

Brookings – Politico Web Chat: The Gaza Strip
Live Web Chat with Brookings Senior Fellow Tamara Cofman Wittes and Politico Senior Editor Fred Barbash
January 28, 2009

Fred Barbash-Moderator:

Hi everyone, and welcome to today's Brookings – Politico web chat. I'm Fred Barbash, senior editor at Politico, and I will be your moderator today. We have Tamara Cofman Wittes with us this afternoon. She is an expert on Middle East Affairs, and is ready to answer your questions. Let's get started.

12:27 [Comment From Albert (Boston)]

Thank you for taking my question. President Obama has put together a very impressive team with an obvious focus on diplomacy. However, with all the star power and egos (Clinton, Mitchell, Holbrooke, Biden, Ross, Rice, etc.), I worry about too many cooks in the kitchen and the Administration speaking with one voice, especially in the Muslim World

12:30 Tamara Cofman Wittes:

Thanks, Fred, for inviting me and to Albert and all of you for your questions.

There are a lot of high-powered people joining the Obama foreign policy team – and so far, they seem to be coordinating very carefully with one another to send a single, clear message of engagement and energy behind US diplomacy, especially in the more troubled parts of the world. The Mitchell appointment is a good example – he's reporting to Secretary Clinton, but it's very clear he speaks with the authority of the president behind him. If they keep on like they've done these first few weeks, I think they will work very effectively together indeed.

12:30 [Comment From Carmen (Austin)]

I thought it was a brilliant strategic move for President Obama to conduct his first interview with Al-Arabiya. This definitely sets the tone that we want to engage Muslims and Arabs to work with them to solve the region's problems. How is his interview playing in the Muslim world?

12:32 Tamara Cofman Wittes:

So far, the reaction is positive but there is definitely some skepticism – perhaps without the Gaza crisis the honeymoon might have been warmer. I think both Arab governments and the Arab public are encouraged by the language and tone from the new administration, but they want to see actions, too. That's why sending Mitchell to the region early was important.

12:32 [Comment From David]

What do you see as the early key differences between Obama's approach to Gaza and the broader Middle East, and Bush's?

12:34 [Reader Poll] Was Obama's interview with Al-Arabiya a success?

Yes (40%);

No (10%);

Yet to be determined (50%)

12:35 Tamara Cofman Wittes:

The approach is obviously more energetic, but the Obama Administration is still in crisis-management mode in dealing with Gaza, they are not yet able to launch a broader diplomatic initiative on Arab-Israeli peace. Obama's language on Hamas so far is basically identical to the Bush policy (and the policy of the UN, EU, and Russia, the other "Quartet" members). So we'll have to give them time to get past the crisis and then see how their peace process diplomacy develops.

Another key test will be after the Israeli elections – how will Obama deal with a potential right-wing government in Israel that is skeptical about peace talks with the Palestinians?

12:35 [Comment From Benjamin]

Do you see any parallels between the Northern Ireland conflict in the 90s and the Arab-Israeli conflict of today?

12:38 Tamara Cofman Wittes:

They both involve long-standing communal conflicts that raged over many years, and that engaged the interests and sympathy of major Western powers. Both involved nationalist terrorist groups that had to make a decision to transform into nonviolent, purely political movements (the IRA and the PLO). Now some are wondering whether Hamas can make the same transformation.

The parallels are not perfect – in Northern Ireland, both sides are of the same ethnicity, and a growing economy in Ireland gave incentives for peace that don't exist in the Middle East.

12:38 [Comment From Jane (Washington)]

Bin Laden and his deputy were recently mocking Obama, calling him a "house negro" or something like that. Should we read anything into that? How are the bad guys reacting to the shift from Bush to Obama.

12:40 Tamara Cofman Wittes:

Obama was asked about this in the Al-Arabiya interview – he said Al Qaeda seems nervous about his taking office, and I think he's right. The messages from Al Qaeda since the election have tried to make the case that Obama's presidency will NOT bring change in US policy, that he's just Bush in different guise. Obama's early signals to the region are a clear effort to counteract that claim. Unfortunately, the Gaza crisis, coming as it did when Obama was powerless in the transition, was tailor-made for Bin Laden's purposes. Obama is working hard to take back the initiative, and I think he's succeeding.

