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PATRYCJA SASNAL

**Polityka Stanów Zjednoczonych wobec aktorów  
w konflikcie arabsko-izraelskim.  
Między Bushem a Obamą**

**U.S. Policy towards Actors in the Arab-Israeli Conflict:  
Between Bush and Obama**

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PATRYCJA SASNAL

No. 12, AUGUST 2009



*Secretary Rice is headed to the Middle East. Peace in the Middle East is a priority for this administration. She's going to continue our efforts to involve all parties—the Palestinians, the Israelis, Arabs—to work for a solution that will lead to peace, and that is a Palestinian state living side by side with Israel in peace and security.*

George W. Bush [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov) (December 2008)

*Obama and Biden will make progress on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a key diplomatic priority. They will make a sustained push – working with Israelis and Palestinians – to achieve the goal of two states, a Jewish state in Israel and a Palestinian state, living side by side in peace and security.*

Barack Obama [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov) (January 2009)

## Introduction

U.S. influence in the Middle East is at the post-Cold War lowest. In part, this is a consequence of the “Bush doctrine” and the resulting errors in Middle East policy—the Iraq war and negligence of the Arab-Israeli conflict—leading to a realignment of the regional line-up, in place from the 1970s (and slightly modified in the early 1990s). Iran’s position has strengthened, at the expense of most Arab states and Israel. Another adverse consequence of the Iraq war is the continued radicalisation of the Islamic world, generating support for groups hostile to the U.S. Extremist religious groups, themselves involved in terrorist activity or exhorting others to do so, pose a threat not only to the interests of the United States and their allies, but also many Arab governments and Israel. These gloomy developments have also been underpinned by the U.S. administration’s unwillingness to commit itself to the peace process. The unsolved and neglected Arab-Israeli conflict is of multifaceted importance. Politically, it on the one hand defines the regional relationships, hampers cooperation among Arab countries and antagonises Palestinian factions, and on the other, it largely determines bilateral relations with the U.S. for the parties to the conflict. At the public-attitudes level, it continues to generate strong emotions among the Arabs, providing a pretext for groups hostile to the U.S. to incite the population against U.S. policies.

During George W. Bush’s second term, starting from 2005 and 2006, the political situation in the Levant began to deteriorate perceptibly. The adverse changes—including the war between Israel and Hezbollah in July 2006, the political crisis in Lebanon and a real threat of another civil war in spring 2008, inter-Palestinian strife after the 2006 parliamentary election and the takeover of Gaza Strip by Hamas in mid-2007, the alarming situation in Iraq, coupled with the problem of Iraqi refugees in Syria, a political crisis in Israel, and Iran’s growing influence in the region—led the Bush administration to change its policy towards the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and support the peace talks between the two sides, resumed in November 2007 in Annapolis. But just as many previous U.S. diplomatic attempts at conflict resolution, the initiative came in a wrong form and too late to be a success.

Simultaneously, given the Middle Eastern destabilisation and a weakening of U.S. influence, steps towards easing the tensions were taken at the regional level, without external actors’ participation. Several such events took place in the spring and summer of 2008, including an agreement between Lebanon’s ruling coalition, the March 14 Movement, and the Hezbollah-led opposition; the resumption of Syrian-Israeli indirect peace talks; Palestinian negotiations between Fatah and Hamas, first in Yemen and later through Egypt’s good offices; Israel-Hamas ceasefire in Gaza; Israel-Hamas agreement on prisoner exchange; and Jordan authorities’ talks with Hamas. Compared to 2006 and 2007, the year 2008, which saw a presidential campaign in the U.S., was marked by a relative weakening of tensions between Israel and its neighbours, but there remained the problem of Iran’s nuclear programme, which led to the development of plans for an Israeli military attack on that country.<sup>1</sup> A relative easing of Middle East tensions contained a small yet important element of waiting for decisions to be taken by the U.S. which—for reasons of its strategic relations with Israel, vital regional interests and the top-level position internationally—comes as a guarantor of security for many countries in the region.

With Barack Obama taking over presidency and proclaiming “a new beginning” in relations with Muslim majority states, the likelihood increased of a change in U.S. Middle Eastern policy and the country’s intense

<sup>1</sup> B. Ravid, “Defense establishment paper: Golan for Syria peace, plan for Iran strike,” *Haaretz*, 29 November 2008, [www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/1039929.html](http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/1039929.html).

contribution to the Arab-Israeli peace process. The president has talked about a greater role for diplomatic instruments in foreign policy making, a dialogue without preconditions with countries in conflict with the U.S. and, most importantly, about seeing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a major priority for his administration. Irrespective of the weakening of U.S. potential in the region, the administration's greater diplomatic involvement in the Middle East continues to be a condition for improved security in the region. Active U.S. engagement in Arab-Israeli conflict settlement is among the most important interests of the United States and the whole international community. This analysis will therefore review U.S. policies towards the states actively involved in the Middle East conflict or having its vital interests linked to this conflict (Israel, Palestinian Autonomy, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and Jordan), and will seek to identify the major determinants for U.S. policy in the region. After describing the Middle East's place in U.S. foreign policy and the special importance of the Arab-Israeli conflict, it will attempt at confronting the policy assumptions and instruments of the previous and the present administrations. It will then present the current determinants of U.S. policy towards the conflict, in bilateral relations with individual actors, and other internal and external determinants.

The methodological basis for the present study is provided by classical positivist policy analysis and rational choice theory. The policy analysis focuses on the 2006–2008 period, from a deterioration of regional situation in 2006 to the expectations, projections and first initiatives in President Obama's policy to be pursued from 2009 onwards.

One terminology note must be made here regarding the notion of the "Middle East," which in Polish literature usually denotes a wide swath from Afghanistan and Iran to Egypt.<sup>2</sup> Even though the text includes references to "U.S. Middle Eastern policy," it will be taken to have a *sensu stricto* meaning (i.e. without Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan). Wherever the notion of Middle East is taken in a broader meaning, this will be clearly indicated.

## The Importance of the Middle East and U.S. Foreign Policy Doctrine

### Greater Middle East in U.S. foreign policy

The Middle East comes as a high-priority area in U.S. foreign policy for reasons which include:

- Geostrategic position<sup>3</sup>: major transcontinental transport and commercial routes run through the region which has historically been at the centre of influences by great powers and religions.
- Energy and financial resources<sup>4</sup>: the energy reserves in the Middle East (oil and gas) are estimated to account for more than a half of global reserves, and the dividend from their sale gives a considerable financial clout to Arab producers and exporters. Unobstructed access to these resources is a matter of strategic importance, counting among vital U.S. interests.
- Alliance with Israel: it has played an important role in the Middle East policy of the United States, strengthening U.S. influence in the region; consequently, mediation in the Arab-Israeli conflict is in U.S. interests. Historically, effective U.S. diplomacy towards both sides to the conflict tended to produced strategic gains.<sup>5</sup>
- Terrorism: violent extremist groups in the Greater Middle East pose a major challenge to U.S. security, and directly to U.S. troops stationed in the region. By far the greatest number of "foreign terrorist organisations" on the State Department's list come from there. The founders and leaders of the main group fought by the U.S., al-Qaeda, hail from Egypt and Saudi Arabia.
- Proliferation of nuclear weapons: the nuclear programme developed by Iran, a country hostile to the U.S. since 1979, may durably change the security landscape in the region, thus providing another major

<sup>2</sup> *Wielka Encyklopedia PWN*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2001, vol. 4, p. 158.

<sup>3</sup> This determinant was of considerable importance for US policy during Cold War, when the Middle East was the scene of rivalry with the USSR.

<sup>4</sup> It must be noted that the beginnings of U.S. economic and political presence in the Middle East date back to the 1920s and 1930s, just after the discovery of oil deposits in the Arabian Peninsula, i.e. the times when major economies were switching to petroleum-based energy sources.

<sup>5</sup> Following the US "shuttle diplomacy" in the 1970s and U.S.-mediated Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement, the Soviet Union's influence in the region diminished considerably.

threat to the security of the U.S. and its Middle Eastern allies. With Iran going nuclear, the likelihood increases that these weapons will proliferate throughout the region.

– Anti-Americanism: the most negative perception of the U.S. is in Muslim countries, a result of U.S. policies in the Middle East and the strategic alliance with Israel. With anti-American sentiments on the rise, support has been growing for the ideology of terrorism and its use against the United States. Because of the level of Middle Eastern anti-Americanism, the region comes as a priority direction for U.S. public diplomacy.

Security in the Middle East is among several U.S. “classic interests,” along with e.g. security in Europe, as described in 1994 by the then National Security Adviser, Anthony Lake.<sup>6</sup> And the global threats, as listed by Hillary R. Clinton during her nomination hearing to be secretary of state,<sup>7</sup> have their sources in the Greater Middle East, an area which occupies an important place in the national security and defence strategy<sup>8</sup> and the strategy for public diplomacy and strategic communication.<sup>9</sup> Much of President Bush’s State of the Union address in 2008 dealt precisely with that particular region.<sup>10</sup>

### Special significance of the Arab-Israeli conflict

The Arab-Israeli conflict takes centre stage in the context of the Greater Middle East’s significance and U.S. interests in the region. But because of the need to deal with the most pressing problems (terrorist threat, Iraqi situation, and Afghan-Pakistani border) and the circumstance that the costs of neglecting the Arab-Israeli conflict are indirect and long-term (and, consequently, less evident), the conflict and the peace process have tended to be underrated. As matters stand, however, the Arab-Israeli conflict represents a link which connects most of the previously listed priorities and interests of the United States.

The conflict is a priority foreign-policy and security issue for the United States’ strategic ally (Israel), countries in conflict with that ally (Palestinians, Syria and Lebanon) and also for Egypt and Jordan which signed peace treaties with Israel but are still wary of the conflict’s outcome. At the most general level, the conflict with Israel determines the political consciousness of the whole Arab world—not only the directly involved countries (those in a state of war with Israel, or bordering on it) but also the energy and financial potentates in the Gulf. That is why the American strategic alliance with Israel and the resulting policies have for more than four decades stirred antipathy towards Americans in Arab countries and—starting with George W. Bush’s first terms—in the whole Muslim world. The unresolved conflict provides a breeding ground for support of extremism and terrorism. Organisations hostile to Israel and the United States receive support from Iran, permitting the Islamic Republic to expand its sphere of influence in the Arab world, and causing conflicts among the Arabs. Threatened with fanaticism and Iranian advances, the authoritarian Arab governments allied with the U.S. get legitimacy to engage in undemocratic practices domestically, provoking increasing discontent among society, which in turn translates into anti-American resentment. And globally, the Arab-Israeli conflict remains a bone of contention among members of the international community (e.g. in the UN forum) and a (potential) platform for cooperation between the Europe Union, the United States and Russia.

As long as the Arab-Israeli conflict remains unresolved, U.S. strategic goals in the Middle East—guarantying Israel’s security on the one hand, and U.S. interests in Arab and, more broadly, Muslim countries on the other—will remain in conflict. It must not be expected that a resolved conflict (with a Palestinian state established; peace accords signed with that state, Syria and Lebanon; and Israel recognised by Arab League countries) could eliminate anti-American sentiments and Arab-Israeli tensions, but it would certainly bring down the level of these tensions and improve the security situation in the Middle East.

<sup>6</sup> A. Lake, “American Power and American Diplomacy,” *U.S. Department of State Dispatch* 1994, No. 46, pp. 766–769.

<sup>7</sup> “Today, nine years into a new century, Americans know that our nation and our world face great perils: from ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, to the continuing threat posed by terrorist extremists, to the spread of weapons of mass destruction (...).” See: H. R. Clinton, *Nomination Hearing To Be Secretary of State*, 3 January 2009, [www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/01/115196.htm](http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/01/115196.htm).

<sup>8</sup> The National Security Strategy, March 2006, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2006>; *National Defense Strategy*, 2008, [www.defenselink.mil/news/2008%20national%20defense%20strategy.pdf](http://www.defenselink.mil/news/2008%20national%20defense%20strategy.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> *U.S. National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication*, June 2007, [www.state.gov/documents/organization/87427.pdf](http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/87427.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> *President Bush Delivers State of the Union Address*, 28 January 2008, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/01/20080128-13.html>.

A factor no less important for U.S. interests than the Middle East and the Arab-Israeli conflict is the United States' role in the region. After the end of the Cold War, the U.S., as the "hyperpower"<sup>11</sup> of the time, was capable to influence the Middle Eastern situation almost unilaterally. And even despite a subsequent weakening of American domination, the U.S. remains the only mediator which—given its capacity to press both sides—may make Arab-Israeli peace a reality. At a time of ongoing regional conflict, U.S. security guarantees are needed not only by Israel. Arab countries, too, especially those under authoritarian regimes, have been seeking to develop as good relations with the U.S. as possible. While regional states' narrow interests are still of the greatest importance in the region, a major change of the Middle Eastern *status quo* can only take place with U.S. participation.

## Obama doctrine vs. Bush doctrine

One reason why President Obama won the election was that he distanced himself from the policies of his predecessor, denouncing the "Bush doctrine" and actions based on this doctrine, such as the launch of the war in Iraq. As indicated by the announced changes and early moves by the new U.S. administration, Obama will seek to develop a new foreign policy doctrine, diametrically different from the previous one.<sup>12</sup> But this should not be taken to mean an automatic invalidation of all elements of the Bush doctrine.

