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Abstract

Ten years ago, President Barack Obama's unprecedented address to the Muslim world from Cairo was hailed as a landmark in US–Middle Eastern relations and described by contemporary observers as a historical break in US foreign policy in the region. Yet it soon became clear that the president's vision for a "new beginning based on mutual interest and mutual respect" would face many practical constraints. Analysing the thematic and rhetorical development of Obama's speeches during the formative period between summer 2008 and 2009, as well as the public and academic perception of and reaction to these moments, the paper examines the underlying interests and motivations for the president's foreign policy approach in the Middle East. It argues that despite the low priority given to foreign policy issues during the economic crisis occurring at the time, the key pillars of Obama's ambitious vision for the Middle East were rooted in pronounced US interests as well as the president's personal convictions, rather than opportunistic calculations. It thus counters retrospective post-2011 criticism which argues that Obama's words were never meant to be put into practice. The study contributes to the establishment of a solid empirical and conceptual base for further research on the United States' foreign policy in the Middle East under the Obama administration.

Keywords: US foreign policy, Barack Obama, Middle East, New Beginning, Cairo, rhetoric

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Article Outline

1 Introduction

This year marks the 10-year anniversary of President Barack Obama's landmark trip to Cairo. On 4 June 2009, he delivered a key campaign promise with regard to his administration's foreign policy: an address to the Muslim world from a major Arab capital. The unprecedented symbolic move has often been interpreted as a logical continuation of his (domestic) campaign slogan of "change" into sphere of foreign policy, and described as a historical break in US–Middle Eastern relations.[1] However, when the president finished his hour-long speech, in

1 I would like to thank the IMES team at the GIGA – especially Henner Fürtig, André Bank, Hakkı Taş, Thomas Richter, Christiane Fröhlich, and Zoltan Pall – for their extensive feedback and comments on earlier drafts. An earlier version of this paper was presented at Politicologenetmaal, Leiden, on 7 June 2018, and at the Pan-European Conference on International Relations, Prague, on 13 September 2018.

which he pledged his personal and his administration's commitment to a "new beginning" in the relationship between the United States and Muslims around the world based on "mutual interests and mutual respect," an essential question remained in the room: Would Obama's words be followed by actions?

When the high hopes were inevitably followed by some disappointments, however, few took the time to ask *why* the president had committed himself to the idea of a "new beginning" between the United States and the Middle East in the first place. After all, the economic crisis necessitated attention at home, and Obama's "pivot to Asia" envisioned a refocusing of international engagement, two developments that did not favour more comprehensive engagement in the Middle East. These seemingly contradictory circumstances raised a number of questions. Was it the president's genuine conviction that drove him to stress the necessity of addressing the various issues that had troubled the Middle East for decades, from the Iraq war to the Palestinian question? Or was his reorientation of priorities in Washington's foreign policy in the region, and therefore his approach to the various issues, based on a pragmatic calculation of US interests? Or, alternatively, was Obama vowing to address certain issues mainly for political expedience?

This study argues that Obama's commitment to translating his political vision into political action was based on personal conviction and his perception of US interests in the Middle East; it thereby counters retrospective criticism which argues that the president opportunistically withdrew from his pledge to address the many Middle Eastern issues once he was confronted with the realities on the ground, an argument that received heightened attention once the Arab Uprisings and the Syrian civil war considerably altered the geopolitical situation in the region towards the end of his first term.[2] The paper therefore re-evaluates the main criticism levelled against Obama's foreign policy in the Middle East – namely, that he missed the opportunity to translate his ambitious programme into action and abandoned some aspects of it entirely.[3] Furthermore, it also calls into question the evaluation of the ambitious vision based on its flawed execution, which was dependent as much on the administration's resolve as on factors beyond its control.

Indeed, the decade since Obama's landmark speech has seen much research focused on the execution of his ambitious vision for the Middle East. In this context, numerous valuable

2 Daniel S. Morey, Clayton L. Thyne, Sarah L. Hayden, and Michael B. Senters, "Leader, Follower, or Spectator? The Role of President Obama in the Arab Spring Uprisings," *Social Science Quarterly* 93, no. 5 (2012): 1185-1201.
Fawaz A. Gerges, "The Obama Approach to the Middle East: The End of America's Moment?" *International Affairs* 89, no. 2 (2013): 299-323.
Bret Stephen, "What Obama Gets Wrong: No Retreat, No Surrender," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 5 (2015): 13-16.
March Lynch, "Obama and the Middle East: Rightsizing the U.S. Role," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 5 (2015): 21.

3 Shadi Hamid, "Obama's Good Intentions in the Middle East Meant Nothing," *Foreign Policy*, 19 January 2017.
Ronald Gardner, "Action Not Words: Obama's Opportunity to Transform U.S.-Muslim Relations," Social Sciences, 18 February 2018.

contributions have been made to critically contextualising, assessing, and evaluating Obama's particular foreign policy approach towards the region.

Insightful attempts have been made to situate the forty-fourth president in the grand narrative of US foreign policy traditions. The sharp contrast which Obama's foreign policy in the Middle East offered to the expansionist legacy of previous president George W. Bush led some to investigate the reasoning behind a more cautious approach.[4] Others have readily incorporated Obama's presidency in the realist US foreign policy paradigm, which has been dominant in US foreign policy since World War II, and dismissed President Bush's first term as an idealist, and less prudent, exception to the rule.[5]

Most analysts, however, have focused on one or several key issues of Obama's foreign policy in the Middle East, be it the planned US troop withdrawal from Iraq; terrorism; Iran's nuclear programme; the Israeli–Palestinian conflict; or later, the Libyan intervention, the infamous "Syrian red line," and the emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS). In these analyses, a lion's share of the criticism has targeted the administration's follow-up in addressing the Israeli–Palestinian conflict after Obama's initial promise of wholehearted engagement with the issue. Analysts have argued that there was neither real change nor real progress in comparison to the previous administrations.[6] Obama's take on the Iraq war and his support for the timely withdrawal of US troops, the most salient foreign policy issue during the 2008 elections, received only sporadic attention after the withdrawal was completed at the end of 2011. The academic discourse on violent extremism, on the other hand, gradually shifted away from Obama's initial framing of the issue, which was heavily focused on the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan, hitherto seen as the main source of terrorism. Still, the gradual (yet less spectacular) withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan between 2013 and 2014 also called for some evaluations and prognosis.[7] The emergence of ISIS, as well as the proliferation of lone-wolf attacks in Europe and the United States, however, led to a discursive shift on the topic of terrorism, both in the public and academic discourse. What has drawn the most attention, though, is the Obama administration's (successful) diplomatic approach towards Iran's nuclear programme. While critical contemplations on Obama's resort to a realist containment-like policy after the failed initial outreach to Teheran dominated the pre-2015 literature,[8] those which were

4 Michael Clarke, and Anthony Ricketts. "Shielding the Republic: Barack Obama and the Jeffersonian Tradition of American Foreign Policy," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 28, no. 3 (2017): 494-517.

