

Fourth Session of the
Körber Dialogue Middle East

“US Policy in the Middle East: Priorities for the New President”

January 9–10, 2009, Berlin

The Körber Dialogue Middle East provides a platform for multilateral discussions about foreign policy and security issues pertaining to the Middle East. It seeks to bring together representatives of the most important stakeholders on a regular basis in order to foster an open and policy-oriented exchange of ideas. In the fourth session of the Körber Dialogue Middle East, high-ranking representatives of leading think tanks and former officials from the Middle East, the European Union and the United States gathered in order to discuss US foreign policy in the Middle East and priorities for the new President.

This summary contains a selection of specific arguments which we consider to be relevant to the current policy discussion. It will be distributed to the participants of the Körber Dialogue Middle East and selected policy-makers.

SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION

I. Values and Interests: US Foreign Policy in the Middle East

Participants argued that US foreign policy in the Middle East revolves around two contradictory issues. On the one hand there is US support for Israel and, as a consequence of this, the goal of resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict; and on the other hand the US has an interest in securing and maintaining access to the hydrocarbon resources of the Gulf region. The fundamental challenge facing all US administrations has been and continues to be the attempt to devise a policy which can reconcile these two disparate and at the same time interconnected issues. Such reconciliation is particularly challenging in view of the fact that the center of gravity in the Middle East has shifted from the Levant to the Gulf region. This trend is due to Iran’s rise to regional predominance in the Gulf region as a result of the overthrow of the Saddam regime, the installation of a pro-Iranian Shiite government in Baghdad, and the weakening of the Taleban on Iran’s eastern flank.

Participants asserted that these fundamental traits of US policy are likely to influence President Obama's approach to the region. Four points were seen to be of particular importance:

- Due to the shift from the Levant to the Gulf region, Iran will also be taking center stage under the Obama administration.
- What the new President does very much hinges on the behavior of the regional players.
- Promoting democracy and reform will remain on the US agenda. However, the instruments used to attain these objectives will differ considerably from those employed by the Bush administration.
- The incoming US president will have to come up with a coherent vision for the Middle East, which some participants thought was a rapidly changing region on the verge of collapse. It is on the one hand completely under-institutionalized and to some extent fragmented, though on the other hand it is held together by numerous interlocking conflicts.

Some participants thought that the Obama administration may well pursue a policy of multi-directional diplomacy in the Middle East, with numerous US envoys being sent to the region to sort out potential policy options. US foreign policy under President Obama will in all probability once again embrace dialogue as an instrument of diplomacy rather than as a reward for good behavior. However, some participants voiced scepticism about whether a policy of dialogue for the sake of it will really be more constructive than a rigid policy of non-engagement as practised by the Bush administration.

II. Security in the Gulf Region: How to Achieve Stability

Participants' opinions differed on the question of if and how some kind of security arrangement should be installed in the Gulf region and what role the US might play in it. Whereas some speakers asserted that a security structure in the Gulf should be implemented as soon as possible, others asked whether the time was really ripe to embark on such an ambitious project. The latter argued that, since the clock was ticking in the conflict about the Iranian nuclear programme, it was premature to think about a comprehensive security arrangement in the Gulf. In principle participants agreed that, if it materialized, a Gulf security arrangement should be as comprehensive as possible in order to prevent further polarization of regional states. The argument that Iran and Saudi Arabia might function as the sole guarantors of regional security was rejected. Most of the participants were of the opinion that international actors, above all the US, should be integrated into the Gulf security architecture.

Initial steps towards the implementation of a comprehensive Gulf security arrangement could include the formation of multilateral working groups in areas of overlapping interests, such as Iraq. Preparatory talks among the potential members of a security structure should not be conducted on an official level, but rather in the framework of "track 1.5 talks", i.e. informal meetings involving both official and non-official representatives. With regard to Iranian-US relations,

the hope was expressed that the Obama administration will “make positive noises” towards Iran, which, it is to be hoped, will be answered by signals of goodwill from Tehran. Some participants emphasized that in the case of Iran the balance between incentives and costs should be recalibrated (strong incentives in the case of compliance, but equally tough sanctions in the case of non-compliance).

III. Conflict Management in the Levant: What the US Should Do

Participants agreed that in view of the various tracks of the Israeli-Arab conflict, especially the Israeli-Palestinian track, a serious effort at conflict resolution requires major US involvement, ideally soon after the inauguration of the new President. Some speakers emphasized that the US position should be distinct from Israel’s position in order to make it possible for the US to be taken seriously as an honest broker. With regard to the Israeli-Palestinian track, particular emphasis was placed on the need to establish a new frame of reference for conflict resolution which transcended the phased approach stipulated by the roadmap. Core elements of such a new frame of reference should include the renunciation of the use of force by both parties to the conflict, the return to 1967 borders, and a gradual dismantling of Israeli settlements in the Palestinian Territories. The argument was put forward that in principle the Syrian-Israeli track was more likely to yield results than the talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. However, on account of the Gaza conflict indirect talks between Syria and Israel had been suspended. Some participants argued that Turkey had disqualified itself as a mediator on account of Prime Minister Erdogan’s harsh criticism of Israel’s actions during the Gaza conflict.

With regard to Gaza, some speakers criticized the Western policy of non-engagement towards Hamas. They argued that the suspension of all contacts with Hamas had strengthened the movement. Talking to an actor should not be regarded as implicit legitimization, but rather as an instrument with which to exert pressure. However, other participants rejected the argument and questioned the willingness of Hamas to conduct talks with Western actors in the first place. As a potential step towards post-conflict stabilization in Gaza, there were proposals for the deployment of international forces on the borders of the Gaza Strip.

IV. What Role for Europe?

The final section of the discussion was devoted to the role of the EU in the Middle East, and the question of an effective division of labor between the EU and the US in the region.

The prospects for EU engagement in the short term were not considered to be very encouraging, especially since the two EU Presidencies in 2009 are not likely to put the Middle East at the top of their agenda. However, on a more fundamental strategic level, there was a more optimistic mood. Some participants argued that European engagement can be effective, but only if EU ac-

tivities are closely coordinated with the US. They called for greater EU-US coordination not only with regard to the current conflicts in the Middle East, but also with regard to joint efforts to reduce dependence on the regional hydrocarbon resources. However, others claimed that the EU should seek to counterbalance US influence in the Middle East instead of aligning its policies too closely with the US position.

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