As presented in the National Security Strategy of 2002, the Bush doctrine is founded on four tenets: preventive war, fight against terrorist threat, regime change in rogue states and spread of democracy.<sup>13</sup> It was developed after the attack on the World Trade Centre—but the reaction to 11 September 2001 was more like a crowning, rather than the beginning, of unilateral tendencies aiming to strengthen American domination after the end of the Cold War. Despite the toppling of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq, cited by advocates of the former president's policies (and despite many welcome developments such as better relations with China and Russia), the implementation of the Bush doctrine in the Middle East, as has been pointed out previously, failed to produce favourable consequences for the U.S. or for regional security. A plan for a new order in the region—the 2004 project Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA),<sup>14</sup> providing for a sort of *chef d'oeuvre* in the form of a democratised Islamic world, sometimes to be achieved by means of "enforcing"<sup>15</sup> a democratic political system—has backfired and, consequently, the United States' unilateral force weakened.<sup>16</sup> That came as a result of two major blunders: the Iraq war and abandonment of mediation in the Middle East conflict. An important factor behind the negative perception of the Bush doctrine was also the controversy it aroused among the public (international and American) and European allies, thus eroding the U.S. image in the world.

If unilateralism and a drive to reinforce U.S. domination provoked extraordinary controversy, the calls to change (including in foreign policy), revamp the U.S. image and rebuild the country's position—with which Obama had won the election—gave rise to equally extraordinary expectations. Paradoxically, though, many elements of the Bush doctrine may stay as part of the Obama doctrine. An analysis of campaign announcements, formation of the present administration and its early moves allows one to identify, with a great deal of certainty, the Obama administration's overall foreign policy concept, which is the use of "smart power"—and, in the Levant, dialogue coupled with a privileged treatment of the Middle East peace

<sup>11</sup> R.S. Litwak, *Regime Change. U.S. Strategy through the Prism of 9/11*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Washington 2007.

<sup>12</sup> This is reflected in a host of measures taken in the first half-year of the Obama administration: "a fresh start" offer to Russia, participation in talks with Iran, taking up the question of nuclear disarmament, initiatives of particular importance for relations with Middle Eastern countries (appointment of special envoys to the Middle East and Sudan, closure of the Guantanamo prison, starting a dialogue with the Muslim world through Obama's public pronouncements and his visit to the Middle East). In June 2009 in his speech in Cairo President Obama implicitly declared an end to the Bush doctrine.

<sup>13</sup> M. Buckley, R. Singh (eds.), *The Bush Doctrine and the war on terrorism: global responses, global consequences*, Routledge, London, New York 2006, p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> For more on the project, see: <http://bmena.state.gov>.

<sup>15</sup> *Ramses 2008*, Institut Français des Relations Internationales, 2008, p. 170.

<sup>16</sup> A. Wenger, "US Foreign Policy under Bush: Balance Sheet and Outlook," *CSS Analyses in Security Policy* 2008, No. 3, <http://se1.isn.ch:80/serviceengine/FileContent?serviceID=ISN&fileid=E30D111F-5B81-5F24-96F3-1EA91FC41974&lng=en>.

process.<sup>17</sup> The “smart power”, which derives from both “hard” and “soft” power, is based on the following three major assumptions:<sup>18</sup>

1. The U.S. image in the world is of importance for the country’s security and prosperity.
2. The United States can take on the contemporary challenges only in cooperation with allies and partners.
3. Civilian instruments may strengthen government policy’s legitimacy, effectiveness and sustainability.

But the choice of a different set of foreign policy instruments, as compared with the previous administration, does not yet mean a change in priorities and all those assumptions which the Bush doctrine brought for good into U.S. strategic planning. Since 2001, when George W. Bush took office, we have seen an increase in the weight of the threat of terrorism, extremism and proliferation of mass destruction weapons (each present in the Bush doctrine)—and the epicentre of all those threats is in the Middle East. Whatever its theoretical assumptions,<sup>19</sup> the future “Obama doctrine” will represent, in part, a continuation of the predecessor’s policy by other means. But this change—the use of smart power and resort to diplomatic means—may prove to be of primary importance for developments in the Greater Middle East.

## U.S. Engagement in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and Bilateral Relations with Israel and the Palestinians

### U.S. role—mediator or a side to the conflict?

There can be no doubt that for the peace process to continue, mediation by the United States, as a guarantor of the commitments pledged, capable of pressuring both sides, comes as a necessary condition. Out of the many factors needed for an effective U.S. mediation, the following seem to be of prime importance:

- playing an honest broker role<sup>20</sup>—the U.S. must not become a party to the conflict; it is in the interest of the international community and, needless to say, America itself for the U.S. to be guided by its own national interest, even if this may cause misunderstandings with its strategic ally, Israel;
- taking action and proposing initiatives—the U.S. administration must not be passive; only its active participation in the process, where it suggests alternative solutions not guided by parties’ selfish interests, will be effective and deemed impartial;
- effectively overseeing implementation of the agreements reached.

Given the failed U.S. mediation experience since the mid-1990s, however, the above characterisation should be described as an “ideal type,” unreachable to President Bill Clinton (who has been seen as a peace process promoter) and to Bush alike. U.S. involvement in search for conflict resolution in 2001–2008 includes two initiatives—the road map, with participation in the Middle East Quartet,<sup>21</sup> and the process started at Annapolis—of which the latter merits closer scrutiny, due to its scale, consequences and impact on the region’s current situation.

<sup>17</sup> The description of the Obama administration’s foreign policy goals is carefully worded: “Obama and Biden will make progress on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a key diplomatic priority.”

<sup>18</sup> R.L. Armitage, J.S. Nye, *Implementing Smart Power: Setting an Agenda for National Security Reform*, Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 24 April 2008, <http://foreign.senate.gov/testimony/2008/NyeTestimony080424a.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> If we view the Bush doctrine as an amalgam of expansionist idealism and elements of realism, then the Obama doctrine might a priori be termed as expansionist realism with elements of idealism. Some US political scientists, as e.g. J. S. Nye, predict the Obama administration to espouse progressive realism. See: J. S. Nye, *Progressive realism*, Project Syndicate 2006, [www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/nye36](http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/nye36), and R. Wright, “‘Progressive realism’: In search of a foreign policy,” *International Herald Tribune*, 19 July 2006, p.7.

<sup>20</sup> In U.S. literature on the subject, the notion of “honest broker” is often invoked when writing about the role which the United States should play in the peace process. See: D. C. Kurtzer, S. B. Lasensky, *Negotiating Arab-Israeli Peace: American Leadership in the Middle East*, United States Institute of Peace, 2008, or “Lessons Learned Concerning U.S. Involvement in the Palestinian-Israeli Peace Process Over Last Seven Years”, *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* 2001, No. 2, p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> The Quartet is an international arrangement, called into being in 2002 to mediate in the Middle East conflict. Its members are: the UN, Russia, the EU and the US. The Quartet appoints its special envoy, a position held since June 2007 by Tony Blair.

With the bulk of resources concentrated in Iraq and the Middle East conflict marginalised for years, President Bush's announcement of a plan to convene an international conference opening a new round of Palestinian-Israeli negotiations—it was held in Annapolis, Maryland, on 27 November 2007—represented a turn in U.S. policy towards the Middle East. But the resumption of the peace process hardly reflected the U.S. administration's conviction that the move was badly needed. Rather, it came in response to pressures from Arab and European allies for the U.S. to attempt easing the Arab-Israeli and the intra-Palestinian conflicts. A compelling argument for this was provided by the dramatic situation in Iraq (deteriorating after the Samarra mausoleum attack of February 2006) and a promise of assistance from Arab countries, notably Jordan and Saudi Arabia, in return for U.S. contribution to the resumption of Palestinian-Israeli talks. Thus, the decision to convene the Annapolis conference came not because of the understanding of the importance and consequences of the Arab-Israeli conflict; it was, on the one hand, prompted by the Iraq situation and search for ways to calm it down, and on the other, by President Bush's record-low popularity<sup>22</sup> and attempts to burnish his image.

From the start, the actual U.S. role was inadequate for negotiations to succeed, despite the decisions about U.S. intense and whole-hearted participation.<sup>23</sup> The United States was to act as facilitator,<sup>24</sup> not mediator—but in the end, the U.S. administration, while repeatedly criticising the new Israeli settlements on the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), did not succeed in persuading Israel to discontinue constructing new buildings. Paradoxically, after the Annapolis conference, the number of settlement buildings almost doubled in January–May 2008 against a year earlier, with most of the new structures built on the eastern, Palestinian side of the security barrier.<sup>25</sup> President Bush's visit to the Middle East in January 2008<sup>26</sup> dealt with this issue insufficiently, even though it was aimed to back the peace negotiations. Among items on the agenda, the Palestinian-Israeli talks were overshadowed by other topics (rising oil prices and the Iranian nuclear programme), and the agenda itself was wrongly devised, providing for only bilateral U.S.-Israeli and U.S.-Palestinian meetings (instead of trilateral talks involving Israeli and Palestinian Autonomy leaders) and just a several-hour visit in Egypt.

Among adverse determinants of the U.S. mediation effort is also the fact that the administration failed to work out a comprehensive and nuanced strategy for contacts with parties and partners who could help in reaching success in the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations. One example showing that the U.S. lacked a proper concept of what to do was the May 2008 visit to the Middle East by President Bush, and the chasm between the praises for Israeli achievements and a disproportionately critical tone when speaking about governance in Arab countries. Even as efforts were being made to reach Israeli-Palestinian agreement—and this was the aim sought during the president's May visit—Bush's pronouncements were dominated by neo-conservative rhetoric,<sup>27</sup> which only deepened the intra-Palestinian divisions.

The Israeli-Palestinian negotiations were resumed too late (November 2007), which in turn was caused by the presidential timetable in the last year in office. Even a considerable personal involvement of Condoleezza Rice<sup>28</sup> and the appointment of the special envoy for Middle East security, General James L. Jones, proved insufficient over a short period of 12 months. Starting from mid-2008, it was clear that, under the most likely scenario, there would be no perceptible result of the peace processes which, by then, had come to a standstill. The impact of the peace process's failure was mitigated by Barack Obama's victory in the U.S. presidential election, well received among Middle Eastern governments.

<sup>22</sup> Opinion poll finding showed 29% support for the president, a record-low level influenced not only by the war in Iraq but also the administration's response to Hurricane Katrina, etc. See: S. Page, "Poll: Bush approval drops to low of 29%", *USA Today*, 10 July 2007, [www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2007-07-09-bush-poll\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2007-07-09-bush-poll_N.htm).

<sup>23</sup> *The Joint Understanding* of Annapolis conference of 27 November 2007 assigns to the United States a role of "monitor" and "judge." See: <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/11/20071127.html>.

<sup>24</sup> President Bush Meets with President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/11/20071126-7.html>.

<sup>25</sup> K. Peraino, "A Piece of the Peace," *Newsweek*, 13 October 2008, pp. 56–58.

<sup>26</sup> The president visited Israel, Palestinian Autonomy, Kuwait, Bahrain, UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. For more see: P. Sasnal, "Wizyta prezydenta Stanów Zjednoczonych na Bliskim Wschodzie," *Biuletyn (PISM)*, No 2. (470), 18 January 2008.

<sup>27</sup> During the Knesset address in May 2008, the president once again presented a vision of democratisation of the Greater Middle East, where "Al Qaeda and Hezbollah and Hamas will be defeated, as Muslims across the region recognize the emptiness of the terrorists' vision and the injustice of their cause." See: *Address of US President George Bush to the Knesset*, May 2008, [www.knesset.gov.il/description/eng/doc/speech\\_bush\\_2008\\_eng.htm](http://www.knesset.gov.il/description/eng/doc/speech_bush_2008_eng.htm).

<sup>28</sup> Secretary Rice went nine times to the Middle East in 2008.

The U.S. initiatives undertaken in the first half of 2009—Obama’s meetings with the king of Jordan in April, the Israeli prime minister and the president of the Palestinian Autonomy in May as well as the president’s trip to the Middle East in June — give testimony to an intention to engage intensely in Arab-Israeli mediation. They provide a clear signal of departure from the policies of two previous presidents, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, whose peacemaking initiatives were presented only towards the end of their respective terms in office. One can also notice gestures indicating that Obama wants to be an honest broker.<sup>29</sup> The president may also be willing to tap the Arab world’s favourable disposition towards the Saudi-inspired “Arab peace initiative,”<sup>30</sup> adopted by the Arab League at a summit in Beirut on 26–27 March 2002.

During a visit to the region in April 2009, the special envoy to the Middle East, George Mitchell, said elements of the Arab peace initiative would be incorporated in the future U.S. proposal for parties to the conflict,<sup>31</sup> which will provide for simultaneous Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian talks. The plan calls for the recognition of Israel by all Arab League member states and normalisation of relations, in exchange for Israel’s complete pullout from the Arab territories occupied from 1967 and an agreement on Palestinian refugees. The Arab League repeated the 2007 peace plan proposal, and Saudi Prince Turki al-Faisal resumed the initiative’s promotion during an Oxford Research Group meeting in October.<sup>32</sup> Modified by the Obama administration, the initiative may cause controversy—among the Arabs (given that the recognition of Israel by all Arab states may only come as a crowning of the peace process, not its beginning), and among the Israelis (depending on the final shape of detailed provisions). Authentic support for U.S. measures from all Arab League member states may only occur within a comprehensive plan to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict and in a situation where interests of all major Arab League partners are taken into account. A mediation tactic involving two “negotiating tracks” (Palestinian and Syrian) will provide a clear signal of departure from the policies of the previous president. The tactic itself deserves praises, remembering e.g. that Syrian-Israel talks may help weaken Iranian influences in the region, but because of the enormity of the task undertaken by the U.S., necessitating so great resources, coordination, experience and favourable conditions in the region, the initiative’s success is by no means assured.

