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The Islamic World and Obama's Middle East Initiative

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Take a look at a map of the world. The 40th parallel north runs just north of Morioka and Akita in Japan and stretches to Turkey -- past Ankara -- via the Central Asian city of Samarkand, Uzbekistan. Meanwhile, the 25th parallel north passes Okinawa Prefecture and goes through Karachi and Riyadh and south of Cairo. The 30th parallel east is seen west of Cairo and the 75th parallel east appears east of Islamabad.

The parallelogram comprising the two east-west parallels and the two north-south parallels encompasses the Middle East, Central Asia and Southwest Asia, as well as the Mediterranean Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Silk Road. Located in the quadrilateral region, known as the Greater Middle East, are three war-stricken areas -- Afghanistan, Iraq, and Israel and the Gaza Strip. This parallelogram includes Pakistan, Iran and Israel, which have been accused by the international community of either possessing nuclear weapons or pressing ahead with nuclear development programs. According to one demographic projection, by 2050, India, which has a large number of Muslims, will have the world's largest population below fifteen years of age, making the country vulnerable to possible social problems such as unemployment and public strife. Following India, Pakistan, Egypt, Iran and Turkey -- countries listed among the top twenty countries of the world -- also have a large number of Muslims.



All the countries mentioned above are key players in the quadrilateral region. The widespread, complex problems seen in the area likely will present U.S. President Barack Obama with a thorny path. He inevitably will have to take the initiative in addressing Middle East issues, which he says are a top priority for his administration's foreign policy.

In his inaugural address, Obama ushered in "a new era of responsibility" and called on the Muslim world, including the Middle East -- an area rife with problems -- to share responsibility in seeking "a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect." He added: "Those leaders around the globe who seek to blame their society's ills on the West, know that your people will judge you on what you can build, not what you destroy." The new U.S. leader criticized "those who cling to power through... the silencing of dissent." These remarks in particular must have sounded harsh to the ears of government leaders in the Arab world, where power rarely changes hands.

When touching upon the diverse traditions of U.S. society, Obama referred to Muslims ahead of Jews. He also referred to peace in Iraq and Afghanistan. As a result, the Middle East's reaction to his inauguration speech was relatively favorable.

On the other hand, Obama made no mention of the Gaza Strip -- an area that has turned into a crucible of crisis and destruction. His omission was perhaps due to caution in the face of the grim reality of Middle East diplomacy -- which cannot be addressed merely on the basis of arguments over what is civilized. Obama may also be familiar with a noted playwright's observation that an opinion that cannot be changed is a bad one.

Obama's Middle East

Besides Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel, both of whom are close to Israel, Obama's Middle East team is expected to include Dennis Ross, a former U.S. negotiator on Israeli-Palestinian issues who has been appointed as special envoy to Iran. Several Arab-American and Iranian-American specialists also are expected to join the team. The fate of Obama's Middle East diplomacy hinges on whether he can retain impartial and multiple perspectives, instead of an Israel-centric stance. This kind of practical approach to Middle East strife is a viable way to deal with the area's problems.

Unlike the administration of former U.S. President George W. Bush, which inconsistently pursued conflict mediation between Israel and Palestine, war in Iraq, and peace-building in Afghanistan, Obama quickly announced the appointment of former Sen. George Mitchell as special Middle East envoy and former Ambassador to the United Nations Richard Holbrooke as special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Obama's actions thus far have demonstrated an enthusiasm for taking a comprehensive approach to resolving the pending interrelated issues that permeate the Greater Middle East parallelogram.

However, despite a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, military clashes occurred hours before Mitchell arrived in Jerusalem on January 27 and right-wing parties won a majority in Tuesday's general elections in Israel, underlining the difficulties associated with solving the Palestinian issue, often referred to as "the mother of all Middle East problems." As of January 19, the day after a ceasefire was declared, a total of 1,315 people, 417 of them children, had been killed on the Palestinian side. While Israel's excessive attacks should be criticized as a matter of course, it is obvious that the fragile ceasefire could collapse unless Hamas Islamists refrain from groundlessly declaring victory and unnecessarily resorting to provocation. Tuesday's general election in Israel could potentially be absolutely crucial with regard to a Gaza ceasefire.

In a related and ominous development, Saudi Arabia's Prince Turki al-Faisal recently issued the United States with a warning. The former Saudi intelligence chief wrote in a British newspaper that Washington's "special relationship" with the kingdom was at risk "unless the new U.S. administration takes forceful steps to prevent any further suffering and slaughter of Palestinians" and if it does not revise its policies vis-a-vis Israel. "Eventually, the kingdom will not be able to prevent its citizens from joining the worldwide revolt against Israel," the prince said. Turki's statements are tantamount to saying the Obama administration would be entirely to blame in the event of a 9/11-type international terrorist attack.

The Rise of Iran as Key Player

The Gaza issue has a lot to do with the Middle East's changing political dynamism. Iran's strategic influence has gained a stronger foothold among Shiites in Lebanon and the Gulf region since a Shiite-dominated government started ruling Iraq, a country that used to act as a bulwark for Arab Sunnis to stem the pressure from the east, i.e., from the Shiites in Iran.

In geopolitical terms, Iran used to be on the fringes of the Middle East, but in lieu of the Arabs, it now acts as a pivot in the Middle Eastern parallelogram, seemingly glowering upon Afghanistan and Palestinian issues in the eastern and western rims, respectively, of the quadrilateral region.

Despite economic woes at home, Iran -- which on Tuesday marked the 30th anniversary of the victory of the Islamic Revolution -- has increased its sway on non-state entities, such as Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Hizbollah in Lebanon, groups that combine Islamic fundamentalism and nationalism. Thus, Iran has risen from a Gulf power pursuing nuclear development to a Middle Eastern power that secures beachheads on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean. Consequently, Iran has emerged as a potential threat to the two Sunni-dominated Middle Eastern powers of Egypt and Saudi Arabia -- not to speak of Israel.

Against this backdrop, Obama has no choice but to hold dialogue and negotiations with Tehran -- which lies at the center of the parallelogram -- as a way of addressing not only such issues as nuclear proliferation, but also a variety of other Middle East topics.

In his earlier foreign policy speeches, Obama called on the United States' allies to contribute further to peace in the Middle East. For its part, Japan will be able to comply with this request by looking to its own recent proposals, "The Arc of Freedom and Prosperity," which was advanced in 2007 as a new Eurasian diplomatic strategy, and the "Corridor for Peace and Prosperity" initiative for the West Bank. While upholding these proposals as a diplomatic principle of the country, Japan should consider what it can do to help reconstruct Afghanistan within the current legal framework.

In this connection, I particularly regret that one of the two proposals -- the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity -- has been frozen by the Japanese government in response to Chinese and Russian reactions, even though the strategy had the potential to bring peace to the parallelogram's unstable arch.

In light of tragedy in the Gaza Strip, rampant piracy off Somalia, Iran's nuclear development program and the rehabilitation of Afghanistan, among other issues, Prime Minister Aso Taro should revive the new diplomatic strategy -- the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity -- which he advocated as then foreign minister so that it could produce synergistic effects with Obama's wide-ranging approach to the Middle East.

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