5 Steven Simon, and Jonathan Stevenson. "The End of Pax Americana. Why Washington's Middle East Pullback Makes Sense," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 6. (2015): 2-10. John G. Ikenberry, Anne-Marie Slaughter, Thomas J. Knock, and Tony Smith, *The Crisis of American Foreign Policy: Wilsonianism in the Twenty-first Century.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

6 Asaf Siniver, "Change Nobody Believes In: Obama and the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 22, no. 4 (2011).

7 Juergen Kleiner, "How Many Lives Do the Taliban Have?" *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 25, no. 4 (2014).

8 Bernd Kaussler, and Anthony B. Newkirk, "Diplomacy in Bad Faith: American–Iranian Relations Today," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 23, no. 2 (2012).

written in the aftermath of the landmark agreement focused on the merits of Obama's two-track diplomacy, even mandating historical inquiries into the values of US diplomacy.[9] Steven Hurst, for example, reflected on the importance of domestic constituencies' interests in both Iran and the United States during the negotiations for a nuclear agreement.[10]

Convinced of the value of Hurst's core argument, which was published in the wake of the U.S. Congress's close vote to pass the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), this paper expands Hurst's thematic reach and takes on the domestic environment behind Obama's foreign policy in the Middle East as a whole, albeit with a focus on the conditions at the beginning of his presidency. As most inquiries into the topic have been inspired by the short- and mid-term results of Obama's Middle East policy (or the lack thereof), there is an argumentative gap in the assessment of the president's legacy in the region. The retrospective view on the initial domestic conditions underlying Obama's approach to the Middle East may have been obstructed by the tumultuous dynamics in the region during Obama's two terms in office; from a historical perspective, however, an assessment of these conditions is certainly a worthwhile endeavour as it provides an analytical foundation for Obama's controversial "new beginning."

Accurately assessing the initial conditions behind Obama's controversial Middle East policy is therefore imperative to analysing its subsequent course. This primary-source-based account is thus less inclined to establish a theoretical framework to analyse Obama's foreign policy in general, but rather aims to provide an empirical background to the debates on the topic. It does so by looking at the interplay between idealistic, pragmatic, and opportunistic motivations behind the president's ambitious vision during the formative period of his foreign policy towards the Middle East. During this time – roughly mid-2008 to mid-2009 – the basic principles of his approach to the region were defined and presented to the American and international public, and eventually led to the establishment of the conditions for the execution of the various policy outlines. Thus, the two-part quantitative and qualitative analysis of Obama's public speeches, as well as of the public sources representing the public and academic discourse related to the respective speeches, looks at the dynamics between the message and its perception in order to identify indicators of the underlying motivations. The message is analysed based on Obama's speeches, and the perceptions of it are identified via news outlets, opinion polls, and think tank publications. This historical account is thus based on an extensive selection of the currently available and publicly accessible primary sources.[11]

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9 Jeffrey R. Fields, "Engaging Adversaries: Myths and Realities in American Foreign Policy," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 26, no. 2 (2015).

10 Steven Hurst, "The Iranian Nuclear Negotiations as a Two-Level Game: The Importance of Domestic Politics," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 27, no. 3 (2016).

11 The public perception is based on a selection of US-based print media and polling station reports, most notably *The New York Times, The Washington Post (Eastern Edition),* Gallup Poll, PEW Research Center, YouGov, and Survey USA. The expert discourse is based on publications by the most influential US think tanks that regularly publish on the issues in question, most notably *Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, International Security, The Washington Quarterly, Wilson Quarterly, Policy Review*, as well as publications from the Center for American Progress and the American Enterprise Institute.

2 Quantitative Analysis: The Formative Period of Obama's Middle East Policy

Between summer 2008, when the primaries merged into the general presidential election, and the Cairo address in June 2009, Obama held over 20 high-profile public speeches on varying occasions and for various purposes. Taking a quantitative look at the content of these speeches, some general patterns and developments are worth noting.

Naturally, Obama's tone adapted to the respective settings of the speeches, developing from the more aggressive speeches during the election period to more subdued patterns when trying to unite the country behind him after the inauguration or to reconcile US and Middle Eastern interests in Cairo. However, while the tone of the speeches followed this gradual development, other aspects showed notable consistencies. This was the case with the topics Obama addressed during this period, as well as the rhetorical themes he used to convey his message; thus, the juxtaposition of the different rhetorical moments analysed here describes a rather continuous discourse over a one-year time period.

Although Obama was mostly concerned with domestic issues (i.e. the financial crisis and healthcare reform), most of his speeches also featured his approach to US foreign policy in the Middle East. Based on both the frequency with which they appear in the different speeches and the overall amount of time Obama spent discussing them, the four most salient Middle East issues (in descending order) were the scheduled withdrawal from Iraq, the continuous threat of violent extremism to the United States, Washington's position on Iran's nuclear programme, and the ongoing Israeli–Palestinian conflict. However, although all of these issues received notable (though varying) attention in Obama's speeches, they were not perceived as equally important in the United States. While the continuous presence of US troops in Iraq had received considerable political and public attention, none of the other issues was equally newsworthy. The perceived danger of terrorist attacks, although collectively remembered on an annual basis around Ground Zero, had lost some of its prominence since 9/11. The Iranian nuclear programme was a continuous concern of the State Department but only occasionally made it into the headlines. The Middle East peace process, meanwhile, had become more of a token issue in the domestic politics of the United States. Additionally, the economic crisis sidelined all foreign policy issues from autumn 2008 onwards. While Obama was certainly aware of this pattern, he nevertheless addressed all four topics with a degree of consistency that allows their classification as the cornerstones of his foreign policy approach towards the Middle East during the formative period.

Perhaps even more consistent, however, was Obama's use of rhetorical themes to underline his messages, two of which – responsibility and inclusiveness – were especially prominent during the period from summer 2008 to summer 2009 (and beyond).