## U.S. special relations with Israel

The United States maintains special relations with Israel, which are of both strategic importance (although not institutionalised in the form of a mutual defence treaty) and of “moral importance,”<sup>33</sup> based on common values. Under a 1981 bilateral memorandum, political, military and intelligence consultations have been held regularly, and on a quarterly basis since 2007.<sup>34</sup> Both countries maintain advanced economic relations, and since 1985 their economies have been part of a free-trade area. U.S. trade with Israel topped \$30 billion in 2008, earning Israel the 19<sup>th</sup> position among U.S. trading partners, ahead of e.g. Russia.<sup>35</sup> Israel is the largest recipient of U.S. economic and military aid after the end of World War II.<sup>36</sup> In 2008 it received \$2.4 billion in military assistance, and the figure is expected to be growing successively to reach \$2.9 billion over the coming ten years.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>29</sup> These include the fact that right after taking over the office, Obama phoned up the Palestinian Autonomy president, before calling the Israeli prime minister.

<sup>30</sup> *Mubādarat as-salām al-‘arabiyya* [Arab peace initiative], official text, [www.arableagueonline.org/las/arabic/details\\_ar.jsp?art\\_id=1777&level\\_id=202](http://www.arableagueonline.org/las/arabic/details_ar.jsp?art_id=1777&level_id=202).

<sup>31</sup> A. Eldar, A. Issacharoff, N. Mozgovaya, “Obama wants Israel to hold parallel talks with Palestinians and Syria,” *Haaretz*, 17 April 2009, [www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1078889.html](http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1078889.html).

<sup>32</sup> *New Momentum to Middle East Peace Plan*, Oxford Research Group, October 2008, [www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/about\\_us/pressrelease211008.pdf](http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/about_us/pressrelease211008.pdf).

<sup>33</sup> *Vice President’s Remarks at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee 2007 Policy Conference*, March 2007, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/03/20070312.html>.

<sup>34</sup> C. Migdalovitz, *Israel: Background and Relations with the United States*, CRS Report for Congress, 7 March, 2009, [http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/RL33476\\_20090307.pdf](http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/RL33476_20090307.pdf).

<sup>35</sup> *Top U.S. trade partners*, [http://ita.doc.gov/td/industry/otea/tp/Top\\_Trade\\_Partners.pdf](http://ita.doc.gov/td/industry/otea/tp/Top_Trade_Partners.pdf).

<sup>36</sup> J. M. Sharp, *U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel*, CRS for Congress, 2 January 2008, [http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/RL33222\\_20080102.pdf](http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/RL33222_20080102.pdf).

<sup>37</sup> A. Benn, S. Rosner, “U.S. to increase military aid to Israel in decade-long deal,” *Haaretz*, June 21, 2007, <http://haaretz.com/hasen/spages/873594.html>.

Contentious issues in U.S.-Israel relations have to do primarily with the Palestinian-Israeli peace process,<sup>38</sup> and especially the settlements built on the occupied Palestinian territories, which the U.S. finds to contravene international law. President George W. Bush made a precedent in April 2004 when, in a letter to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, he wrote that the future agreement must take into account the “Israeli populations centres.”<sup>39</sup> Another bone of contention is the status of Jerusalem, a city which Israel controls and regards as capital, and whose eastern part is claimed by Palestinians. The administration denies to recognise the whole city as Israeli capital, but Congress, in successive resolutions, referred to Jerusalem as an undivided capital of the state of Israel.<sup>40</sup>

During the eight years under George W. Bush, the relations with Israel were very good but, strategically and geopolitically, Israel’s situation in the region got complicated as a result of the Iraq war. This strengthened Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah and helped tighten up the links between Iran and these organisations, leading in consequence to an escalation of tensions in the region and outbreak of war in Lebanon in July 2006. For Israel, the two-track war on the Lebanese and Palestinian fronts<sup>41</sup>—which the U.S. administration supported and sometimes encouraged—proved too costly, and so the Israel-U.S. relations in 2007–2008 morphed towards Israeli decision-making getting more independent of its ally’s Middle Eastern goals. Israel’s military strategy changed, too, as indicated by the new defence plan for 2008–2012, “Tefen.”<sup>42</sup> In addition to drawing on military means in order to strengthen the position of the state and refurbish its image in the region, Israel also turned to diplomatic solutions: against the U.S. administration’s position it reached a tactical agreement with Hamas, consented to a six-month ceasefire (June–December 2008), and engaged in indirect negotiations with Syria (May–December 2008). This tactic was discontinued with the launch in December 2008 of Operation Cast Lead in Gaza. Of key importance for the Israel offensive’s success was synchronisation of Gaza Strip action with events in the U.S., towards completing the operation prior to President Obama’s inauguration. Anticipating an intense U.S. involvement in the peace process, Israel used force to weaken Hamas in the period immediately preceding the launch of U.S. activities. It thus exposed itself to international criticism, realising that—in a situation where talks with Palestinians were about to begin under the U.S. aegis—the criticism would soon die down, whereas Hamas would have its military and political support base demolished. In these circumstances, Operation Cast Lead is unlikely to impact the Israel-U.S. relations.

The Iran problem is for Israel the definite foreign policy priority, an issue more important than—although related to—peace with the Palestinians. U.S. approach to the Iranian nuclear programme is basically similar to the Israeli position, but differences of opinion have been increasingly frequent of late, translating into policy changes in both countries. In 2008, there was an Iran-related misunderstanding over U.S. additional military assistance for Saudi Arabia, involving a contract whose first tranche has been executed since early 2008. And in September 2008 the United States refused to supply Israel with GBU-28 bombs (capable of destroying Iranian underground installations) and provide access to an air corridor over Iraq for a possible passage to Iran by Israeli air forces.<sup>43</sup> Aware of these tensions, President-elect Obama in December 2008 promised Israel to provide security guarantees in the form of a nuclear umbrella,<sup>44</sup> while he was preparing a new tactic for diplomatic contacts with Iran, unpopular in Israel. Given the importance of the “Iran issue” for Arab-Israeli settlement, the U.S.-Israeli differences of opinion on how to contain Iran may adversely impact prospects for a success of the peace process. This is because in contacts with

<sup>38</sup> In addition to the peace process, there are several bilateral contentious issues, such as cases of Israeli espionage in the U.S., and inadequate protection of intellectual property in Israel, which fall outside the scope of this analysis in view of their minute impact on the entirety of U.S.-Israeli relations.

<sup>39</sup> *Exchange of letters between PM Sharon and President Bush*, April 2004, [www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Peace+Process/Reference+Documents/Exchange+of+letters+Sharon-Bush+14-Apr-2004.htm](http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Peace+Process/Reference+Documents/Exchange+of+letters+Sharon-Bush+14-Apr-2004.htm).

<sup>40</sup> H. Con. Res. 152/110, Relating to the 40th anniversary of the reunification of the City of Jerusalem, June 2007, [www.govtrack.us/congress/billtext.xpd?bill=hc110-152](http://www.govtrack.us/congress/billtext.xpd?bill=hc110-152).

<sup>41</sup> See: *Rapport Annuel Mondial sur le Systeme Economique et les Stratégies 2008*, Institut Français des Relations Internationales, 2008, p. 195.

<sup>42</sup> Under the Tefen plan, spending on ground forces is going to increase considerably, which suggests a departure from a defence strategy modelled on the Kela plan for 2003–2008, under which the ground forces were cut down by 25%. See: *Sipri Yearbook 2008: armaments, disarmament and international security*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Oxford University Press, pp. 204–205.

<sup>43</sup> *US ‘refuses to give Israel bombs’ fearing Iran strike*, AFP, 11 September 2008, [www.bicom.org.uk/news/news-archive/u-s—refuses-to-give-israel-bombs—fearing-iran-strike](http://www.bicom.org.uk/news/news-archive/u-s—refuses-to-give-israel-bombs—fearing-iran-strike).

<sup>44</sup> A. Benn, “Obama’s atomic umbrella: U.S. nuclear strike if Iran nukes Israel,” *Haaretz*, 11 December 2008, [www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1045687.html](http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1045687.html).

Netanyahu, a security policy hardliner, the United States will seek consent to both desisting from Iran attack plans and making territorial concessions to Palestinians. In the present circumstances it seems unlikely for Israel to agree to any of the two concessions, although it may give consideration to them in response to U.S. “incentives.” Negative consequences of U.S.-Israeli negotiations upon the peace process may come into the open when the administration concludes that benefits from an Iran agreement with Israel outweigh profits from progress in Palestinian-Israeli talks. The meeting between president Obama and prime minister Netanyahu in May 2009 and its immediate aftermath indicate a deepening rift between the two allies in opinion on how to resolve the Iranian nuclear programme issue and where Iran fits in Middle Eastern politics: according to the Israeli government, eliminating the Iranian problem would contribute to the success of the peace process, for the American administration however the logic should be reversed—it’s the success of the peace negotiations that will help settle the Iranian problem.<sup>45</sup>

A possible U.S.-Israeli agreement may be rendered harder to achieve by the large extent of Israeli regional policy’ autonomy. Despite dependence on American aid and guarantees, Israel used to pursue its foreign policy without a proportional docility towards the United States, and sometimes even against the U.S. *raison d’être*. Since the July 2006 war against Hezbollah, the Israeli foreign policy and security doctrine has seen major transformations which sometimes lead to decisions incompatible with Washington’s main policy line. Against the Americans, during the war with Hezbollah, Israel repeatedly assured the Damascus regime that the war was not directed against Syria. The Israeli government’s position in relations with Syria used to be much more pragmatic than that of the United States, which saw in the military operations a chance to weaken yet another authoritarian regime in the region.<sup>46</sup> Examples of decisions which were communicated to the U.S. ally but which contradicted the Bush administration’s policy include behind-the-scenes talks with Turkey on a resumption of dialogue with Syria and, as their consequence, indirect talks (from May 2008), a prisoner-exchange deal with Hezbollah of July 2008, and the previously mentioned ceasefire with Hamas. The changes in Israeli-U.S. relations reflected the waning U.S. influence in the region. For Israel, a protracted conflict with Arab neighbours, even with U.S. guarantees, was more risky than taking a strategic decision about peace. In the context of the expected action by the new U.S. administration, it is encouraging that the position of the Israeli military and intelligence establishment, favouring a recourse to diplomatic means in contacts with Arab neighbours, largely influenced the decisions of the previous Israeli government. Irrespective of Netanyahu’s rhetorical announcements, a political settlement of the Middle Eastern conflict lies in Israeli interest.

No major changes in the Israeli-U.S. alliance should be expected under President Obama, but thorny problems may indeed emerge. The strategic alliance will outlast the disputes, for reasons which are both regional (good relations with Israel, an important regional force, are in U.S. interests) and internal: the Jewish community and the pro-Israeli lobby make their presence felt in American political life; particularly good relations with Israel is a cachet of Democratic administrations; and finally President Obama himself has repeatedly spoken about the strategic alliance on the campaign trail, after the election and after his inauguration. Many people close to the president openly sympathise with Israel, among them the White House Chief of Staff, Rahm Emanuel. Potential tensions in bilateral relations may arise over the previously mentioned Iran issue, especially so given that over the next 12 months Iran may produce enough highly enriched uranium to build one nuclear bomb. Israel will seek a radical solution to the problem, while the U.S. wants to turn first to diplomatic means. Tensions, albeit of a different nature, may also emerge during peace process negotiations, if only the new administration does commit itself to these negotiations. It should be assumed that whenever the Obama administration expects Israel to make concessions—and these must come if the negotiations are to be completed successfully—it will seek to reward the country rather than press it. The initial signals issued by the president-elect in late 2008—security guarantees for Israel—indicate that the U.S. already has a preliminary regional action plan and that it will expect Israeli cooperation in return for aid and new guarantees. The foreign policy of the Netanyahu government remains unclear.<sup>47</sup> Political negotiations may probably lose its priority position in Israeli-Palestinian relations, which would make the prospect of an Israel-Palestinian peace accord still more distant. But if the U.S. firmly seeks to activate the peace process, the Netanyahu government may engage in the process, too, as this is in

<sup>45</sup> Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel, 18 May 2009, [www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/Remarks-by-President-Obama-and-Israeli-Prime-Minister-Netanyahu-in-press-availability](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-President-Obama-and-Israeli-Prime-Minister-Netanyahu-in-press-availability).

<sup>46</sup> A. Harel, A. Issacharoff, *34 day : Israel, Hezbollah, and the war in Lebanon*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2008, pp. 104–106.

<sup>47</sup> P. Sasnal, “Parliamentary Election in Israel—Foreign Policy Consequences,” *Bulletin* (PISM), No. 9 (541), 13 February 2009.

Israel's strategic interest. Despite his aversion to negotiations with the Arabs, the Likud leader did take part in the peace process in the 1990s when, using U.S. intermediation, he held talks with Palestinians which led to the signing of the Wye River memorandum in 1998.<sup>48</sup> Potential U.S.–Israel differences on this issue could surface irrespective of the final makeup of the Israeli coalition, remembering that territorial concessions, expected by the U.S., are unpopular in a radicalised Israeli society, as confirmed by opinion poll findings.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, however, if the Israeli government blocks American initiatives or takes steps contravening these initiatives, thus acting against U.S. interests, the Israeli-U.S. relations may gradually weaken. A likelihood of such a scenario is indicated not only by the makeup and announcements of the Israeli cabinet,<sup>50</sup> but also by the controversies within the administration and the public over the influence of the communities supporting Israeli interests in the U.S.<sup>51</sup> An ongoing public debate on that subject demonstrates that the question of the pro-Israel lobby's pressure is no longer a taboo in the United States.

