnist for the Jordan Times and Al Rai. [bitterlemons.org](http://bitterlemons.org)*

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