Obama's idea of responsibility permeated his speeches during this period, though with some occasion-specific variations. During the campaign, responsibility was to be restored to the US government, hence the need for "change" and the departure from the policies of the Bush administration. During the transition period, Obama was set to unify the country behind

him by stressing the responsibilities it had to take on as a nation. In Cairo, addressing the various issues in the Middle East based on "mutual interests and mutual respect" was framed as a responsibility not only of the United States and the regional parties involved; Obama's "new beginning" was to be the responsibility of the global community. Meanwhile, he repeatedly framed the different Middle East foreign policy issues using variations of the responsibility theme. In his view, it was not only a moral and fiscal responsibility to withdraw US troops from Iraq, but it was also imperative to pass the responsibility for Iraq's future to the Iraqi people. Combating global terrorism, on the other hand, was framed as a global responsibility held by all nations. Concerning Iran's nuclear programme, the Iranian government was offered a path to become a responsible member of the international community and urged to responsibly represent the interests of the Iranian people. Meanwhile, Israelis, Palestinians, and Arabs were all responsible for contributing to a comprehensive resolution of the conflict.

The concepts of unity and inclusiveness, which constituted Obama's second major rhetorical theme, can at times be seen as complementary to or a logical extension of the responsibility theme, given their close connection to it. Early on, Obama had advocated the need to overcome Washington's political culture of partisanship, which he saw as running counter to America's interests; the theme became especially prominent after he had won the election and tried to prepare the nation to face the challenges ahead.[12] The concepts of unity and inclusiveness were also transferred to the issues at hand in Obama's Middle East policy. Particularly during his Cairo speech, Obama was eager to frame his approach not as (unilateral) US foreign policy but as challenges to be addressed in regional and global partnerships.

Having defined the general developments of Obama's speeches during the one-year period in terms of thematic content and rhetorical themes, it is now necessary to focus on some defining moments of this development in preparation for a further in-depth analysis aimed at unearthing the underlying motivations behind the president's approach to the Middle East. Three subsequent stages of Obama's road to Cairo can be discerned: During the 2008 electoral campaign, Obama presented his ideas and position on US foreign policy in the Middle East to a broad American public for the first time. With his inauguration as the forty-fourth president of the United States in January 2009, Obama's vision had to be translated into the foreign policy programme of the world's most powerful county. Finally, during the address from Cairo University in June 2009, the president presented his vision directly to the Muslim world and sought its partnership in addressing the upcoming challenges.

During each of these stages, which are understood as part of a larger development rather than historical snapshots, the relationship between Barack Obama as a public official, the issues he addressed, and his speeches as the main means of communication on the one hand, and the domestic (and international) audiences on the other was redefined. By analysing this dynamic relationship – according to rather constant thematic and rhetorical parameters – the

12 Barack Obama, "Presidential Inaugural Address," *American Rhetoric,* 20 January 2009.

underlying patterns of the president's foreign policy approach can be made visible. The following qualitative analysis of the three main stages outlined above thus focuses on selected sources that represent both sides of the relationship. Obama's speeches are used as the main frame of reference on the one hand, while related US media publications, opinion poll reports, and think-thank publications on the respective topics provide insights into public and academic reception on the other.

3 Qualitative Analysis: Milestones on Obama's Road to Cairo

3.1 The Electoral Campaign – Change We Can Believe In

The first moment where the relationship between the American public and Obama's message regarding his approach to the Middle East was redefined was in summer 2008, when the primaries merged into the general election and the prospect of the relatively young and charismatic senator from Illinois becoming the first African-American president moved within reach. While "change" became Obama's most memorable slogan, the discursive battle of the campaign was fought around the concept of experience. Both of his opponents, Senator Hillary Clinton during the primaries and Senator John McCain during the general elections, were seen as more experienced candidates. Thus, it is important to determine why Obama presented himself as the candidate of "change." Was it his personal conviction that the incumbent administration had gone off track and America needed to adjust its course? Did his platform represent specific interests with regard to the foreign policy issues analysed here? Or did the constellation of the campaign leave him with no choice but the opportunistic embrace of the best alternative to the politically more experienced candidates? In retrospect, the most salient issue of autumn 2008, the financial crisis, certainly favoured a candidate of change; however, how Obama addressed foreign policy issues and how he was perceived also deserve a closer look.

The essence of Obama's message during the campaign – not only with regard to his foreign policy approach to the Middle East – is captured in the Democratic nomination victory speech of 3 June 2008 and the nomination acceptance speech of 28 August 2008, two speeches that were structurally and thematically very similar.[13]

The main thematic concern was the economic crisis, where Obama felt confident vis-à-vis his opponent John McCain. Concerning US foreign policy in the Middle East, however, the information Obama gave was sparse, and in both speeches he focused almost exclusively on the war in Iraq and the need for a break from the Bush presidency (Victory Speech 13:00; Acceptance Speech 29:05). Obama stressed that responsibility would be handed over to the Iraqi

13 Barack Obama, "Democratic Nomination Victory Speech," *American Rhetoric*, 3 June 2008.
Barack Obama, "Democratic Convention Presidential Nomination Acceptance Address," *American Rhetoric*, 28 August 2008.

government and the Iraqi people. Consequently, US military resources and troops would be shifted to Afghanistan to combat the terrorist threat there (Victory Speech 15:25; Acceptance Speech 29:40). However, this second part was only mentioned in passing, as was Iran's nuclear programme, which Obama linked to a renewal of efficient diplomacy and, therefore, to his discourse of "change" (Acceptance Speech 33:30). The Palestinian question, which would later complete Obama's Middle Eastern foreign policy quartet, did not receive any mention.

It could be argued that although Obama must have felt the need to define his position vis-à-vis his opponent McCain (a decorated war hero) with regard to the war in Iraq and other Middle Eastern issues, there was little need to further define "change." Where it mattered, the economic crisis, anything was better than the status quo; with secondary issues, which foreign policy certainly was, it appealed to those generally unhappy with the incumbent Bush administration. There was no need to present equally unpopular alternatives.

In terms of public perception, the "change" versus "experience" theme certainly caught on, as evident from both mass media coverage and polling reports on the campaign. As both candidates focused on this dichotomy by emphasising their respective strengths and playing down their presumable weaknesses, reporters and analysts were eager to elaborate on the strategies each side derived from this constellation.