## U.S.-Palestinian relations

The January 2006 election in Palestine provided the most salient landmark for Israeli-Palestinian relations during President Bush's second term. The U.S. administration's attitude towards the outcome of the 2006 democratic elections on Palestinian territories exemplifies the incompatibility of the regional democratisation plan on the one hand and the realities of Middle Eastern politics and U.S. interests on the other. The victory of Hamas—an entrant on the U.S. list of terrorist organisations<sup>52</sup>—led the U.S. to embark on a boycott of Palestinian Authority authorities and stop providing assistance to Palestinians. Simultaneously, the president approved a secret plan to arm a Fatah faction led by Muhammad Dahlan, as a step towards removing Hamas from power.<sup>53</sup> The situation was all the more awkward for the United States as several months later, in July 2006, another entrant on the terrorist organisations list, Hezbollah, came out the winner in a war with Israel. In these circumstances, Hamas leaders reasoned that the U.S. would be so much worried by the rise of Hezbollah as to seek a mitigation of the conflict with Hamas. Several months after the Israel-Hezbollah war, Hamas leader and the then PA prime minister Ismail Haniya, sent a letter to President Bush offering—unsuccessfully, as it subsequently turned out—a softening up of his organisation's position on Israel's recognition and Middle East peace.<sup>54</sup> Following the takeover of the Gaza Strip by Hamas in mid-June 2007 and the establishment of a Fatah government in the West Bank on 17 June, the U.S. ended the boycott and, at the same time, greatly increased aid to the Mahmoud Abbas party. The West Bank authorities received in 2008 an unprecedented amount of annual aid, U.S.\$414.5 million, with an added U.S.\$200 million assigned for 2009.<sup>55</sup> The U.S. did not benefit from ignoring a major Palestinian political force (after the January 2006 election).<sup>56</sup> The Gaza blockade led to Hamas

<sup>48</sup> *The Wye River Memorandum*, [www.state.gov/www/regions/nea/981023\\_interim\\_agmt.html](http://www.state.gov/www/regions/nea/981023_interim_agmt.html).

<sup>49</sup> See: *Poll: Majority of Israelis Oppose Dividing Jerusalem*, Arutz Sheva Israel News, 1 September 2008, [www.israelnationalnews.com/News/Flash.aspx/139490](http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/Flash.aspx/139490), *Most Israelis oppose Golan return for peace: poll*, al-Arabiya, 25 April 2008, [www.alarabiya.net/articles/2008/04/25/48866.html](http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2008/04/25/48866.html), D.Moran, "Israeli settlers radicalize," *ISN Security Watch*, 10 December 2007, [www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/Security-Watch/Detail/?ots591=4888CAA0-B3DB-1461-98B9-E20E7B9C13D4&lng=en&id=53928](http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/Security-Watch/Detail/?ots591=4888CAA0-B3DB-1461-98B9-E20E7B9C13D4&lng=en&id=53928).

<sup>50</sup> As early as April 2009, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, chair of the populist and nationalist party Israel Our Home, rejected the advisability of Israeli-Palestinian talks, launched at Annapolis in 2007, confirming the Israeli government's withdrawal from "final status" talks. See: J. Heller, A. Entous, *Israel's new foreign minister dismisses Annapolis*, Reuters, 1 April 2009, [www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSTRE52U4VH20090401](http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSTRE52U4VH20090401).

<sup>51</sup> Recent public debate on the subject was started by a 2007 book by John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel lobby and U.S. foreign policy*; its recent manifestation was the forced resignation of Charles W. Freeman from running for the head of National Intelligence Council. See: S. Waterman, "Costs of War: The Israel Debate," *ISN Security Watch*, 17 March 2009, [www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/Security-Watch/Detail/?lng=en&id=97791](http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/Security-Watch/Detail/?lng=en&id=97791).

<sup>52</sup> *Foreign Terrorist Organizations FTOs*, [www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm](http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm).

<sup>53</sup> Plan implementation was the responsibility of Secretary of State Rice and Deputy National Security Advisor Elliott Abrams. The advisability of these measures was the subject of disputes within the administration, as a result of which Dick Cheney's chief Middle East aide David Wurmser resigned in July 2007, just before the Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip. The move was made public by Vanity Fair magazine in April 2008. See: D. Rose, "The Gaza Bombshell," *Vanity Fair*, April 2008, [www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2008/04/gaza200804](http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2008/04/gaza200804).

<sup>54</sup> B. Ravid, "In 2006 letter to Bush, Haniyah offered compromise with Israel," *Haaretz*, 14 November 2008, [www.haaretz.co.il/hasen/spages/1037258.html](http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasen/spages/1037258.html).

<sup>55</sup> J. Zanotti, *U.S. Foreign Aid to the Palestinians*, CRS Report for Congress, 8 October 2008, [http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/RS22967\\_20090220.pdf](http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/RS22967_20090220.pdf).

<sup>56</sup> "Ruling Palestine I: Gaza Under Hamas," *Middle East Report* N°73, International Crisis Group, 13 March 2008, [www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?action=logon&ref\\_id=5525](http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?action=logon&ref_id=5525).

consolidation in the area, monopolisation of the use of force by that group, and abject poverty for the Gaza population.<sup>57</sup> It could have been predicted that the Palestinian society's polarisation between Fatah and Hamas supporters, territorial fragmentation and the deteriorating living standards of the populace would act against Israeli-Palestinian agreement. There was every reason to believe that the provisions of a hypothetical accord between President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert would be boycotted by Hamas on its home ground, in Gaza. And yet, the Bush administration did not change its policy towards Palestinians, in the expectation that even a preliminary agreement between Olmert and Abbas will discredit Hamas. And it unequivocally described as warranted the scale of the Israeli operation against Hamas in the Gaza Strip in December 2008, blaming Hamas for the escalation. Waiting for the confrontation's outcome, President-elect Obama did not take any position on the issue, even though previously he did not avoid commenting on other events of international significance, such as the financial crisis and the Mumbai attack. This seems to be an early sign of the caution with which President Obama will pursue policy in the region. The Israeli offensive may have two major consequences for future U.S.-Palestinian relations. Two scenarios are likely: following a longtime political weakening, Hamas opts to form a national unity government with Fatah, in which case relations with the U.S. would depend on Hamas' support for the peace process; or Hamas once again grows in strength and seeks to maintain its control of Gaza. If the latter materialises, relations with the U.S. will remain basically unchanged. Another direct consequence of Operation Cast Lead is the weakening of the leadership of Fatah, an U.S. ally that consented to the Israel offensive, which cost it public legitimacy, at least in the short run.

Since 2006, there has been a continuous debate in the United States about the goals and effectiveness of U.S. policy towards Palestinians. Some foreign policy veterans, such as James Baker III or Zbigniew Brzezinski, are in favour of engaging with Hamas.<sup>58</sup> Brzezinski's opinion is all the more weighty as he has backed Barack Obama in the presidential election and is among the foreign policy experts close to the president.<sup>59</sup> For the success of the peace process, an important question is whether negotiations with Israel undertaken prior to Palestinian reconciliation may produce positive results. Attempts to help form a national unity government in the Palestinian Authority have been going on — under Egyptian leadership—since the end of the Gaza war in January 2009. The formation of such government would remove a major obstacle to the success of hypothetical peace negotiations. One cannot rule out that the Obama administration may open limited, secret contacts with Hamas, to be conducted via intermediaries, which might render more realistic the prospect of intra-Palestinian rapprochement and success of peace talks.<sup>60</sup> But such action would involve major risks of legitimising a terrorist organisation, deteriorating relations with a strategic partner (Israel) and, consequently, a threat to peace negotiations. It would also require a special agreement with Fatah party which has no interest in voluntarily sharing power prior to the 2010 parliamentary election. And contacts with Hamas would entail collaboration with competing regional mediators (Egypt, Turkey, Qatar), or with Syria which, in return for the cooperation, would expect its conditions to be met.

<sup>57</sup> *The Gaza Strip: a humanitarian implosion*, Oxfam, a joint agency report, March 2008, [www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/downloads/oxfam\\_gaza\\_lowres.pdf](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/downloads/oxfam_gaza_lowres.pdf).

<sup>58</sup> Brzezinski recalls the evolution of Israeli decision-makers' position on the Palestinian state over the past several decades (from absolute opposition to sympathetic view) and he notes that similar changes may occur within Hamas. Even extreme parties tend to evolve, and this is what the US should encourage in factions such as Hamas. See: Z. Brzezinski, B. Scowcroft, *America and the world: conversations on the future of American foreign policy*, Basic Books, New York, 2008, p. 83.

<sup>59</sup> In this context, Zbigniew Brzezinski's opinion on Middle East policy assumes greater significance. The Middle East, in his view, will long remain a priority area for the new president. This includes Iran, Iraq and the Arab-Israeli conflict. U.S. relations with Europe and Russia are of secondary importance. According to Brzezinski, the U.S. should pull out of Iraq swiftly but reasonably, Iran should be engaged with serious, political dialogue, and the Middle East conflict requires U.S. direct and intense involvement.

<sup>60</sup> In this regard president Obama has emphasized the bankruptcy of American policies several times. At a press conference with Netanyahu in May 2009, speaking about the need for a dialogue with the Iranians, he also mentioned Hamas and Hezbollah, although he did not explicitly articulate his opinion about the need for a change in policy towards these organizations. In his Cairo speech, however, Obama implicitly accepted Hamas as a representative of "some Palestinians." See: *Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel*, 18 May 2009, [www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/Remarks-by-President-Obama-and-Israeli-Prime-Minister-Netanyahu-in-press-availability](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-President-Obama-and-Israeli-Prime-Minister-Netanyahu-in-press-availability), *Remarks by the President on a New Beginning*, 4 June 2009, [www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6-04-09](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6-04-09).

## U.S. Relations with Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and Jordan

In this group, two countries (Syria, Lebanon) remain in a state of war with Israel and are parties to the Arab-Israeli conflict, while the other two (Egypt, Jordan) signed peace treaties with Israel (in 1979 and 1994, respectively) and continue exerting considerable influence on the situation in the region and Israeli-Arab relations. Evaluation of U.S. relations with those countries provides a starting point for a comprehensive approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict which was rejected by the Bush administration but is now being embraced by the Obama administration.

### U.S.-Syrian relations

After the 2000 meeting of presidents Bill Clinton and Hafez al-Assad in Geneva and the failure of US attempts to mediate between Syria and Israel, the already strained US-Syrian relations further deteriorated. The major problems include Syrian influence in Lebanon and accusations of assassination of former Lebanese prime minister, Rafiq al-Hariri; support for organisations regarded by the US as terrorist (notably Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in PA); close contacts with the United States' enemy, Iran; military cooperation with North Korea and Russia, and accusations of having initiated a nuclear programme. Syria is one of the four entrants on the US list of countries supporting terrorism.<sup>61</sup> In the period from 1979, the United States imposed on Syria a string of economic, financial and political sanctions. And over the past six years, while keeping the existing sanctions the US administration imposed new ones: the Syria Accountability Act (SAA) of 2003 (which, with minor exceptions, bans exports to that country<sup>62</sup>) and an array of financial sanctions, of which the last one, dated February 2008, aimed at freezing the assets of President Bashar al-Assad's relatives.<sup>63</sup> However, the actual implications of US sanctions are limited given the low level of US-Syrian economic contacts prior to SAA. The present level of two-way exchanges approaches \$700 million a year.<sup>64</sup> Following the attacks of 11 September, instances of Syria-US cooperation in passing intelligence data for fight against terrorism could be seen—but with Syria *de facto* classified by the US administration as part of the "axis of evil"<sup>65</sup>, and given the repeated accusations of Syria's destabilising post-war Iraq, that country discontinued collaboration with the US.<sup>66</sup> The United States recalled its ambassador to Damascus in February 2005,<sup>67</sup> following the assassination of al-Hariri in Beirut, where Syrian security forces were involved, according to a report by the International Independent Investigation Commission.<sup>68</sup> Under pressure from the US and other members of the UN Security Council, Syria pulled out its troops from Lebanon in May 2005.

To the end of Bush's second term, his administration pursued a policy of confrontation towards Syria, seeking to weaken and marginalise that country and avoiding official contacts—despite calls for change from American academics and analysts.<sup>69</sup> Syria was invited to the Annapolis conference in November 2007 but, according to sources close to the administration, it itself had strove to get an invitation, seeking to

<sup>61</sup> *State Sponsors of Terrorism*, [www.state.gov/s/ct/c14151.htm](http://www.state.gov/s/ct/c14151.htm).

<sup>62</sup> *Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003*, Public Law 108–175—DEC. 12, 2003, <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d108:HR01828:@@L&summ2=m&>.

<sup>63</sup> *Executive Order 13460—Blocking Property of Additional Persons in Connection With the National Emergency With Respect to Syria*, Federal Register, 15 February 2008, [www.treas.gov/offices/enforcement/ofac/legal/eo/13460.pdf](http://www.treas.gov/offices/enforcement/ofac/legal/eo/13460.pdf).

<sup>64</sup> *Trade with Syria 2008*, Foreign Trade Statistics, [www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5020.html#2008](http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5020.html#2008).

<sup>65</sup> Syria was not explicitly mentioned as an "axis of evil" element in the presidential State of the Union of 2002, but that was suggested by subsequent pronouncements by some members of the administration, such as e.g. a May 2002 speech for Heritage Foundation by John R. Bolton, under secretary of state for arms control and international security in 2001–2005. See: [www.heritage.org/Research/PublicDiplomacy/HL743.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/PublicDiplomacy/HL743.cfm).

