



شبكة الجزيرة
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The Arab condition and regional and international variables

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The legacy inherited by United States' president, Barack Obama, from his predecessor, George W. Bush, included:

1. Direct American involvement in two unsuccessful wars – in Iraq and Afghanistan, and indirectly, in two unsuccessful wars waged by the Israeli army on Lebanon (in 2006) and the Gaza Strip (in 2008/2009);
2. A financial crisis – American and international – whose magnitude exceeds the global economic crisis of 1929 to 1932, and which rendered the greater Middle East project a complete fiasco; and
3. A bad reputation for the U.S. across the world – including within Western public opinion.

During his presidential election campaign and after his success in the election, Obama should not have promised to effect change in the U.S. and globally without first realising the constraints and obstacles that he would face, some of which are impossible to overcome. Obama assumed the leadership of a United States in a state of deterioration in terms of its global position and the global balance of power compared to what it was from the end of World War II through the Cold War era and post-Cold era, until recently.

Obama and his administration needed to halt this deterioration and put America on the path of the kind of change that would lead to the restoration of its position in the balance of power globally and regionally in the Arab-Islamic world.

Halting the deterioration

However, with a focus on winning the war in Afghanistan, processing a peaceful settlement in Palestine, liquidating Iran's nuclear program, and on finding an exit from the financial crisis and economic recession, the halt to the deterioration has not happened.

First: What has been achieved at the level of the financial crisis is only a relative halt on the escalation of the crisis, by the injection of billions of dollars of taxpayers' money into the financial sector, thus increasing the debt. This was accompanied by more looting of international resources in various ways, including manipulation of the dollar and oil prices and the blackmailing of former foreign investors. Indications are still fluctuating between negative and positive economic growth, but unemployment in the U.S. remains at 10 percent.

Second: The world situation is characterised by general disorder, and is far from being rebuilt into a new world order: economically, politically or even militarily. Relations between major countries are no different from what they were during the last three years of the era of George W. Bush, who had shyly to return to cooperation with Europe through NATO, and had to begin repairing relations with both Russia and China. On the one hand, the Obama administration continues to monopolise the Palestinian question, and, on the other, it imposes its vision on its NATO allies in the management of the conflict in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq. The U.S. engaged other major countries on the Iranian issue by adopting Bush's policy which was based on the cooperation of the "5 + 1". While we may credit Obama with the deal with Russia whereby the U.S. cancelled its project to locate anti-missile systems in Poland and the Czech Republic – in exchange for Russia's cooperation in the Iranian nuclear matter – the fact is that the Bush administration moved in the same direction in its last year.

Additionally, there is the contradiction that arose in the Obama era between America and Japan on the issue of the U.S. military base in Okinawa.

In other words, the position that the Obama administration has reached in terms of its relationships with other major countries is one that fluctuates between alienation, cooperation, and non-cooperation. Such a situation of inconsistency tends towards greater instability, if not chaos. More importantly, however, 2009 saw America failing to regain its global leadership or to make its vision dominant in its relationships with other major powers.

Third:

1. Obama's strategy of escalating the war in Afghanistan failed. When its military strategy was on the brink of collapse, his administration was obliged to change its strategy by announcing the beginning of a withdrawal of troops in mid-2011 (earlier than the date set by the Bush administration for withdrawal from Iraq), and also announcing an increase of troops: 30,000 more from the U.S. and 7,000 from its NATO allies.
2. The Obama administration stepped up military intervention by conducting air raids in Pakistan in the wake of the civil war between the Pakistani army and the Pashtun tribes of Pakistan. The result, as it emerged in the last two months of 2009, was a miserable failure in Pakistan for the Obama administration. This will have a ripple effect and points to increasing failure in Afghanistan. The battle in Waziristan, it was announced, had ended. In addition, rumours abound that Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari will soon fall. Obama has lost control of the situation in Pakistan, and there is an intensification of popular hostility towards America and towards Obama personally.
3. The overall U.S. political dispensation in Iraq is characterised by chaos and confused relationships between the various Iraqi parties. This is another example of American failure in 2009.
4. The Palestinian file, which topped Obama's list of priorities and is being handled by George Mitchell, collapsed in the first phase of its implementation. Obama was forced to retreat from his demand for a complete freeze of settlement construction as a prerequisite for the launch of negotiations and for the first gradual steps of Israel's normalisation with the Arabs. The U.S. administration has adopted Netanyahu's proposal on the issue of settlements and the start of negotiations, prompting Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to withdraw his candidacy for the next presidential election and declare his disappointment in Obama. Paradoxically, in the hands of Obama and his administration, the Palestinian file realised a dangerous failure while the Bush administration, in its final two years, vigorously pushed for it, holding 268 sessions of negotiations, as admitted by Saeb Erekat.
5. The formation of the national unity government in Lebanon is a failure for Obama's administration and Netanyahu's government.
6. The Obama administration and the 5 +1 Group were taken by surprise – while they were planning to pressurise and impose sanctions on Iran – when Tehran agreed to swap its 3.5 percent enriched uranium for 20 percent enriched uranium for scientific purposes. Thus, 2009 ended with debate of the Iranian proposal and

its conditions, which suggests that Obama was close to failure on this issue since he did not achieve any of his announced objectives. His failure here, however, was not as great as his failure on other issues. The reason is possibly that on the Iranian question the U.S. cooperated with the 5 + 1, its failure in other matters was due to American monopoly of decision-making and progress.