"Experience" was attributed to Senator McCain, who defined his position on key issues such as the Iraq war, terrorism, and Iran's nuclear programme early on. Newspapers were eager to report when he questioned his opponent's political skills on these matters.[14] Meanwhile, the political newcomer Obama did not appear to convince the public in this regard and was seen as struggling to define himself on several issues, as well as to translate his praised rhetorical skills into credible policy outlines that would appeal to voters.[15] "Change," on the other hand, was Obama's main asset and he often used the term in his favour while discrediting his opponent by associating him with the unpopular Bush presidency.[16] McCain sought to counter this argument by distancing himself from President Bush on certain issues.[17]

The implications of this constellation for assessing the foundation of Obama's approach to the Middle East, however, are somewhat counterintuitive. Taking into consideration the war-weary American public, one might assume that Obama's clear stance against war in Iraq, which separated him from the Bush presidency, and by association from his competitor John McCain, would turn out to be a valuable asset for Obama in the campaign. However, data

14 Michael Cooper, "McCain sharpens his foreign policy attacks on Obama," *The New York Times*, 3 June 2008.

15 Jackie Calmes, "For Obama, a Challenge to Clarify his Message and Define Himself," *The New York Times*, 27 August 2008.

16 Laura Meckler, "Campaign '08: McCain, Obama Kick Off Groundbreaking Battle; Amid War in Iraq And Economic Woes, Promises of Change," *The Wall Street Journal (Eastern Edition)*, 4 June 2008.
Nick Timiraos, "Democratic Convention: Obama to Emphasize His Contrast to McCain, Bush; Acceptance Speech Will Try to Portray Out-of-Touch Rival," *The Wall Street Journal (Eastern Edition)*, 28 August 2008.
Adam Nagourney, and Jeff Zeleny, "Framing Goals, Obama Takes the Fight to McCain," *The New York Times*. 29 August 2008.

17 Michael Cooper, "McCain Distances Himself from Bush and Jabs Obama," *The New York Times*, 4 June 2008.

from media publications and related opinion polls suggest otherwise. A majority of Americans preferred McCain when it came to the country's foreign policy.[18]

With regard to the economy, the American people were certainly ready for "change," a factor that ultimately carried the Democratic candidate to victory in November 2008. The implications of his disassociation strategy in the field of foreign policy, which he used to describe the departure from an unpleasant status quo but rarely where the process of change was supposed to lead, however, would reach far into Obama's presidency. He won the election with a mandate on the economy, not on foreign policy. Even if he had had strong opinions on issues like the Iraq war and Washington's approach to diplomacy, there was no incentive to leap ahead in this regard and present concrete (unpopular) alternative policies for the departments of state and defense.[19]

When we look at how Obama's Middle East approach was perceived by experts in the field, the assessment is naturally more nuanced and it thus makes sense to look individually at the key issues identified above. The US foreign policy priorities in mid-2008 regarding the Middle East can be summarised as follows: As the US mission in Iraq, President Bush's controversial foreign policy signature venture, had become increasingly unpopular in and outside the United States, a phased withdrawal had been initiated after the so-called surge in 2007. The topic clearly dominated the foreign policy agenda, and also limited the USA's political and financial resources in other areas.[20] However, while the situation in Iraq had arguably improved, experts warned that the situation in Afghanistan, at the time closely associated with international terrorism concerns, was deteriorating and needed attention.[21] Interestingly, though, the growing discourse on the internationalisation, decentralisation, and digitalisation of terrorism had not yet detached the salient issue of terrorism from US involvement in Afghanistan.[22] Meanwhile, the negotiations regarding Iran's nuclear programme had reached a

18 The leaning towards one candidate/party in a specific state either softens or enhances this trend, reflecting voters' tendency to trust "their" candidate more. The following regional polls have been averaged by the author, "SurveyUSA Election Poll [#14236-#14250]," *SurveyUSA,* 15 August 2008.

19 The observation that Obama's running mate Joe Biden's controversial plan to divide Iraq into a Kurdish, Sunni, and Shi'a state was dropped in favour of a unspecified "responsibly ending the war in Iraq" (Acceptance Speech 33:15) is an illustrative example of these kinds of calculations, Dan Senor, "Biden Wanted to Break Up Iraq," *The Wall Street Journal (Eastern Edition),* 29 August 2008.

20 Michèle A. Flournoy, and Shawn Brimley, "The Defense Inheritance: Challenges and Choices for the Next Pentagon Team," *The Washington Quarterly* 31. no. 4. (2008): 60.

21 "Terrorism Index," *Foreign Policy,* no. 168. (2008): 78.
Seth G. Jones, "The Rise of Afghanistan's Insurgency: State Failure and Jihad," *International Security* 32, no. 4. (2008): 7-40.

22 Malcom Nance, "How (Not) to Spot a Terrorist," *Foreign Policy,* no. 166 (2008): 74-76.
Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, and Culvert Jones, "Assessing the Dangers of Illicit Networks: Why Al-Qaida May Be Less Threatening than Many Think," International Security 33, no. 2. (2008): 7-44.
Max Abrahms, "What Terrorists Really Want: Terrorist Motives and Counterterrorism Strategy," International Security 32, no. 4 (2008): 78-105. Marc Sageman, and Bruce Hoffman, "Does Osama Still Call the Shots?" *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 4 (2008): 163-167.

deadlock and the presidential candidates were expected to address the impasse. Regardless of whether they favoured a negotiated "grand bargain" or the military option, acquiescence to an Iranian bomb was untenable. The international sanctions, the hitherto go-to solution, were seen as increasingly ineffective,[23] not least because a 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) had concluded that no weapons-related activities could be identified in Iran's nuclear programme, which considerably weakened the case for sanctions.[24] The Israeli–Palestinian peace process, the last item on the list of US foreign policy concerns in the Middle East in mid-2008, had again been moved to the back burner after an attempt to jumpstart the stalled process at the 2007 Annapolis Conference. Generally, an upcoming administration change in Washington, Israel's most important backer, is seen as an opportunity for a fresh start. Among experts on the conflict, however, long-term and consistent bipartisan policies were favoured to legacy-creating breakthrough attempts.[25]

It is understandable that both presidential candidates focused first and foremost on the war in Iraq, while vowing to also pay more attention to the "other war" in Afghanistan,[26] as well as addressing the security concerns in connection with Iran's nuclear programme. In this context, Obama was able to benefit from his early opposition to the Iraq war. While McCain argued that a precipitous withdrawal would forfeit the gains made so far, Obama repeatedly stressed that McCain's (and President Bush's) definition of victory was impossible to achieve. His main argument was that a timely withdrawal of US troops would pressure the Iraqi government and regional players to take responsibility for the country's stability. According to Obama, the freed-up resources could then be transferred to Afghanistan to implement a similar "surge" there.[27] Regarding the Iranian nuclear programme, Obama also preferred a diplomatic solution over a military one. While both candidates made it clear that acquiescence to an Iranian nuclear bomb was not an option,[28] Obama was prepared to negotiate directly with Teheran while McCain was reluctant to do so.[29] Lastly, without concrete references from the candidates on how to address the Palestinian question, experts expected that the bilateral (or trilateral) efforts of the Bush era policy would likely continue under McCain while Obama

23 For the arguments emphasising the effectiveness of the sanctions, see Michael Jacobson, "Sanctions against Iran: A Promising Struggle," *The Washington Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2008): 69-88. For a more critical voice, see Dingli Shen, "Can Sanctions Stop Proliferation?" *The Washington Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2008): 89-100.