<sup>66</sup> D. Jehl, vol. Shanker, "The Reach of War: Iraq Fallout; Syria Stops Cooperating With U.S. Forces and C.I.A.," *The New York Times*, 24 May 2005, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C0DE6D81239F937A15756C0A9639C8B63>.

<sup>67</sup> D. Gollust, *US Recalls Ambassador from Syria Following Hariri Assassination*, VOA News, 15 February 2005, [www.voanews.com/english/archive/2005-02/2005-02-15-voa58.cfm?moddate=2005-02-15](http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2005-02/2005-02-15-voa58.cfm?moddate=2005-02-15).

<sup>68</sup> *Report of the International Independent Investigation Commission established pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1595 (2005)*, [www.un.org/News/dh/docs/mehlisreport](http://www.un.org/News/dh/docs/mehlisreport).

<sup>69</sup> The most representative examples include: J.A. Baker, L.H. Hamilton (eds.), *The Iraq Study Group Report*, Vintage Books, New York 2006, and a letter from experts to President Bush and Secretary Rice "Failure Risks Devastating Consequences," *The New York Review of Books* 2007, No. 17, [www.nybooks.com/articles/20750](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/20750).

include the Golan Heights into the agenda.<sup>70</sup> The Americans confined themselves to sending the invitation, taking care to ensure as wide representation as possible, to add to the legitimacy of the resumed peace process.

In the aftermath of the Iraq war, Syria initially collaborated with the US on sealing the Syrian-Iraqi border, which, incidentally, was perfectly in line with the interests of a country being flooded with masses of Iraqi refugees. But following an escalation of tensions over the Lebanon situation in the first half of 2005, this collaboration was discontinued.<sup>71</sup> The Damascus regime took a confrontational tactic of allowing militants to cross the border with Iraq, in an attempt to demonstrate Syria's potential and importance for Iraqi security. US military commanders realised that, in addition to the positive consequences of the "surge", Iraq's durable stability required an effective border control by the Syrians. General Petraeus was to visit Damascus in December 2007, to encourage Syria to cooperate on Iraq, but the visit was blocked by the administration.<sup>72</sup> And in October 2008, US special forces attacked on Syrian territory a group of individuals whom they suspected of smuggling militants across the Iraqi border.<sup>73</sup> The incident reflected the quality of bilateral relations in that time: US arbitrariness and Syrian weakness.

At the same time, the Syrians normalised their contacts with Iraq in the period from November 2006, establishing diplomatic relations, signing an agreement on cooperation in security and science, and entering into a number of economic deals. In the light of US interests and Iraqi security, the Syrian-Iraqi collaboration is of multifaceted nature. It is beneficial as long as it brings about durable normalisation in bilateral relations, a sealing of the borders and a strengthening of authorities in Baghdad. But it may also have adverse consequences if, after an American combat troops pullout by late-2010, it contributes to the formation of a tripartite strategic alliance between Iraq, Syria and Iran, with which Iraq's Shiite government has very good contacts. If this indeed happens, Iran would be strengthened further, and the likelihood of a renewed outbreak of conflict in Iraq would increase. The United States will act to prevent this scenario from materialising. As far as the three countries are concerned (Iraq, Syria, Iran), the US can press most strongly Iraq, with Iran at the opposite end of the spectrum. Unless the policy of dialogue with Iran succeeds, the factor of decisive importance for future developments in Iraq may prove to be the US relations with Syria.

The Syrian-Lebanese relations remain highly complicated. Despite bilateral normalisation of 2008/2009, Syria still considers its neighbour to be its own zone of influence. The Americans and Syrians back opposing blocks on Lebanon's political scene. The US-Syrian relations and Syria's behaviour in its regional environment may be greatly influenced by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), proceeding in the Netherlands since March 2009 to examine the circumstances of al-Hariri's assassination,<sup>74</sup> which may with high confidence come to conclusions unfavourable to Syria. STL activity has been rendered much more difficult—by the broadening of its remit (to include other assassinations of Lebanese state officials since end-2004) and by the controversy surrounding its establishment<sup>75</sup>—and will very likely take several years to complete. In the future, the United States and the EU may use the STL findings as a bargaining chip in contacts with Syria, either letting the regime "save face," by playing down the issue in bilateral contacts or, conversely, exerting pressure on the Damascus regime and highlighting the Syrian part in the assassination as a starting point in future activities on the UN forum. A potential exploitation of the assassination for diplomatic manoeuvring in talks with Syria would represent a glaring example of departure from the policy of selective "Wilsonianism," as pursued by the previous administration. Even though the US and Syria have conflicting interests in Lebanon, in the final analysis the different positioning

<sup>70</sup> Z. Brzeziński, B. Scowcroft, *America and the world: conversations on the future of American foreign policy*, Basic Books, New York, 2008, p. 96.

<sup>71</sup> D. Jehl, T. Shanker, "Syria Stops Cooperating with U.S. Forces and C.I.A.," *New York Times*, 25 May 2005, [www.nytimes.com/2005/05/24/politics/24syria.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/24/politics/24syria.html).

<sup>72</sup> J. Landis, "Bush's Policy of No Dialogue with Syria is Costing US Lives," *Syria Comment*, 29 August 2008, <http://joshualandis.com/blog/?p=849>.

<sup>73</sup> J. Marcus, *What could lie behind Syria raid?*, BBC News, 26 October 2008, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/7692263.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7692263.stm).

<sup>74</sup> After successive reports by commissioners of an investigation commission appointed by the UN Security Council (UNSCR 1595), Detlev Mehlis, Serge Brammertz and Daniel Bellemare, indicating there was a Syrian connection in the planning of al-Hariri's assassination, the Security Council in May 2007 established an international tribunal to investigate the matter, by Resolution 1757. See: [www.un.org](http://www.un.org), [www.stl-tsl.org](http://www.stl-tsl.org).

<sup>75</sup> The legal controversy was about the adoption by the UN Security Council of Resolution 1757 establishing the Tribunal on the basis of prerogatives provided in Chapter VII of the UN Charter, i.e. leaving out Lebanese Parliament. And the political controversy was about the adoption of the Resolution in May 2007, when the country was riven by an acute political crisis.

of the Lebanon issue in the foreign policy of Syria (priority) and the US (a secondary issue) may influence its importance for Syrian-US relations.

A new issue in bilateral relations with the US is the accusation that Syria has run a nuclear programme, which emerged after an Israeli air force attack in September 2007 on al-Kibar, northern Syria, where a nuclear reactor was claimed to be built. The United States, which accuses Syria of holding weapons of mass destruction, showed in April 2008 a series of photos of a bombed building, claiming it was a nuclear reactor. The presence of uranium particles on the spot, in the Dayr az-Zour district, was confirmed by two reports from the IAEA.<sup>76</sup> The building is very likely a result of cooperation with North Korea; it could be a part of a military nuclear programme which, however, stands no chances of implementation over the next couple of years. Still, the discovery of al-Kibar and the evidence held by Israel and the US may serve as another means of pressure in relations with the Syrian regime.

In step with the improvement in Syria's relations with EU states and neighbours, an important chance has now emerged for US Middle Eastern policy. This is a chance which the Bush administration did not venture to tap at a time when Israel opened dialogue with the Syrians.<sup>77</sup> In its foreign policy, Syria proceeds from the traditional assumption that only the United States—given its military might and the position in the Middle East and among the international community—can ultimately guarantee the regime's survival, even despite the poor state of today's bilateral relations. US mediation in the conflict with Israel is for Syria a sine qua non condition of participation in the peace process. Unless the US government mulls the opportunities offered by Syria's conciliatory stance, this may have adverse consequences for the Middle Eastern situation and US policy in the region. Firstly, this is because of worrying developments inside Syria itself. A reported assassination attempt against the president,<sup>78</sup> the gunning down of his close associate, General Suleiman,<sup>79</sup> an attack on an intelligence services building in Damascus,<sup>80</sup> are all signs of the state's growing internal destabilisation. And rivalry can be detected between the regime's factions—those inclined towards reform and an opening up to Europe and America vs. the hardliners, bent on keeping the status quo and privileged relations with Iran. Not inconceivably, Assad may adopt—at least, initially—a strategy of seeking opportunities on both fronts simultaneously. The continuation of US opposition to talks with Syria deprives the reformers of a major trump card, the argument that a rapprochement with the EU and the US will bring benefits, including the guarantees of regime survival. Thus, an absence of changes in policy towards Syria may have the effect of strengthening the advocates of warming up to Iran. And secondly, failure to tap the emerging opportunities may have adverse implications for Lebanon and the occupied Palestinian territories.

During the first month in office, the Obama administration took initial steps towards establishing a dialogue with the Damascus government.<sup>81</sup> G. Mitchell went to Syria in June with his first official visit. Obama has also decided to return U.S. ambassador to Syria. A durable improvement in bilateral relations, however, will be contingent not only on mutual good will but also on a host of external factors, such as the policies of the new Israeli government, US-Iranian relations, and developments in Lebanon and Palestine.

<sup>76</sup> *Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement in the Syrian Arab Republic*, IAEA, [www.isis-online.org/publications/syria/IAEA\\_Report\\_Syria\\_19Nov2008.pdf](http://www.isis-online.org/publications/syria/IAEA_Report_Syria_19Nov2008.pdf), and [www.iaea.org/NewsCenter/Statements/2008/ebasp2008n013.html](http://www.iaea.org/NewsCenter/Statements/2008/ebasp2008n013.html).

<sup>77</sup> P. Sasnal, "Syria-Israel Talks: High Stakes and Low Expectations," *PISM Strategic File* 2008, No. 5.

<sup>78</sup> D. Banse, M. Behrendt, C. Wergin, "Putschversuch gegen Assad in Syrien gescheitert," *Die Welt*, 6 June 2008, [www.welt.de/politik/article2075124](http://www.welt.de/politik/article2075124).

<sup>79</sup> "Syrian general found shot dead in mysterious killing – reports," *The Daily Star*, 4 August 2008, [www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition\\_id=1&categ\\_id=2&article\\_id=94753](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=2&article_id=94753).

<sup>80</sup> *Syrian car bomb attack kills 17*, BBC News, 27 September 2008, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/7639137.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7639137.stm).

<sup>81</sup> In February 2009, a Congressional delegation was in Damascus, headed by Senator John Kerry who spoke with President al-Assad. On 7 March 2009, Acting Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey D. Feltman and National Security Council member Daniel Shapiro stayed in Damascus for the highest-level visit in four years.

## U.S.-Lebanese relations

The United States maintains good relations with Lebanon. Its priorities in bilateral contacts include supporting the March 14 Movement,<sup>82</sup> helping strengthen the state structures, especially against Hezbollah (part of the March 8 Alliance<sup>83</sup>), and acting in favour of Lebanon-Israel agreement or at least easing tensions between neighbours and backing Lebanese autonomy against Syria's moves. Following the victory of a pro-Western coalition in the parliamentary elections of May and June 2005, Lebanon was briefly the second largest beneficiary of U.S. military assistance in per capita terms, after Israel.<sup>84</sup>

Since the end of the civil war in 1990, Lebanon has continued in a state of permanent political crisis. The first half of 2005 saw the assassination of al-Hariri and the pullout of Syrian troops. The United States welcomed with satisfaction the emergence of the March 14 Movement and the subsequent changes on the country's political scene which weakened the Syrian and Iranian influences. In November 2006 a cabinet crisis began, which only ended in May 2008 with the Doha agreement and the formation of a national unity government. In the meantime, riots broke out in the north of the country, instigated by radical Sunni groups and pacified by the Lebanese army. The Salafi groups in the northern Lebanon, which came out against state structures and other religious factions, and which have unofficial links to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, pose a threat to state stability.<sup>85</sup> But on the other hand, the chances of disarming Hezbollah, which grew over the past two years to pose a potential threat to the Lebanese army in the event of an internal conflict, are very slim indeed. With behind-the-scenes manoeuvring by Syria and Saudi Arabia, the situation in Lebanon poses a serious problem for the United States.

Israel's war with Hezbollah in July 2006 actually presented the administration with a choice between loyalty to a strategic ally, Israel, and support for a fragile U.S.-friendly democracy in Lebanon. In other words, it was a choice between two Bush doctrine priorities, "war on terror" and Middle Eastern democratisation. The eventual U.S. acquiescence to the destruction of Hezbollah and—not infrequently—state infrastructure<sup>86</sup> proved ineffective on both counts, leading to a strengthening of Lebanon's Shiite party and its supporter, Iran. There is much to indicate that during that war the U.S. would not have objected if Israel had brought hostilities to Syria,<sup>87</sup> something to which neoconservatives openly prodded Israel.<sup>88</sup> The reason why Israel finally opted to limit the operation was very likely a sheer calculation of gains and losses from the ongoing Hezbollah war.<sup>89</sup>

It is not possible to separate U.S. policy towards Lebanon from the American-Syrian relations. If the US opens up to Syria, in whose vital interest it is to keep the present influence in Lebanon, the dilemma may emerge about the quality and degree of support for the anti-Syrian March 14 forces. Although the impact of Syrian intelligence on Lebanon has hardly been a constructive factor in the past decade, it would be wrong to give an unequivocally negative mark to overall Syrian involvement. Both countries are linked by common

<sup>82</sup> The March 14 Movement was born during the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon in 2005 (in the aftermath of assassination of former prime minister al-Hariri), comprising mostly pro-American factions which oppose Syrian influence in the country. The movement affiliates many political and social groups of diversified character: secular and religious, right- and left-wing, Christian (Maronites), Druze and Muslim (Sunni). Saad al-Hariri's Future Movement, Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces, Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party, and Amine Gemayel's Falange Party are the most important elements of the alliance.