12:41 [Comment From Laurie]

What do you think of the selection of George Mitchell as special Middle East envoy? What do you know about his plans, and how would you advise him to start?

12:41 Reader Poll: What do you think about the selection of George Mitchell?

Good choice (50%);
Not a good choice (10%);
Don't know yet (40%)

12:43 Tamara Cofman Wittes:

I think George Mitchell is an inspired choice. He may be in his seventies, but he is indefatigable – as his hard-hitting baseball investigation showed! He is patient, but tenacious, as he showed in the Northern Ireland talks – he describes his work as "700 days of failure and one day of success." He has tremendous personal authority, and his new bosses were carefully to make clear that he brings their authority with him as well. I think he can do great work, IF the political leadership on the ground can do what they need to do – a tall order.

12:44 [Comment From Mark]

What is the current state of foreign media access in Gaza? Have humanitarian efforts fully resumed?

12:46 Tamara Cofman Wittes:

On Sunday, the Israeli Supreme Court ordered the IDF to allow foreign journalists back into Gaza – there were also a few stringers, and one bureau (al Jazeera) who were in Gaza and did not leave during the conflict, so that's how all the images and reporting got out during the past month. However, after yesterday's Palestinian bombing and Israeli retaliation, the crossings were closed, and I don't know precisely their current status.

Humanitarian aid is flowing into the Strip, mostly via UNRWA – although Hamas has also started handing out cash to Gaza civilians, some of it courtesy of Iran – Lebanon 2006 redux.

12:46 [Comment From Ann - DC]

What role do the politics of Israel's upcoming elections play in the conflict?

12:49 Tamara Cofman Wittes:

If current trends continue, Israel's Likud Party, headed by former Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, will win the February 10th polls. He will face a choice of forming a right-wing government (with ultra-Orthodox parties and a right-wing immigrants' party) or a more centrist government that could include his main rivals, Tzipi Livni's Kadima (the current ruling party) and Ehud Barak's Labor. A centrist government might give him more flexibility on key issues, like economic policy, that he cares about – but it will also complicate decision-making regarding the Palestinians.

12:49 [Comment From achosen1.wordpress.com]

How do you think the future American-Israeli-Syrian peace process will affect the Lebanese independence and the position of Hizballah?

12:52 Tamara Cofman Wittes:

Right now, it's not clear to me that the Israeli-Syrian talks will resume quickly, or that they will make much progress without American sponsorship. One of the key choices Obama will face is whether to push Israeli-Syrian talks, when the Palestinian track is in such dire need of attention. An Israeli-Syrian agreement could bring strategic benefits to Israel, the United States, and other Arab states who favor the regional status-quo in their joint quest to contain Iran.

But you are right to raise the question of Lebanon – Syria will likely ask the United States, as the price for peace, to back off its support for Lebanese independence vis-a-vis Syria. Israel might not mind a stronger Syrian hand in Lebanon, but it could easily set

back Lebanese democracy and efforts to disarm Hizballah and normalize Lebanese politics.

12:54 [Comment From Ron in IL]

In your answer about the similarities between Northern Ireland and the Arab-Israeli conflict you said that Ireland's economic boom helped create incentive for peace. Is the U.S. doing anything to help create a similar boom in the Middle East?

12:56 Tamara Cofman Wittes:

Very interesting question, Ron. The high oil prices in recent years led to a boom in investment in the Middle East – but not all of it was directed in ways that will build long-term prosperity, and the loss of that oil income leaves some states in precarious circumstances.

The United States has tried in a few ways over the past years to encourage economic growth in the Middle East, most recently, under Bush, through free-trade agreements with Arab countries. But many states need significant political and economic reforms if they are going to address their deep-seated economic and social problems, like massive youth unemployment. That's where American support for liberal reform in the Middle East can be important and helpful, and where Bush was not entirely wrong to support an agenda for greater freedom in the Middle East.

12:56 [Comment From Mark]

There was intense speculation earlier that Israel would attack Iranian nuclear facilities before Obama took office. Instead, for a variety of reasons, the Israelis moved against Hamas in Gaza. Have the Israelis shelved plans re Iran, in your opinion, given the new occupant of the WH and his activism on the diplomatic front?