24 Dennis Ross, "Statecraft in the Middle East," *The Washington Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2008): 7-22.

25 Aaron D. Miller, "The Long Dance: Searching for Arab-Israeli Peace," *Wilson Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2008): 44. Ross, "Statecraft in the Middle East," 16-19.

26 Richard Holbrooke, "The Next President," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 5 (2008): 18-20.

27 Jones, "The Rise of Afghanistan's Insurgency," 21.

28 Holbrooke, "The Next President," 16-18. Among experts, however, there were voices that would favour the third option followed by Cold War-like deterrence over the second (military) scenario, due to the limitation of a pre-emptive (air) strike in barring Iran from developing nuclear weapons, and the underestimated military and economic consequences of such a strike, see Pecastaing 2008.

29 Holbrooke, "The Next President," 16.

would probably promote broader US engagement in the region, which would allow Washington to draw other regional players into the peace process.[30]

While this shortlist of Obama's approaches to the different issues certainly looks good on paper, some contextualisation is necessary. Firstly, in autumn 2008, Obama's core foreign policy agenda, the withdrawal from Iraq, was hardly a novelty. The late Bush administration had already negotiated the US troop withdrawal with the Iraqi government and the questions that concerned experts in mid-2008 were when and how Iraq was to be left.[31] Nevertheless, Obama's early opposition to the war left few experts in doubt that he genuinely stood behind his position. That it set his platform apart from the unpopular Bush administration, however, can be seen more as a welcome by-product than an opportunistic calculation. On the other hand, one is keen to ask how he justified escalating a similar engagement in Afghanistan. With few direct US interests at stake in renewed nation-building in the Hindu Kush beyond bringing the instigators of 9/11 to justice, the issue had to be framed as a concern for the safety of US citizens. However, this argument hardly withstands scientific scrutiny, which in turn calls into question Obama's frequently used war-of-necessity versus war-of-choice dichotomy. Regarding the Iranian nuclear programme, on the other hand, Obama's position again lined up with his general approach of favouring diplomacy over military solutions. He argued that exhausting all options before starting another war in the Middle East would best serve US interests. Using sanctions to provide incentives for future negotiation thus became Obama's trademark policy on Iran. Lastly, the question arises as to why the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, an issue that became very prominent during Obama's early presidency, was not brought up during the campaign. It certainly was not a salient issue with the American public, although some experts saw value in a genuine effort to address the conflict. During the campaign, however, expending political capital on an issue that concerned few Americans and only slightly impacted US interests was of no strategic value, possibly explaining why addressing it was postponed until after the inauguration.

3.2 The Inauguration – Yes We Can

The second defining moment of Obama's rhetorical road to Cairo can be located around his inauguration as the forty-fourth president of the United States in January 2009. The impact of his official change in status ought not to be underestimated. Henceforth, there was a high probability that Obama's ideas and opinions would be translated into the policies of the world's most powerful country; thus, a discursive shift from the competitive environment of the campaign to a more conciliatory approach appears intuitive. Indeed, it was the focus on inclusiveness and on the ability to face challenges as a united nation – true to Obama's "Yes We Can" campaign slogan – that characterised this particular period. The question was thus

30 Ibid 18.

31 "Unmasking the Surge," *Wilson Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (2008): 70-71.

which issues would make the transition from the rhetorical battles of the campaign into the actual political agenda of the new administration, and which would be dropped from or added to the catalogue. It can be proposed that themes and issues rooted in personal conviction or broad interest would make this transition more seamlessly.

The main theme of the inaugural address itself was the restoration of responsibility and trust between the American people and their government.[32] Obama did not hesitate to mention the challenges that would have to be faced during the coming years. He urged his fellow citizens not to lose faith in American values – a recurring theme of the speech – and to take on the tasks of the twenty-first century as a united people.

Although general in nature and mostly focused on social and economic issues at home, the speech referenced the USA's relationship with the Middle East on several occasions. A short acknowledgement of the nation's state of war in its fight against global terrorism at the beginning of the speech was followed by more explicit references later on. They included a general reaching out to the Muslim world and a challenge to authoritarian rulers (13:25), a tough stance against terrorism (12:15), an indirect reference to Iran's nuclear programme (12:05), and the pledge to withdraw US troops from Iraq and Afghanistan (11:55). The foreign policy themes mentioned thus mostly paralleled those of the campaign, although the tone had become more prudent.

Given the occasion and the relative compactness of the speech, it is noteworthy that it featured a direct appeal to the Muslim world. Although the president must have been well aware that it was the economic crisis that most concerned US citizens, he did not miss the opportunity to send a message the world's 1.8 billion Muslims.

While the inaugural speech certainly held high symbolic value, it cannot be looked at in isolation. In this regard, information on the public context derived from media publications and polling reports is quite useful. The inauguration historically marks the peak in a US president's popularity.[33] Additionally, Obama benefitted from the widespread perception of having inherited a particularly bad set of cards, including an economic crisis and two ongoing wars. An indulgent home constituency,[34] the goodwill of many Republican voters,[35] and a liberal budget with which to address the economy almost guaranteed a smooth start for the president's bipartisan approach.[36]

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32 Barack Obama, "Presidential Inaugural Address," *American Rhetoric,* 20 January 2009.

33 "Talking Transition: 63% Approve of Obama's Performance," *Marist Poll,* 17 December 2008.
Lydia Saad, "Obama Starts With 68% Job Approval; One of the Better Initial Ratings of Post World War II Presidents," *Gallup Poll News Service,* 24 January 2009.
Jeffrey, Jones, "What History Foretells for Obama's First Job Approval Rating; Gallup to track Obama's job approval rating daily," *Gallup Poll News Service,* 22 January 2009.