<sup>83</sup> The pro-Syrian March 8 Movement includes: Hezbollah, Amal Movement (both Shiite), Free Patriotic Movement (Christian Maronites) and smaller Shiite, Maronite and Druze parties.

<sup>84</sup> In 2005 Lebanon received US\$400 million, and the administration asked for US\$60 million to be provided in 2009. See: D. Schenker, "The Future of U.S. Military Aid to Lebanon," *PolicyWatch* #1407, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 3 October 2008, [www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2933](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2933).

<sup>85</sup> The most glaring example of this threat came with riots in Nahr al-Barid camps, stirred up by Fatah al-Islam and pacified by the Lebanese army in May 2007. See: "Fatah al-Islam planned to assassinate Siniora, Jumblatt; senior member outlines plot in interview," *The Daily Star*, 14 June 2007, and "Fatah al Islam Was Riyadh's Creature," *Paris Intelligence Online*, 20 September 2007.

<sup>86</sup> Prior to the military action, Prime Minister Olmert received Condoleezza Rice's consent, but with the proviso that the Fuad Siniora government and state infrastructure would not suffer. At the end of the day, none of these conditions was met. See: A. Harel, A. Issacharoff, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>87</sup> A.E. Shamoo, B. Bricker, "At War with Syria and Iran: The Neo-Cons May Get Their Wish," *FPIF Commentary*, 10 August 2006, [www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/3422](http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/3422).

<sup>88</sup> C. Sultan, *Tragedy in South Lebanon: the Israeli-Hezbollah war of 2006*, Scarletta Press, Minneapolis, 2008, p. 45.

<sup>89</sup> A subsequent report by the Winograd commission questioned the rationale for the decision about military measures and it pointed to the dysfunctionality of Israeli decision-making centres. See: *Report of the Main Findings of the Winograd Commission*, [www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3500810,00.html](http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3500810,00.html).

history, economic interdependencies and even family ties. It can even be assumed that Syria—which recognises Lebanon’s sovereignty (with diplomatic relations established in 2008), negotiates with Israel and sacrifices the strategic aspects of relations with Iran for the sake of getting closer to the US and the EU—will play a constructive role in Lebanon, not destructive. It should be remembered that the US used the Syria influence in Lebanon for its own policy goals—e.g., in 1975 it encouraged Syria to get engaged in Lebanon in order to suppress the brutal civil war.<sup>90</sup>

Compared to early 2008, the post-Doha developments on the Lebanese political scene should be appraised positively, even if tensions have grown again in the lead-up to the June 2009 election. The March 14 Alliance won the ballot, hailed as a triumph of democracy. It is a safe bet that the U.S. will continue backing the March 14 forces, although the state’s stability and a calming down of internal conflicts is not contingent on these forces’ electoral victory. Lebanon is a conglomerate of a variety of forces with different political, religious and ethnic affinities. What is central to the security of the Lebanese people is integration of all major forces, including the Shiite groups, in political structures, and identification of common national interests. Only then can public consent be reached to a peace deal with Israel, maintenance of strong links with Syria and further democratisation. If, for example, Hezbollah continues to refrain from the use of force at a time of internal crises and against Israel<sup>91</sup> and accepts election results, the United States attitude towards the organisation may possibly change, along the French and British line.<sup>92</sup> A different scenario is equally likely: if events combine to increase the region’s instability—meaning an increase in tensions between the U.S. on the one hand and Iran and Syria on the other, the choice of a confrontational path towards neighbours by the Netanyahu government, and March 14 Alliance and Hezbollah fail to agree on the shape of the new political setting—Lebanon may well relapse into domestic conflict.

## U.S.-Egyptian relations

Ever since the March 1979 peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, the United States has perceived the Egyptian state as a stabilising regional force. Good relations with that country, which still commands considerable influence in the region,<sup>93</sup> are in U.S. interest, aimed to continue political and military cooperation and make the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty durable. Even though the US may see a moderate government in Egypt as exerting a welcome mitigating influence upon the Middle Eastern situation, President Hosni Mubarak’s three-decade-long stint in power does give rise to controversy, in addition to provoking ever stronger calls for democratisation. The American-Egyptian relations are mirrored in the levels of annual economic and military aid granted to the country by US Congress. In terms of U.S. military assistance, Egypt came third in the world in 2008, with US\$1.3 billion<sup>94</sup>—and a similar amount was earmarked for 2009. But economic assistance to Egypt is going to be halved this year, to US\$200 million.<sup>95</sup> In mid-2007, as part of a counter-offensive against Iranian advances, the administration announced a ten-year military aid package, with US\$30 billion for Israel and US\$33 billion for “Arab countries,” including US\$13 billion for Egypt and the balance for Gulf states.<sup>96</sup> But given Egypt’s growing internal problems, an unstable regional environment and inefficacy of U.S. policy in the region, the bilateral relations slackened over the last two years of the Bush administration.

The level of tensions in bilateral relations increased in step with the deteriorating situation in the Gaza Strip. The U.S. had repeatedly raised the question of inadequate response to arms smuggling (including

<sup>90</sup> I. Rabinovich, *The War for Lebanon 1970–1985*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, London, 1985, pp. 48–49.

<sup>91</sup> During the war in Gaza in 2008/2009 Hezbollah refrained from attacking Israel, giving a signal of a possible change in the direction of its policy.

<sup>92</sup> I. Black, “UK ready for talks with Hezbollah,” *The Guardian*, 5 March 2009, [www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/mar/05/uk-set-for-hezbollah-talks](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/mar/05/uk-set-for-hezbollah-talks).

<sup>93</sup> Despite signals about economic slowdown, Egypt remains the largest Arab country (with a population of some 80 million, according to CIA Factbook), and the strongest militarily (“Egypt Defence & Security Report Q1 2009,” *Business Monitor International*, February 2009, pp. 23–26).

<sup>94</sup> S. B. Epstein, K.H. Nakamura, *State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs: FY2009 Appropriations*, CRS Report for Congress, 21 August 2008, p. 21, [http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/RL34552\\_20090403.pdf](http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/RL34552_20090403.pdf).

<sup>95</sup> J. M. Sharp, *Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations*, CRS Report for Congress, 12 May 2009, <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33003.pdf>.

<sup>96</sup> “US/Middle East: Military aid,” *International Herald Tribune*, 6 September 2007, [www.iht.com/articles/2007/09/06/news/06oxan-militaryaid.php?page=1](http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/09/06/news/06oxan-militaryaid.php?page=1).

from Iran) through the Egypt-Gaza border,<sup>97</sup> pointing to Egypt's use of the smuggling issue in its relations with Israel.<sup>98</sup> In January 2008, Congress stopped aid to Egypt, and demanded a firm action from the government in Cairo.<sup>99</sup> The Congress decision was subsequently annulled by the administration, but the problem of the Rafah border crossing remained. The behaviours of presidents Bush and Mubarak at the World Economic Forum in Sharm al-Shaikh in May 2008 gave rise to tensions in bilateral relations: Bush was not present during Mubarak's inaugural address, and Mubarak skipped the Bush speech.<sup>100</sup> The US president's highly critical comments about Israel's neighbours,<sup>101</sup> which came several days after he completely ignored the Palestinian issue during a visit commemorating Israel's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary, stirred discontent among Arab leaders.<sup>102</sup>

With relations with the U.S. deteriorating, Egypt found itself in a predicament. Locked in historic rivalry with Iran, the Egyptian government fears radical ideologies' inroads into society and impact on the overall situation in the country. Since Gamal Abdel Nasser's revolution of 1952, the Muslim Brotherhood—banned as a political party—have posed and continue to pose the major problem for Egyptian rulers, the presidents Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak. Hamas, which controls Gaza, is regarded as a Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, with both groups keeping close contacts. Therefore, a strengthening of the Palestinian offshoot and its alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood is not to the liking of the Egyptian government, fearing that Hamas's Gaza success may provide an example to follow by Salafi groups in Egypt. The Israeli operation in the Gaza Strip in late 2008 and early 2009, which received a nod from Egypt, brought it tangible benefits in the form of a weakened Hamas and a confirmation of Egypt's significance for Middle Eastern stabilisation, as mediator and host to talks between the warring parties. For the Egyptian president, the Mubarak's survival in power and relations with the US and Israel are of priority importance.

But on the other hand, the Egyptian authorities (notably intelligence officers) keep good contacts with Hamas and other groups, such as Islamic Jihad, which should be seen as offering a chance in case US policy towards the region changes. During George W. Bush's term in office, influenced by the Israel-Palestinian talks, the United States finally consented to Egyptian mediation of Hamas-Israel ceasefire.<sup>103</sup> And the Egyptian mediation during the Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip was given high marks by the US, too, just as hoped for by Cairo. Of considerable importance was also the Egyptian mediation in Fatah-Hamas talks in the first half of 2009. The Egyptian government's mediation efforts are of strategic importance for the state, as confirming the role it plays in regional conflicts. Whenever Egypt-sponsored negotiations succeed, the state gets additional political capital, imparting new domestic legitimacy to the Mubarak government and weakening the Islamists. And it is feared that religious parties, led by the Muslim Brotherhood, might win in a democratic election—a scenario which would inject an element of risk to the Middle East's geopolitical situation and pose a threat to peace agreement with Israel. The United States will seek to avoid this scenario and will assure President Mubarak of its support. First signs of action towards improving the American-Egyptian relations can already be seen: after a visit to Asia, Egypt was the second destination for Secretary Clinton. Importantly, Obama chose Cairo for his long-awaited address to the Muslim world, which he delivered on 4 June 2009. During his visit to Egypt he also met with president Mubarak.

<sup>97</sup> D. Makovsky, *The U.S.–Israel–Egypt Trilateral Relationship: Shoring Up the Foundation of Regional Peace*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 21 May 2008, [www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC07.php?CID=396](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC07.php?CID=396).

<sup>98</sup> Egypt reportedly linked the degree of control of several dozen under-the-border tunnels to Israeli concessions on an increased presence of Egyptian troops on the border with Israel.

<sup>99</sup> N. Guttman, "Threat To Cut U.S. Aid Opens Rift With Egypt," *Forward*, 9 January 2008, [www.forward.com/articles/12443](http://www.forward.com/articles/12443).

<sup>100</sup> *Jibes highlight Bush-Mubarak rift*, BBC News, 20 May 2008, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/7410669.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7410669.stm).

<sup>101</sup> *President Bush Attends World Economic Forum*, 18 May 2008, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/05/20080518-6.html>.

<sup>102</sup> L. Stack, "As Bush leaves Mideast, he gives Arab leaders a to-do list for reform," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 19 May 2008, [www.csmonitor.com/2008/0519/p25s04-wome.html](http://www.csmonitor.com/2008/0519/p25s04-wome.html).

<sup>103</sup> *U.S. opens door to Hamas with Egypt mediation*, Reuters, 7 March 2008, [www.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUSN0564145820080307](http://www.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUSN0564145820080307).

## U.S.-Jordanian relations

The Kingdom of Jordan is a major US ally in the Middle East and an important beneficiary of US foreign assistance: in fiscal 2008, the country received a record US\$940 million from the U.S., which put it in the 5<sup>th</sup> place globally.<sup>104</sup> But even though Jordan is one of the principal US allies in the fight against extremism, the bilateral political relations were not always concerted. Jordan maintained good contacts with the Saddam Hussein regime, and in 1990 it opposed Operation Desert Storm in Iraq. After signing a peace accord with Israel in 1994, Jordan has joined the group of U.S. close allies in the region.

For the Hashemite Kingdom, a settlement to the Israel-Palestinian conflict is a regional policy priority. On the one hand, along with Egypt, Jordan is one of the two Arab countries (out of twenty-two) which currently maintain official relations with Israel.<sup>105</sup> And on the other, Palestinians account for more than a half of Jordanian population, with the Islamic opposition enjoying wide support. For the United States, its future assistance to Jordan and relations with the Hashemite Kingdom, the most important issues include the state's political stability, Jordan's contribution to settling the Iraqi and Palestinian-Israeli problems, and bilateral military and intelligence cooperation.<sup>106</sup> In the light of US objectives, a matter of major importance is also the character of Jordan-Palestinian relations. Jordan's special contacts with Hamas are more than twenty years' old. Soon after taking over in 1999, King Abdullah II, wishing to consolidate his international position as a US ally, had the Hamas offices in Jordan closed. But faced with a developing conflict within the Palestinian ranks, and growing dissatisfaction among Jordanian Palestinians, their radicalisation and increasing support for the Islamic Action Front,<sup>107</sup> Jordan opened unofficial dialogue with Hamas in 2007 and 2008.<sup>108</sup>

If reconciliation among Palestinian factions is among prerequisites of Arab-Israeli peace and an imperative for the Obama administration, Jordan's contribution may make the attainment of this goal more probable. So far, the Hashemite Kingdom's role in the intra-Palestinian and Arab-Israeli conflicts has been temporarily marginalised by Egypt's mediation in contacts with Hamas but the country remains an important partner for the U.S., especially in the context of a future military pullout from Iraq and the country's lasting stabilisation. Although Jordan is not the most important U.S. partner in the Middle East, it may help stabilise the region thanks to good contacts with the conflicted Palestinian factions and through participation in regional stabilisation operations which may possibly be required by future agreements. It is also considered one of the major proponents of the Arab Peace Initiative, which might become president Obama's basis for his proposals in the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>109</sup>

## Other Determinants of Obama Administration's Policy in the Middle East

### Internal determinants

Historically, one can speak about several variants of U.S. Middle Eastern policy models, according to which executive-power centre had the greatest say. These are the models of secretary of state,<sup>110</sup> special

<sup>104</sup> S. B. Epstein, K. H. Nakamura, *op. cit.* According to estimates for 2009, Jordan is to receive a bit above US\$500 billion—a reduction reflecting a relatively stable situation in Iraq. The 2008 increase in aid was caused by costs generated for the Jordanian budget by the closure and sealing of the Iraqi border.