This list records the obvious failures of Barack Obama and his advisers in assessing the global situation and setting policies accordingly. This can be the only explanation for Mitchell's failure in launching negotiations according to Obama's condition on a freeze of settlement building. Obama and Mitchell's assessment of the Palestinian situation was based on an incorrect prediction of Netanyahu's response, an incorrect estimation of Obama's ability to enforce his demands, and an error in estimating the probability of the Palestinian president retreating after having raised his ceiling of demands for negotiations to match that of the United States. This is typical of what happened when the Obama administration set its strategy for both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

New balance of power

The imbalance of power in the world continues to impact negatively on the U. S., both in terms of the economic crisis and in terms of the political status of America among major countries. Obama's crisis in Latin America worsened after the coup in Honduras, and the blow his administration received in the Senate and House of Representatives from the results of the Bolivian presidential elections. While the Zionist State was mired in the Arab-Muslim region, the imbalance of power continued, to the detriment of America, as was noted in the serial failures of the U.S. in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon and Iran.

There is, thus, almost unanimous agreement that there is a kind of vacuum because of the serial failures of America on the one hand, the failure of the Israeli army in its war against Lebanon in 2006 and the Gaza Strip in 2008-2009 on the other hand, and the implication that the Israeli army committed war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The vacuum created by the imbalance of power in the Middle East – to the detriment of America and Israel – explains the growing roles of Turkey, Syria, and Iran and the diminishing roles of the Arab countries and the political forces which were betting on the success of American policies during the eras of Bush and Obama.

A breach in the existing power relationships took place when the Turkish-Syrian strategic agreement was signed; a breach also occurred when the Turkish-Iranian deal cemented the relationship of the two countries. Similarly, there was a breach with the formation of the Syrian-Saudi relationship, which resulted in a breakthrough with the formation of the Lebanese national unity government, and a further breach with the Doha negotiations relating to Darfur.

With regard to the Palestinian question, the situation has matured towards a breakthrough on the issue of Palestinian national unity in favour of the resistance strategy. This is hampered only by the Egyptian position, which insists on a continuation of the previous policy. There is also a maturing of the process that could lead to a breakthrough in the case of the imprisoned Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit and the exchange of Palestinian prisoners.

The Arab situation

This is where the points of weakness in the official Arab situation unfold. The new balance of power offers the possibility of increasing the Arab role, as well as the roles of Turkey and Iran, who are seeking to fill the vacuum together with Syria. Meanwhile, the Arab condition in general is in a state of paralysis – with the exception of the faint expression of discomfort by Saudi Arabia (together with Syria) regarding the Lebanese issue.

Any vacuum in the balance of power will not persist for a long while. Such a situation either will tempt new players to jump in to fill the vacuum, or will result in it being filled by chaos.

The basic flaw in the Arab condition was manifested in the policies of the Arab states regarding the Israeli aggression against the Gaza Strip, and was also expressed in the positions of the various states regarding the convening of an emergency Arab summit. The very countries that refused to hold an emergency summit are the same (especially Egypt and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia) which are reluctant to push for an increased Arab role under the conditions of the new balance of power.

The breach caused by the Syrian-Saudi understanding on the issue of Lebanon gives an indication of how strong and effective the Arab position could be if the previous policies of post-11 September 2001 and the ensuing American offensive on the Arab-Muslim region were removed. The acquiescence with the U.S. attack against a number of countries brought the official Arab position to this situation of paralysis, and prevented them from benefiting from the variables that presented themselves with the new balance of power. This acquiescence included the U.S. attack against Afghanistan in 2001, Sharon's attack in Palestine in the spring of 2002 and a reoccupation of area 'A', Iraq in 2003, Lebanon in 2006, the Gaza Strip in 2008-2009, Sudan and the Ethiopian occupation of Somalia, targeting educational curricula and Islamic charitable institutions, as well as the subsequent commitment to American policies, as expressed in the positions of the Arab League and its General Secretariat.

It is noteworthy that the countries that surrendered to U.S. pressures, or bet on the success of U.S. policies, faced a deep crisis with their people. Some of these crises led to internal rifts and sharp divisions. On the other hand, the countries that resisted or were reluctant to comply with American policies, especially in the wars in Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine, developed stronger internal conditions.

This latter group of countries is positioned, under the current circumstances, to contribute to significant breakthroughs in terms of Palestinian national unity and to consolidate the trend of resistance and opposition. They are also well-poised to contribute in terms of the situations in Iraq, Sudan, Yemen and Somalia, and even on the level of creating an effective Arab position ahead of other global negotiations. This includes the success of the Doha Round in the interests of Third World countries, a strengthening of the humanitarian position on climate change and environmental issues, and the establishment of more just and equitable global economic and political systems.

Note on Netanyahu's government

Binyamin Netanyahu's government seems to be strong and was able to impose a humiliating retreat on the Obama administration. The Israeli government appears to be arrogant, insistent on the expansion of settlements, grabbing more Palestinian lands, and releasing volatile statements, but it is, in reality, a weak government. Indeed, it is probably the weakest-ever Israeli government. There are a number of factors which indicate the weakness of the Israeli state.

1. When America is weak in the global and regional balance of power, this necessarily weakens any Israeli government, including the current Netanyahu government.
2. When Netanyahu causes Mitchell's project to fail and imposes a retreat on America, it does not mean that he is strong. Instead, it indicates a crisis in the Israeli relationship with the U.S. and with the Europeans as well. This is indicative of a weakness of Netanyahu's Government.
3. When public opinion turns away from sympathy with war crimes, and when court cases are opened against military officials and politicians, it means Netanyahu's government will be weak.
4. When the Israeli army failed in its wars on Lebanon in 2006 and on the Gaza Strip in 2008-2009, it implies that the Israeli government is weak because the power of the entire state is based on the military and on external support. Accordingly, Israeli positions should be interpreted within the context of this weakness, and the U.S. and European positions should be interpreted in the context of their fear for the vulnerability and fragility of the position of Israel.

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