34 Adam Nagourney, "How Long Will the Obama Honeymoon Last?" *The New York Times,* 20 January 2009.

35 Kirk Johnson, "McCain Country Warms to its New President," *The New York Times,* 20 January 2009.

36 David Brooks, "The Politics Of Cohesion," *The New York Times,* 20 January 2009.

With regard to translating the campaign's foreign policy vision into action, however, the domestic conditions were less favourable. Both the quantity and the quality of the public opinion sources on foreign policy issues indicated the low priority it was given. While the great majority of publications focused on the economy, the few that engaged with foreign policy stressed that a great majority of Americans (approximately two-thirds) wanted the president to focus on the economy, and how few (around 5 per cent) thought foreign policy – usually the Iraq war or terrorism – should be a priority.[37] Still, observers expected Obama to eventually address the troop withdrawal from Iraq, one of his main campaign promises.[38] At the time, though, concrete official information beyond the general vision presented during the campaign was scarce.[39]

The significance of the domestic environment at the time of the inauguration – which can be characterised as generally indulgent but strictly prioritised with regard to specific issues – for Obama's approach towards the Middle East was somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, he was not urged to concretise his vision, meaning that he attracted little criticism and observers gave him the benefit of the doubt. On the other, there was little public space to lay out foreign policy proposals as priorities clearly lay elsewhere, and the president – as was the case during the campaign – was expected to address domestic issues. The fact that Obama still made some remarks on foreign policy issues may hint at a certain degree of personal conviction, an argument that should be taken with a grain of salt as he did not seem eager to present any concrete policies until well into his first term.

If during the campaign experts were assessing each candidate based on his approach to different policy issues in the context of contemporary research, after the inauguration they contemplated how these approaches might be put into practice. Obama, a political newcomer who had provided little concrete information on his foreign policy programme beyond the

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Gabriel Schoenfeld, "Will Obama Bring Home the Neocons?" *The Wall Street Journal (Eastern Edition)*, 20 January 2009.

37 For specific samples from Louisville, San Diego, Los Angeles, Portland, and San Francisco, see "SurveyUSA News Poll #15057," *SurveyUSA*, January 15, 2008; and "SurveyUSA News Poll [#15080, #15081, #15083, and #15084]," *SurveyUSA*, 20 January 2008. Polls from other polling stations show similar results.
Gallup also conducted a poll on the new president in the Middle East. There, the popular approval of "U.S. leadership in the region" was at a historic low of 15 per cent in 2009, but a large majority of the respondents thought a fast withdrawal from Iraq would improve US-Middle Eastern relations considerably. See Julie Ray, "Opinion Briefing: U.S. Image in Middle East/North Africa; Iraq Withdrawal Among Top Actions Residents Say Would Improve Opinions," *Gallup Poll News Service*. 27 January 2009.

38 Laura Meckler, and Jonathan Weisman, "Obama to Call for a New Era of Responsibility. Huge Crowds Gather as First African- American President Takes Office; Aides Expect Steps on Iraq War, Bank Policy This Week," *The Wall Street Journal (Eastern Edition)*. 20 January 2009.

39 Nagourney, "How Long Will the Obama Honeymoon Last?" 2009.
Laura Meckler, and Neil King Jr., "Deficits Restrict Obama as His Promises Come Due. Prioritizing Spending Pledges Will Be a Challenge for a New Administration With Ambitious Goals for Health Care, Energy," *The Wall Street Journal (Eastern Edition)*, 20 January 2009.

broad vision, appeared particularly susceptible to policy recommendations – at least if they did not run completely counter to his steadfastly advanced general vision of an inclusive approach towards the region.[40] Although it might be challenging to assess the motivations behind Obama's approach based on these rather speculative recommendations, they provide valuable complementary insights into how the new president was perceived.

Regarding the situation on the ground, little had changed in US foreign policy in the Middle East since the campaign. With Obama's move to the White House, the US withdrawal from Iraq seemed almost certain. The harsh judgement of the previous administration's handling of the issue and the dim prospect of Iraq transitioning into a sustainable democracy in the near future made continuing the military mission a difficult position to sustain.[41] The details of the withdrawal, however, were still up for debate. Meanwhile, the situation in Afghanistan and Iran had changed little. Obama was expected to initiate diplomatic outreach to Iran at some point, and regarding Afghanistan, experts assumed he would attempt to implement a surge and exit strategy similar to the one in Iraq.[42] The Israeli–Palestinian conflict, however, featured two major developments by the time of Obama's inauguration. First, there had just been a three-week armed conflict in Gaza (known as the Gaza war, 2008–2009) that ended in a unilateral Israeli ceasefire on 18 January 2009, and second, the general elections scheduled in Israel for February that year were already casting their shadow. Both developments were featured in the expert assessments of the issue.

When the new administration took office, the bulk of the academic discussion shifted to what could be translated into policy under the new leadership. As the withdrawal from Iraq seemed inevitable and Obama kept repeating his promise, some voices urged him not to discard but to build on the achievements of the previous administration (especially with regard to improving the security situation in Iraq), or even to adopt a modified version of Bush's freedom agenda.[43] With regard to Afghanistan and the issue of terrorism, a field where Obama felt compelled to take a strong position, experts reiterated the stages for a potential surge and exit strategy there: identifying potential negotiation partners within the complex Afghanistan

40 One of the most detailed foreign policy recommendation with regard to the Middle East was published by the Council on Foreign Relations as early as January 2009 and included possible policy outlines for the four key issues in the Middle East, see Rucgard N. Haas, and Martin Indyk, "Beyond Iraq. A New U.S. Strategy for the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 1 (2009): 41-58.

41 Jeremy Pressman, "Power without Influence: The Bush Administration's Foreign Policy Failure in the Middle East," *International Security* 33, no. 4 (2009): 149-179.
Bruce E. Moon, "Long Time Coming: Prospects for Democracy in Iraq," International Security 33, no. 4 (2009): 115-148.

42 Nathaniel C. Fick, and John A. Nagl, "Counterinsurgency Field Manual: Afghanistan Edition," *Foreign Policy*, no. 170 (2009): 42-47.