<sup>105</sup> Following Israel's military action in Gaza in 2008/2009, Mauritania broke off diplomatic relations with Israel, and Qatar severed commercial relations.

<sup>106</sup> J. M. Sharp, *Jordan: Background and U.S. Relations*, CRS Report for Congress, 17 October 2008, <http://openocrs.com/document/RL33546>.

<sup>107</sup> *Ġabhat al-'Amal al-'Islāmī*, [www.jabha.net](http://www.jabha.net).

<sup>108</sup> In September and October 2008 the Jordanian intelligence head, General Muhammad al-Dhahabi, had four meetings with Hamas envoys. But he was dismissed by King Abdullah II when well-developed contacts with Hamas' political segment became part of the general's internal agenda. See: M. an-Nağār, *Al-'Urdun wa Ḥamās yasta'nifān ittiṣālāthumā ḥadīṭ an taḥāluf taktīkī* (Jordan and Hamas resume contacts and tactical alliance talks), Al-Jazeera, 26 October 2008, [www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/0968531C-066C-41BC-A0D2-FEA8A5E4FD12.htm](http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/0968531C-066C-41BC-A0D2-FEA8A5E4FD12.htm), Y. Melman, "Jordan's King Abdullah fires intel chief over Hamas support," *Haaretz*, 25 January 2009, [www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1058438.html](http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1058438.html) and "Sīnāriyhāt al-'ilāqa bayna Ḥamās wal-'Urdun" (Scenarios for Hamas-Jordan relations), *Al-Quds*, 21 September 2008, [www.alquds.com/node/104144](http://www.alquds.com/node/104144).

<sup>109</sup> Obama met with king Abdullah II in Washington on 21 April 2009. The talks dealt predominantly with the pursuit of a "comprehensive peace" in the Middle East and the Arab Peace Initiative.

<sup>110</sup> This model was chosen by President Bush, whose policy in the region was conducted by the dedicated secretary, James Baker.

envoy,<sup>111</sup> and national security advisor.<sup>112</sup> Looking at the choice of people to fill these positions, the last-mentioned model can be ruled out: General James L. Jones, notwithstanding his merits and experience in the region, has neither the charisma nor motivation to rival the influential secretary of state, Hillary R. Clinton. There can be no doubt that Clinton wants to pursue a firm and—as far as possible—independent foreign policy, but she has no experience in Middle Eastern affairs. Therefore, the most likely model for Middle Eastern policy to be chosen by President Obama is one of a special envoy, reporting directly to the president and the secretary of state.<sup>113</sup> On 22 January 2009, the position of special envoy to the Middle East was assigned to Senator George Mitchell,<sup>114</sup> a veteran of Northern Ireland negotiations and author of the Mitchell Report of 2001, on the basis of which the “road map” had been drawn up. Given the multitude of sometimes diametrically opposing ideas about future US involvement in the Middle East, arising in quarters close to Obama, the selection of Mitchell, who is seen as impartial, is a good compromise.

The administration’s personal makeup largely involves members of the Democratic establishment, close to Bill Clinton. Thus the way the administration’s foreign policy-related positions have been filled may indicate the Obama administration’s partial return to Bill Clinton’s policy. At the Hillary R. Clinton-led Department of State, policy towards the Middle East is taken care of by Jeffrey D. Feltman (in 2000–2001, an advisor to Martin Indyk, the Democrats’ chief Middle East diplomat), and Dennis Ross (President Clinton’s special coordinator for the Middle East). The decision to keep Feltman<sup>115</sup> as deputy assistant secretary of state for the Near Eastern affairs may indicate the conviction that tough policy in the region should be continued. But on the other hand, the president and, in part, the White House staff seem determined to change this policy. Both the National Security Advisor, General J.L. Jones, and the Special Envoy to the Middle East, George Mitchell, are known for impartiality and ideological non-commitment.<sup>116</sup> Obama himself has used advice from experts advocating an open policy and primacy of diplomacy.<sup>117</sup> And so, if a need arises to take decisions about strategic action, e.g. towards Iran or its backers, disputes may arise within the administration, hampering the pursuit of a coherent policy also towards states engaged in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

**The administration’s collaboration with Congress.** An important feature of US policy towards the Middle East is that it is non-partisan. Given that the Democrats have majority in both houses, one can expect a smooth cooperation with Congress. And it should be noted that several Congressmen are known for special interest and engagement in Middle Eastern affairs.<sup>118</sup> On the other hand however, it is likely that Obama’s policy towards the Middle East may encounter opposition in the Israel-friendly Congress not only from the Republican Party but from Democrats as well.<sup>119</sup>

**The Jewish community and pro-Israeli lobby.** The Jewish community is a group whose opinions and activities carry special importance for the United States’ Middle East policy. The most important lobbying

<sup>111</sup> Dennis Ross was a powerful special envoy from President Bill Clinton during the latter’s second term in office.

<sup>112</sup> This model, made possible by a weak secretary of state, was played out by Henry Kissinger in his capacity as national security advisor to President Nixon.

<sup>113</sup> See: B. Ravid, “Obama to base his Middle East policy on army of envoys,” *Haaretz*, 14 December 2008, [www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1046196.html](http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1046196.html).

<sup>114</sup> *Secretary Clinton With Vice President Joe Biden Announce Appointment of Special Envoy for Middle East Peace George Mitchell and Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke*, 22 January 2009, [www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/01/115297.htm](http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/01/115297.htm).

<sup>115</sup> In 2004, during the Iraq war, Feltman headed the Coalition Provisional Authority, and during the 2006 war in Lebanon he was U.S. ambassador to that country.

<sup>116</sup> In contrast to, e.g., Dennis Ross, accused by aides of pro-Israeli partiality. See: A.D. Miller, *The much too promised land: America’s elusive search for Arab-Israeli peace*, New York, 2008, and J.J. Mearsheimer, S.M. Walt, *The Israel lobby and U.S. foreign policy*, New York 2007.

<sup>117</sup> These include, e.g., Daniel Kurtzer, co-author of a study into the previous administration’s mistakes in the Arab-Israeli conflict, *Negotiating Arab-Israeli Peace: American Leadership in the Middle East*, and Robert Malley, programme director at the International Crisis Group, who stirred controversy by meeting Hamas members in the course of the presidential campaign.

<sup>118</sup> Along with the proceedings of the House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia and the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, mention should be made of visits to the region by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in March and April 2007 and other members of Congress, including Republicans.

<sup>119</sup> Congress rarely speaks out about foreign policy. But with the pro-Israel lobby exerting considerable influence, Israeli matters attract interest of both houses. For example, on 21 January 2009, the House of Representatives endorsed the Israeli operation in Gaza Strip by a vote of 390 to 5. Hence any change in the Obama administration’s policy requiring pressure to be exerted on Israel may face opposition from members of Congress.

entity, American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), largely took a positive view of Bush policy, although sometimes critical opinions could also be heard from these quarters.<sup>120</sup> In 2008, new organisations were established, lobbying for the Israeli cause from liberal positions: J Street and the Political Action Committee (PAC). Their emergence may weaken the AIPAC and, consequently, restrict Congress's hypothetical opposition against the administration's policy in the Middle East. The successes of the new organisations, such as collecting considerable funds over a short period, reveal an overwhelming expectation of change in US Middle Eastern policy among Jewish-Americans and active Israel backers.<sup>121</sup> It comes as no surprise that 78% of Jewish-Americans<sup>122</sup> voted for Barack Obama—after all, Democratic candidates have traditionally drawn greater support from Jewish voters than their opponents.

Moreover, the widespread unpopularity of the former president, largely reflecting his administration's ineffective policy towards the Middle East, may indicate that such Middle East policy changes which further U.S. interests do get the approval of the American public. However, not without importance is also the fact that most Americans (59%) declare their sympathies lie more with the Israelis,<sup>123</sup> which, in the final analysis, may influence Obama policies. The new administration opened its term with a great deal of public legitimacy and confidence.<sup>124</sup> This gives the president a greater room for manoeuvre and for riskier decisions.

**Economic crisis.** The extent of the downturn's impact upon the Middle Eastern policy of the Obama administration is not yet known. But this impact should be viewed in two ways. First, the scale of U.S. crisis is so high that the new administration's action in this particular field is what the American public expects in the first instance. One can therefore predict that President Obama's increased foreign policy activity may not meet an instant public approval. And second, intense involvement in the Middle East conflict may prove too costly and too energy-consuming at this hard time for the U.S. economy: time and human resources is one thing, foreign aid is another. On the financial front, the EU's eager member states and the rich countries in the Persian Gulf (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar) could provide a helping hand, but they feel the pinch, too. An analogy for the consequences of the present economic downturn should be seen in the energy and finance crisis of 1973–1974.<sup>125</sup> During its course, in the first half of 1974, the Nixon administration scored a first big success for U.S. policy in the Middle East: ceasefire agreements between Israel on the one hand and Egypt and Syria on the other. The next administration, run by President Carter, pulled off a still greater feat, when after the Camp David summit Israel and Egypt signed a peace treaty. Financial crises, as it can be seen—even granting that the present one has a global extent and its scale is unprecedented—not always have the effect of deactivating U.S. foreign policy; sometimes they actually set it in motion. The level of U.S. aid promised by Secretary Clinton at the Gaza assistance summit in Sharm al-Sheikh in March 2009 (U.S.\$900 million), when compared with the amounts declared by donors at other conferences (e.g. U.S.\$55 million in Paris in December 2007), demonstrates that, for now, the United States is not yet discouraged by the downturn in its Middle Eastern policy.

## External determinants

**Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.** The Iraqi situation is of paramount importance for U.S. capabilities in the whole Middle East. The mid-2009 picture seems to indicate that even though the 2007 “surge” has

<sup>120</sup> Tom Dine, one of AIPAC's actual founders, headed a group which received a Syrian delegation in Washington July 2008. Dine is a proponent of change in U.S.-Syrian relations towards a new opening which the previous administration sought to prevent.

<sup>121</sup> According to a J Street poll taken among American Jews in July 2008, and against declarations by leaders of Jewish organisations, the Bush administration's handling of the Arab-Israeli conflict was criticised by 71% of the respondents, with 86% actively backing U.S. commitment to conflict settlement even if that were to cause misunderstandings in relations with the parties. See: *National Survey of American Jews*, June-July 2008, [www.jstreet.org/files/images/Survey\\_July\\_2008\\_final.doc](http://www.jstreet.org/files/images/Survey_July_2008_final.doc).

<sup>122</sup> *AIPAC Statement on the 2008 Election Results*, 5 November 2008, [www.aipac.org/Publications/PressAIPACStatements/2008\\_Presidential\\_Election\\_Press\\_Release\\_-\\_11.05.08.pdf](http://www.aipac.org/Publications/PressAIPACStatements/2008_Presidential_Election_Press_Release_-_11.05.08.pdf).

<sup>123</sup> Whereas 18% sympathise with the Palestinians. See: L. Saad, *Americans' Support for Israel Unchanged Since Gaza Conflict*, Gallup, 3 March 2009, [www.gallup.com/poll/116308/americans-support-israel-unchanged-gaza-conflict.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/poll/116308/americans-support-israel-unchanged-gaza-conflict.aspx).

<sup>124</sup> Domestic approval of his handling of foreign policy issues reached 61%. F. Newport, *Obama Working With 61% Approval on Foreign Affairs*, Gallup, 1 April 2009, [www.gallup.com/poll/117229/Obama-Working-Approval-Foreign-Affairs.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/poll/117229/Obama-Working-Approval-Foreign-Affairs.aspx).

<sup>125</sup> P. Rogers, *The Financial Crisis and Sustainable Security*, September 2008, [www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/monthly\\_briefings/2008/10/financial-crisis-and-sustainable.html](http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/monthly_briefings/2008/10/financial-crisis-and-sustainable.html).

brought the expected results, the stability of Iraq is still fragile. The SOFA agreement with the Iraqi government, passed by Iraq's Parliament on 27 November, provides for the U.S. troops pullout by the end of 2011. For U.S. commanders, the top priorities are to leave the country smoothly and safely, cede responsibility for stabilisation to the Iraqis, and ultimately specify Iraq's place in the regional alignment of forces. Key to the attainment of these goals will be U.S. cooperation with Saudi Arabia, Syria and Jordan, and also with Iran.

The focus in the fight with violent extremism has now moved to the Afghanistan-Pakistani borderland, whose stabilisation is the U.S. foreign policy priority. The present troubles in that area bode ill for the United States' future commitment to the Middle East, by requiring huge political and economic resources. Conflicts which result in direct threats to U.S. troops will always trump the Arab-Israeli conflict which poses no such danger and whose impact on Greater Middle East security can only be seen in the longer run. As a result, a decision to intensely commit the United States' and the president's authority to the Middle Eastern conflict may be successively postponed in the expectation of an earlier stabilisation in Afghanistan. U.S. involvement in the conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan is also important for another reason: its impact on the U.S. image throughout the Muslim world.