12:59 Tamara Cofman Wittes:

I never really believed that speculation, because I did not think (and do not think) Israel has the capacity to carry out an effective strike against Iranian nuclear facilities without assistance from the United States – and if the United States were to conclude that a military strike was necessary, it could probably be more effective doing it by itself. There have been press reports that Israel requested bunker-busting bombs from the US last year that could be used in a strike on Iran, and President Bush refused the request.

I think there is consensus between Washington and Jerusalem that a military strike on Iran would really be the worst option in this situation, and that diplomacy still has a chance. I hope it can be effective, but of course this depends on the Iranians as well.

1:00 [Comment From Ron in IL]

If Obama shifts focus from Iraq to Afghanistan and Pakistan, how do you think it will affect his image in the Middle East?

1:02 Tamara Cofman Wittes:

Obama may shift military focus from Iraq to Afghanistan, but stabilizing Iraq will require a great deal of American attention still.

But I think you're asking whether shifting military focus to a non-Arab country will reduce Middle Eastern resentment of the United States. I'm not too sure it would make a difference. I think the real key to reducing that resentment will be a) being seen to work

hard on regional peacemaking; and b) reframing American military action abroad from the "war on terror" paradigm Bush used, with associated perceptions in the region of a "war on Islam," to a paradigm that is tightly focused on partnership with the moderate majority of the Muslim world, against Al Qaeda and other destructive, violent extremists. That's clearly what Obama was aiming at in his Al-Arabiya interview.

1:03 [Comment From Diane]

What should be some key components of Obama's middle east policy moving forward?

1:06 Tamara Cofman Wittes:

I think there are three major regional challenges for the United States – containing Iran, stabilizing Iraq, and working on Arab-Israeli peace – but the question is how to put them into a coherent package that speaks to the people of the region. Just working them in isolation won't work, because the governments we need to work with to do these things are under pressure from their resentful and beleaguered populations – and those populations resent their governments for domestic failures as well as for their alliances with the US. This resentment gives strength to regional radical actors like Iran, Hizballah, and Hamas.

To address this problem, the United States needs to frame its involvement in the Middle East as not just dealing with trouble spots, but addressing the desires of the regional citizens: building a future of peace, prosperity and progress. That means not just Palestinian-Israeli peace; it also means real Arab reform, in politics and economics.

1:07 [Comment From Byron in Chevy Chase]

The wars between Jews and Arabs have been going on, literally, since Biblical times. Why does President Obama think that his peace-making efforts will be successful against such long-standing and deeply-rooted hatreds?

1:08 Tamara Cofman Wittes:

I think that, given the religious overlay to this conflict, and the fact that the Arab-Israeli political dispute has now gone on for over a century, it is easy to despair. But I don't believe that political conflicts are at heart inevitable and insoluble – people said the same thing about the Balkan wars of the 1990s, and about Northern Ireland as well, that "ancient tribal hatreds" meant these conflicts would go on forever. I think history has proven them wrong, and I think we have to keep working for a different, a brighter, future for Israeli and Palestinian children.

1:11 Fred Barbash-Moderator:

Tamara: What have been the consequences of the recent Gaza violence for the region itself? Has the Gaza crisis caused new rifts in the Mid East that have to be dealt with?

1:15 Tamara Cofman Wittes:

The Gaza crisis exacerbated a regional divide that had been emerging slowly over the previous few years – on one side there are "status quo" states that like the regional balance of power, that approve a strong US role in the region, and that support Arab-Israeli rapprochement. These are Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, etc. On the other side are "revisionist" actors like Iran, Syria, Hizballah, and Hamas – that are not happy with the regional balance of power, that don't want a strong US role in the Middle East, and that oppose Arab-Israeli rapprochement.

You saw this divide deepen in the midst of the Gaza crisis, when Hamas and Hizballah leaders were lambasting Egyptian President Mubarak for "helping the Israelis" by keeping the border to Gaza closed. In the Persian Gulf, there were two dueling Arab summits to deal with the Gaza crisis – one in which Hamas represented the Palestinians, and Iran was invited, and one in which the PLO represented the Palestinians. This divide will have immense consequences for America's ability to achieve its regional goals – on the one hand, there's a big coalition of states for Washington to work with. On the other hand, these states are beleaguered by the cutting criticisms (and violent, "spoiler" actions) of the "revisionist" side.