43 David Price, "Global Democracy Promotion: Seven Lessons for the New Administration." *The Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2009): 159-170.
Michele Dune, "The Baby, the Bathwater, and the Freedom Agenda in the Middle East." *The Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2009): 129-141.

insurgency (based on the experience in Iraq, most likely tribal leaders); increasing US military presence and simultaneously initiating talks; and, finally, drawing out fighters from the militarised wings.[44] Concerning Iran, where Obama had vowed to follow a diplomatic approach, the new president encountered the most intellectual resistance, as some analysts pointed out that the irresponsive regime in Teheran would merit a more aggressive course.[45] However, most acknowledged that in light of the upcoming Iranian elections in summer 2009, a tough US stance might play into the hardliner's hands, while outreach might support more moderate elements – an assessment that had proven correct in the past.[46] Lastly, there were still very few official reports on how Obama would address the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The recent developments in Gaza and the upcoming Israeli elections, however, saw experts push Obama to aim for a timely settlement of the conflict via the familiar (i.e. Israeli) channels.[47] Alternatively, some experts saw Obama's tenure as a possibility to diverge from the Israeli-centred approach, to focus more on the Palestinian side, and thus to address the perceived structural imbalance of prior initiatives.[48] Although a minority position, this approach may have influenced Obama on his road to Cairo.

It cannot be stressed enough how little concrete information Obama had provided up to this point regarding his foreign policy programme. Apart from the scattered references during the inaugural address and some official acts in the interim period – the appointment of his former opponent in the primaries, Hillary Clinton, as secretary of state, with the task of finding a lasting solution in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and of Robert Gates from the Bush administration as the secretary of defense, in charge of ending the war in Iraq and refocusing on Afghanistan, both of which hint at a rather inclusive approach[49] – much was yet to be defined. On the other hand, it is remarkable how the academic (and public) discourse shifted towards the general approach that Obama had defined during the campaign and continued to champion. Thus, having successfully framed US engagement in Iraq as an expensive and ultimately futile endeavour that ran counter to national interests, by the beginning of 2009 he had received considerable support for the execution of his most prominent foreign policy promise, which envisioned the transfer of responsibilities to the Iraqi government.[50] A similar argument

44 Daniel Byman, "Talking with Insurgents: A Guide for the Perplexed." *The Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2009): 125-137.

45 Reuel M. Gerecht, "The End of Nuclear Diplomacy," *American Enterprise Institute*. August 21, 2008. Dalia D. Keye, and Frederic Wehrey, "Containing Iran?: Avoiding a Two- Dimensional Strategy in a Four-Dimensional Region," *The Washington Quarterly* 32. no. 3 (2009): 37-53.

46 Abbas Milani, "Obama's Existential Challenge to Ahmadinejad," *The Washington Quarterly* 32. no. 2 (2009): 64 and 74-77.

47 "Prospects for A Two-State Solution," *Center for American Progress*, 23 March 2009.

48 Walter R. Mead, "Change They Can Believe In. To Make Israel Safe, Give Palestinians Their Due." *Foreign Affairs* 88. no. 1 (2009): 59-76.

49 Barack Obama, "Nomination of Key National Security Team Members," *American Rhetoric*, 1 December 2008.

50 Katie White, and Steve Bowden, "Exiting Iraq Responsibly," *Center for American Progress*, 17 March 2009.

holds for attempts to reach out to Teheran on a diplomatic level. The issue not only concerned vital US security concerns, but a successful agreement on the nuclear question might also make it possible to address questions regarding the regional power balance, Iran's support for terrorist organisations, and its notorious threats against Israel, making Obama's argument for diplomacy a well-timed one. The grounds for his proposed approach towards Afghanistan, on the other hand, had not altered much since the campaign. On the contrary, the partial removal of the pressure to address the issue of terrorism during the campaign, and the absence of clear incentives for increased engagement in the Hindu Kush, interest-based or personal, made Obama's faithfulness to his war-of-necessity versus war-of-choice dichotomy a peculiar factor in his Middle East policy. Finally, Obama's approach to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict was hardest to grasp, as he had not addressed the issues during any high-profile speech at that point. It is true that it was not a central US foreign policy issue during the campaign, but neither was it in 2009. Still, Obama called Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas on the first day of his presidency and subsequently dispatched the special envoy George Mitchell to the region. With few US interests at stake and little to gain politically, the sudden initiative, as well as the personal effort and the political capital that Obama expended addressing the conflict, are the main reasons the issue is included in this analysis. However, the motivation behind this effort remains to be determined.

3.3 The Cairo Speech – A New Beginning

The third moment that defined Obama's approach towards the Middle East was undoubtedly his speech to "Muslims around the world" from Cairo University in June 2009.[51] Looking at the wider context, the event was very carefully set up. Focusing on Obama's Middle East approach in retrospect, the rhetorical moments and performative actions that characterised the first half-year of his presidency seem like a grand rehearsal for the landmark speech in Cairo. During his television interview with the Arab news station *al-Arabiya* on 26 January 2009, while focusing thematically on the Arab Peace Plan, Obama introduced many key rhetorical features such as the responsibility theme and the focus on equal partnership that would be reiterated in Cairo half a year later.[52] In two addresses to US troops who had been serving in Iraq, Obama seized the opportunity to officially communicate the details of the US withdrawal.[53] And in a speech to the Turkish parliament in April, he courted regional allies for his comprehensive approach to the Middle East, and also introduced the "mutual interest and mutual respect" theme that would define his outreach in Cairo two months later.[54] In this context, Obama's

51 Barack Obama, "A New Beginning: Speech at Cairo University," *American Rhetoric,* 4 June 2009.

52 Barack Obama, "Al-Arabiya Television Interview With Hisham Melhem," *American Rhetoric,* 26 January 2009.

53 Barack Obama, "Responsibly Ending the War in Iraq (Camp Lejeune)," *American Rhetoric,* 27 February 2009. Barack Obama, "Address to Multi-National Forces Serving in Iraq," *American Rhetoric,* 7 April 2009.

54 Barack Obama, "Address to the Turkish Parliament," *American Rhetoric,* 6 April 2009.

address in the Egyptian capital can be read as part of a long and carefully planned discursive shift that was designed to address the many issues in the region.

With regard to this study's inquiry into the rhetorical patterns, it is worth nothing that the Cairo speech was the first non-domestic event under close inspection. The target audience, by the president's definition, was an international one, though the domestic impact of the speech was critical, as described below. This shift thus provides the opportunity to assess whether the change in the target audience was followed by a change in discourse, either thematically or rhetorically, bearing in mind that these audiences would be directly affected by Obama's proposed "new beginning" in the region. Again, it is expected that issues rooted in articulated US interests and congruent with Obama's personal values were able to make the transition more seamlessly. However, newly raised topics might also be of interest.

Regarding the content of the Cairo address itself, the speech did not add any substantial points to Obama's Middle East foreign policy discourse, at least for those observers who had followed the president's appearances regularly. However, for the general audience in the United States and the Middle East, the prominent speech was perceived as novelty not only because of Obama's unprecedented move to hold it in an Arab capital, but also in terms of the content.