**America's standing.** Even though, as indicated by global surveys taken in 2007,<sup>126</sup> the United States was steadily losing prestige and authority in the eyes of the international public opinion, the trend was shown to be reversed in a 2008 poll by the BBC World Service.<sup>127</sup> U.S. foreign policy still gets the worst notes from Muslims, especially in countries allied with the U.S., such as Turkey, Jordan, Egypt or Pakistan.<sup>128</sup> But in a trend indicating an improvement in this policy's effectiveness, Muslims' support for the use of terrorist means in order to achieve political goals waned last year.<sup>129</sup> Paradoxically, one factor behind the diminishing Muslim backing for terrorist groups was the recent years' exacerbation of regional conflicts. The present attitude of the Muslim public augurs well for the policy of the new U.S. administration, even though the "Arab street" did not receive the outcome of the November 2008 election in the U.S. as warmly as the rest of the world or Middle Eastern governments.<sup>130</sup> But that reflected a low view of U.S. policy in the region, rather than any grudge against the values and civilisation of the United States or the Western world.<sup>131</sup>

Changes in U.S. foreign policy will very likely be accompanied by changes in the strategy for public diplomacy towards the Middle East, which has so far failed to deliver results. President Obama has often stressed the importance of the United States standing abroad. Initially he announced a speech in a Muslim capital, to be made early in his term.<sup>132</sup> But it was only a week after the inauguration, in his first interview, which was given to Arab TV al-Arabiya, that Obama expressed readiness to initiate a partnership with Arab-Muslim world, based on mutual respect and mutual interests.<sup>133</sup> The proposal was then explicitly reiterated in his grand speech in Cairo in June 2009.<sup>134</sup> Public diplomacy measures will not be so much important if foreign policy indeed changes perceptibly, so as to be noticed by the public. Devising a comprehensive public policy agenda will truly be a big challenge for the new administration in the light of previous programmes' failures.

**Cooperation with the international community.** Collaboration with European Union states may add to the effectiveness of U.S. mediation in the Middle East and to EU influence in the region. The EU is not capable at present of playing a Mideast role similar to that of the United States, having no instruments of pressure as those in the possession of the U.S.: it is not a guarantor of Israel's security and of Arab regimes'

<sup>126</sup> *Global Unease With Major World Powers*, June 2007, <http://pewglobal.org/reports/pdf/256.pdf>.

<sup>127</sup> *Global Views of USA Improve*, BBC World Service Poll, April 2008, [www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2008/04\\_april/02/usa.pdf](http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2008/04_april/02/usa.pdf).

<sup>128</sup> *Global Public Opinion in the Bush Years (2001–2008)*, Pew Global Attitudes Project, December 2008, <http://pewglobal.org/reports/pdf/263.pdf>.

<sup>129</sup> K. Ballen, "The myth of Muslim support for terror," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 23 February 2008, [www.csmonitor.com/2007/0223/p09s01-coop.html](http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0223/p09s01-coop.html).

<sup>130</sup> "Mideast countries echo Obama's 'change' message, sceptically," *The Jordan Times*, 6 November 2008, [www.jordantimes.com/?news=11901](http://www.jordantimes.com/?news=11901).

<sup>131</sup> A. Kohut, R. Wike, "All the World's a Stage," *National Interest*, 5 June 2008, [www.nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=17502](http://www.nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=17502).

<sup>132</sup> L. Sly, "Which Muslim capital will Barack Obama choose?," *Chicago Tribune*, 10 December 2008, [www.chicagotribune.com/news/chi-obama-muslims\\_slydec11,0,6054788.story](http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/chi-obama-muslims_slydec11,0,6054788.story). In April President Obama was on a visit in Turkey.

<sup>133</sup> *Obama's interview with Al Arabiya*, 27 January 2009, [www.alarabiya.net/articles/2009/01/27/65096.html](http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2009/01/27/65096.html).

<sup>134</sup> *Remarks by the President on a New Beginning...*, *op. cit.*

survival, nor is it unanimous. But given the interest taken in the Middle East by European institutions and states, and also their growing role in conflict resolution in the region, the EU could be a facilitator of negotiations, adding to the U.S. activities the credibility and support the Obama administration needs.<sup>135</sup> A coordinated effort in this direction was taken by the French presidency, just after the U.S. election. During his visit to Washington, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner reportedly presented a draft of a “transatlantic document,” in which the EU proposed close Europe–U.S. cooperation on major global and security-related issues.<sup>136</sup> One important proposal was for European–U.S. collaboration in the Near and Middle East, including e.g. EU involvement in Iraq and cooperation in talks with Syria. If the U.S. and the EU managed to agree a common policy line towards the Arab–Israeli conflict, such cooperation could boost the effectiveness of American mediation and broaden the set of available instruments with which to press and encourage the parties to the conflict.

EU–U.S. cooperation broadens the range of common policy opportunities. This is, first, because the EU has already come up, especially in recent years, with a number of initiatives towards Middle Eastern countries. The trail for these diplomatic initiatives was blazed by the United States, which has been continuously losing prestige in the region. An intensification of the EU’s recent involvement has to do with the changes that occurred in the Middle East in May 2008 (Lebanon’s Doha agreement and the announcement that Israel–Syria indirect talks would be resumed), Israel’s national anniversary, and inauguration of the Union for the Mediterranean in July. These initiatives indicate that many EU member states back the concept of a comprehensive settlement of the Arab–Israeli conflict, which has been embraced by the Obama administration after being spurned by the previous U.S. government. EU member states have vital political and economic interests in the Arab world, especially as regards France’s relations with Lebanon, Morocco and Algeria, the UK’s relations with Iraq and other Gulf states, Germany’s relations with Saudi Arabia, and the relations of the EU as a whole with Israel.

And second, thanks to the EU’s positive image in Arab countries and Israel, the bloc has a capital that the U.S. lacks. Europe’s public diplomacy is effective (Francophone effort, British Council, BBC Arabic, etc.). The EU’s participation in American measures would therefore legitimise the U.S. in the eyes of Middle Eastern states.

**Russia.** With tensions arising between Washington and Moscow after the Georgia crisis, opinions emerged about Russia’s intention to regain a big power position, also using peripheral areas, such as Middle East, where the two countries may confront each other. But it should be remembered that Russia has different (more strategic interests) in the Gulf region than it has in the strict Middle East. Unless conflicts with EU member states and the U.S. exacerbate, Russia will not be interested in a confrontation in the area of the peace process; rather it may prove to be an important partner, not to be turned down by Arab countries and Israel. After the U.S. election and prior to Lebanon’s parliamentary poll, Russia announced a transfer of military equipment to the Lebanese army.<sup>137</sup> This and other similar measures are not only aimed to further Russia’s influence in the Middle East; they are also in keeping with U.S. thinking, thus indicating a non-confrontational nature of Russian plans for the region. In a broader regional context, including Iran, and after the secretary of state’s announcement of a “fresh start”<sup>138</sup> in relations with the Kremlin, Russia’s cooperation in the Middle East may prove indispensable for U.S. policy success and regional stabilisation.

**United Nations.** Although important for the peace process, UN participation is not necessary for its final success. As widely perceived in Arab countries, the main division within the organisation—the Security Council vs. the General Assembly—also defines an informal division between the bodies supporting Israel and those supporting the Palestinians. The UN has only marginal weight for Israel policy. As far as the United States is concerned, the UN’s role may prove significant if the new administration opts for close cooperation with the whole international community, in search of improving its image and adding to the strength of its actions. The choice of this line is all the more probable in view of President Obama’s selection

<sup>135</sup> S. Ben-Ami, *Europe’s Dangerous Banalities*, Project Syndicate, February 2009, [www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/benami26](http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/benami26).

<sup>136</sup> “Relations UE–Etats-Unis: Kouchner présentera un document mardi à Washington,” *Le Point*, 6 November 2008, [www.lepoint.fr/actualites-politique/relations-ue-etats-unis-kouchner-presentera-un-document-mardi-a/917/0/2892.6](http://www.lepoint.fr/actualites-politique/relations-ue-etats-unis-kouchner-presentera-un-document-mardi-a/917/0/2892.6).

<sup>137</sup> *Russia ‘to give’ Lebanon war jets*, BBC News, 17 December 2008, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/7788351.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7788351.stm).

<sup>138</sup> S. Fleming, *U.S. and Russia pledge fresh start in relations*, Reuters, 6 March 2009, [www.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUSTRE52522420090306](http://www.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUSTRE52522420090306).

of his close associate, Susan Rice, as U.S. ambassador to the UN.<sup>139</sup> In practice, UN participation and cooperation may prove indispensable if it comes to deployment of international forces, after a possible signing of Israel-Syria and Israel-Lebanon agreements.

## Conclusion

Prior to the Iraq war, some observers predicted optimistically that, as relative equilibrium comes back to the Gulf region and the Arab-Israeli conflict dies down, the United States will be in a position to afford choosing regional allies based on the previously neglected criterion of respect for democracy and human rights observance. But the war in Iraq complicated the situation regionally and globally; it disturbed the balance of forces in the Gulf and directly exacerbated the Middle Eastern conflict—and yet Middle Eastern democratisation, as a means of fight against terrorism, remained a key aspect of the “Bush doctrine.” A socio-political change such as an externally inspired democratisation of the Middle East, using a wide range of soft power instruments, is not possible in conditions of sharp regional conflict. Whether or not foreign policy should be based on normative assumptions is an intricate theoretical and practical dilemma which cannot be unequivocally resolved. One can only conclude that where foreign policy is founded on simplified normative assumptions, this may bring harm to the very values which underpin the given normative system. Such a mechanism has provoked accusations against U.S. foreign policy—not only from European and Arab intellectuals, but also from within U.S. elites—thus damaging ideas such as “democracy,” “human rights” or “equality” and narrowing the U.S. room for manoeuvre in the Middle East.

An end to U.S. dominance in the Middle East was proclaimed in 2006 by Richard Haas, who wrote that in a new situation the U.S. would have to define its place using largely diplomatic instruments.<sup>140</sup> To what extent this claim is true would be hard to adjudicate. Its critics are right in pointing that the past eight years of U.S. policy is still a short period. A question arises of whether the Iraq war will have durable influence on the United States’ long-term importance in the Middle East. From the historical perspective, a negative answer should now be given, but it is the Obama administration’s policy that will have crucial importance for an honest definition of long-term trends.

The United States remains the only mediator in the Arab-Israeli conflict with real potential to help it end. The Middle East peace process may prove to be a way for the U.S. influence in the region to last. Arab-Israeli peace will not entail an automatic regional stabilisation and peace on the Israeli-Palestinian border, nor will it immediately put an end to threats coming from radical groups in countries of the region. But it is a step necessary to wrap up a conflict which engages all of the region’s major forces and which moulds successive generations of Arabs and Israelis, adversely affecting the interests of the international community.

Last year saw a string of reports and papers from U.S. analysts, experts and academics, calling on the new president to revise the country’s Middle East policy.<sup>141</sup> A need for change is so widely perceived in the U.S. that even the centres known for support of the previous administration’s approach to the Middle East, such as the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, join the discussion about the need to re-formulate the policy in the region. The pro-change quarters are almost at one in perceiving Obama as changing for the better the course of the Middle East activities. The sense of inevitability of approaching changes has also been shared by Middle Eastern leaders.

Back in late 2007, the 2006–2007 changes in the Middle East prompted theories about a progressing U.S. “disengagement” on the one hand and, on the other, a growing Middle Eastern destabilisation.<sup>142</sup> Prior to the Israeli offensive in Gaza, regional forces sought to calm down the tense situation in the expectation of a stronger U.S. involvement under a new president. Actually, it is not inconceivable that in the indirect aftermath of operation Cast Lead a swifter reconciliation among the Palestinians will be possible, which

<sup>139</sup> *The National Security Team*, The Office of the President-Elect, 1 December 2008, [http://change.gov/newsroom/entry/the\\_national\\_security\\_team](http://change.gov/newsroom/entry/the_national_security_team).

<sup>140</sup> R. N. Haas, “The New Middle East,” *Foreign Affairs* 2006, No. 6, [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/62083/richard-n-haas/the-new-middle-east](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/62083/richard-n-haas/the-new-middle-east).

<sup>141</sup> The most important include: D. C. Kurtzer, S. B. Lasensky, *Negotiating Arab-Israeli Peace: American Leadership in the Middle East*, United States Institute of Peace, 2008; and *Restoring the Balance: A Middle East Strategy for the Next President*, Council on Foreign Relations, Brookings Institution Press, 2008.

<sup>142</sup> M. B. Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy. America and the Middle East 1776 to the Present*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2007, p. 611.

would bode well for the peace process. Even though Barack Obama speaks about intense engagement in the Middle East, his actions remain constrained by a host of general factors, including:

- long term consequences of previous administrations' Mideast policy errors and ineffective mediation;
- the weight of post-Cold War priorities and principles which the Bush administration has introduced into strategic planning for good;
- narrow, often conflicting interests of individual actors in the Arab-Israeli conflict;
- contradiction between U.S. interests in the Middle East: guaranteeing Israel's security on the one hand, and interests in Arab and Muslim countries on the other;
- instability in many states engaged in the conflict, and potential unwillingness on the part of new governments;
- a possibility of conflict arising within the administration over the design of Greater Middle East policy;
- the scale of economic downturn and potential opposition on the part of Congress;
- degree of U.S. foreign policy effectiveness on other fronts: Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq;
- the region's widespread anti-Americanism and lack of an effective public diplomacy model;
- degree of cooperation with members of the international community.

For most of these constrains, counterarguments could be presented pointing to factors working to U.S. advantage in the Middle East. The current situation in the region requires a comprehensive strategy, well thought-out actions and tough decisions. Whatever the expectations from the new administration and whatever its strategy, in the final analysis it is the regional actors who will determine the strategic moves, as dictated by their narrow, often conflicting national interests. Use of diplomatic means by the United States may bring qualitative change towards improvement of the Middle East situation, but it is also probable that overall—given the predominance of unfavourable conditions in the region—the new administration's policy may prove not to be essentially distinct from that of the previous administration.