1:16 [Comment From Ron in IL]

I used to work for Rotary International whose headquarters is in Evanston and we had a situation where Islamic countries in Africa were boycotting our work to combat polio. So, we had representatives from Indonesia smooth things over with those countries. How do you think the U.S., and Obama, will use our Islamic allies to help create more open dialogue with the Middle East?

1:18 Tamara Cofman Wittes:

Thanks, Ron, for reminding us how broad and diverse the Islamic world really is! There are certainly voices in Indonesia, the Philippines, and also in the Arab "core" that are ready, even eager, to help strengthen the voices opposing the radical Islamist arguments of Al-Qaeda, etc. These potential allies have been alienated and intimidated – many of them, in the past few years, because the broad public anti-American sentiment has been so strong. We can hope that a change in Washington will loosen that constraint a bit and allow those voices to rise. Then the Obama Administration has to take public diplomacy seriously, and devote people and resources to reaching out to those voices and raising their volume and expanding their reach.

1:19 [Comment From Mark]

US foreign aid to Egypt and military assistance to Israel – do they give the US any leverage or are they simply a political/military obligation? Do you see Obama/Mitchell changing these long-standing programs in any way?

1:19 Fred Barbash:

We have time for just a few more questions, everyone...

1:22 Tamara Cofman Wittes:

As you may have noticed, there's been a lot of debate on the Hill these past few years about whether America's aid package to Egypt still does the US any good, or whether it's just an obligation dating back to the 1979 Camp David accords. In fact, our military-to-military relationship with Egypt is very strong and brings specific benefits, especially with troops deployed in the region. Egypt gives priority passage to US naval ships in the Suez Canal, and landing/refueling rights to US aircraft on their way to missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Would Egypt still help the US in the region without the \$2 billion we give them every year? Yes, probably, because our interests and theirs dovetail on most issues. But there is no question the money smoothes the way.

1:22 [Comment From wells]

I read that Obama and Secretary of State Clinton plan to "renew American leadership and diplomacy, and emphasize smart power as a break with the Bush Administration." What does that mean? And how will Obama go about doing that?

1:27 Tamara Cofman Wittes:

I think "smart power" is a catchphrase that implies a sort of holistic characterization of what came before as "not smart." But what does it mean in practice for Secretary Clinton and President Obama? I think it means: renewed emphasis on using diplomatic tools to send messages, to build alliances, and to pressure adversaries. It means pumping up the State Department's budget and the size of the Foreign Service so that it can use these tools more effectively. And it means helping US diplomats complete a transition that has been long in coming, and that is a consequence of globalization and how it has changed US foreign policy: shifting from reporting on local developments and sending messages via demarches and "cables" to a corps of civilians working actively using aid, using local partnerships, using relationships with local civil society, to achieve shared goals. That's a tall order and it will take a long time. But our shared challenges can't be addressed completely through old means: terrorism, reconstructing states that suffered from civil conflict, stopping climate change, environmental stewardship, improving human rights – all these things go beyond what high politics can do. Our diplomats need the resources and training to take these challenges on.

1:27 [Comment From Ron in IL]

Do you think that Obama will literally re-name "The War on Terror"? Or kind of just let that phrase fade away (like its creators)?

1:29 Tamara Cofman Wittes:

I don't think he'll announce a new label. I think he has already explicitly rejected the old label, and I think he might even avoid any kind of label – all such shorthand names have their disadvantages. President Obama is a leader who does not shy away from complexity or nuance, and I think he is going to ask the rest of us to recognize, and deal with, the complexity of the challenges that face us in the Middle East and around the world.

Thank you all so much for your great questions. I enjoyed spending the hour with you!

1:29 Fred Barbash:

I think that's a great place to wrap it up for today. Thank you everyone for your great questions. And thanks to Tamara for her thoughtful answers. Please tune in next week at the same time and place for another chat!