Approximately a quarter of the one-hour address was an extensive introduction, where Obama discussed at length the history of Islam, its relationship to the West, and the United States' and his own connection to the religion. His core ideological message was that instead of defining the relationship between the United States and the Muslim world through past differences, the issues ought to be addressed in a partnership based on "mutual interests and mutual respect." Again, shared responsibilities were a core theme, which Obama had carried over to Cairo from the electoral campaign and his first speech as president.

Having set up a discourse of tolerance, respect, and shared responsibilities, Obama was poised to address the seven "hard" issues that, in his opinion, posed the greatest challenges in the Middle East at the time, three of which had been frequently recurring topics in his speeches. The first was violent extremism (16:20). Obama was eager to stress that the United States was not and would never be at war with Islam, but would resolutely fight terrorism. He used the opportunity to address the wars in Afghanistan (a war of necessity) and Iraq (a war of choice), and underlined his commitment to withdraw US troops from Iraq according to schedule and to transfer the resources to Afghanistan to fight the continued terrorist threat there. The second source of tension which Obama addressed was the "situation between Israelis, Palestinians and the Arab world" (24:30), which had not yet played a major role in his addresses to US audiences during the previous year but continued to be a key concern to Muslims around the world. The president was careful to acknowledge the past suffering and legitimate aspirations on both sides of the conflict and voiced his support for a two-state solution. Thirdly, he addressed the issue of nuclear weapons, making direct reference to Iran (34:05). Having clearly laid out Washington's position on nuclear proliferation, Obama reached out to the Iranian government and again focused on moving forward under conditions of responsibility and mutual respect. The fourth issue was democracy (36:50). The topic was guided by

the controversial US mission in Iraq and Obama was careful not to appear paternalistic, questioning the viability of suggesting or imposing a particular system of government on other nations. Still, he vowed his support for human rights and democratic governments. Three "new" issues, which so far had not taken centre stage in Obama's addresses, followed. They were religious freedom (40:30), women's rights (43:30), and economic development and opportunities (45:50). Wrapping up the speech, Obama reiterated that all these challenges must be met in partnership (50:10).

Like the previous two key moments of Obama's approach towards the Middle East, the Cairo address cannot be looked at in isolation. If anything, the carefully staged event of Obama's trip to Egypt – supported by the State Department's aggressive advertising campaign to disseminate the speech[55] – moved the sidelined foreign policy issues back into the centre of the United States' domestic political discourse, which was still heavily dominated by the economic crisis.

Taking a look at media publications and polling data in relation to the event, a number of particularities and short- and long-term developments are notable. The main question raised in newspapers in and outside the United States on the eve of the speech was what Obama would say during his long-awaited speech to the Muslim world. Polls indicating a growing negative view of Muslims by Americans and a record low in the perception of the United States in the Middle East had long underlined the need for such a discursive intervention.[56] Thus, US news outlets were eager to let the American public know the issues that people from the Middle East expected to hear about in the speech from the US president. The list ranged from addressing poverty to an increased commitment to promote democracy in the region.[57] Furthermore, commentators almost unanimously stressed the need to address the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in a speech to a majority Muslim audience.[58] Naturally, the issue was most controversially discussed in the aftermath, inside and outside the United States. Obama's "equal approach"

55 The State Department launched a website specifically for the speech, where the transcript of the address was translated into 13 languages and sent to subscribers via text message for free.
Laura Meckler, "U.S. Tempers Hopes for Obama Speech," *The Wall Street Journal (Eastern Edition)*, 4 June 2009.
Jeff Zeleny, and Helen Cooper, "Rival Messages As Obama Lands In the Mideast," *The New York Times*, 4 June 2009.

56 Julie Ray, and Mohamed Younis, "Approval of U.S. Leadership Up in Some Arab Countries; Most Remain Low Overall; More Palestinians Disapprove than Before," *Gallup Poll News Service*, 1 June 2009.
Frank Newport, "Americans Still Say Muslims Have Negative View of U.S. Most Americans Say Muslim-West Relations Are Important to Them," *Gallup Poll News Service*, 3 June 2009.

57 Abdulkareem Al-Eryani, "What the Muslim World Wants to Hear From Obama: A Poverty Plan," *The New York Times*, 3 June 2009.
Ayman Nour, "What the Muslim World Wants to Hear From Obama: Rigged to Lose," *The New York Times*, 3 June 2009.

58 Gerald F. Seib, "What Should Obama Say in Egypt?" *The Wall Street Journal (Eastern Edition)*, 2 June, 2009.
Margaret Coker, and Ashraf Khalil, "World News: Obama Must Address Skeptics in Cairo," *Wall Street Journal (Eastern edition)*, 3 June 2009.

and direct words for Israel – though welcomed by observers in the Middle East – were perceived as unusually blunt in the United States.[59] But even if the approach was criticised by more conservative American commentators and right-wing constituencies in Israel,[60] most commentators saw the potential value of the address to help resolve the issue and conceded that an even-handed approach would inevitably anger some elements on both sides.[61] Furthermore, (Muslim) viewers generally liked the US president's honest and respectful approach, his understanding of Islamic and Middle Eastern culture, his overall message of tolerance,[62] as well as his forthright reference to historical differences and ongoing conflicts in the region.[63]

From a long-term perspective, however, the main reservation about the landmark address in Cairo was whether action would follow the president's words,[64] a question that remained open in the immediate aftermath of the speech.[65] In this regard, the speech had no notable immediate effects; there was no spike in either Obama's gradually declining domestic approval rating with regard to handling foreign policy issues, nor in the United States' standing in the Middle East.[66]

Still, the immense media coverage of the event certainly helped create a favourable discourse, one of the necessary conditions for the Obama administration to address the challenges in the region. In this artificial context, however, the symbolic message of the speech widely overshadowed all other aspects, making it difficult to assess the motivation behind Obama's approach. Hence the need to look behind the scenes at the development of his approach to each particular issue. What can be said with certainty about the public perception of Obama's Cairo speech is that the prominent stage on which he presented his ambitious Middle East foreign policy vision would make it difficult for him to back-pedal from his rhetorical pledge, thus indicating a certain degree of commitment beyond opportunistic motives. That the topic

59 Jeff Zeleny, and Alan Cowell, "Addressing Muslims, a Blunt Obama Takes On Mideast Issues," *The New York Times,* 5 June 2009.

60 "Barack Hussein Bush," *Wall Street Journal (Eastern edition),* 5 June 2009.
Charles Levinson, "Obama In The Middle East: In Israel, Reaction to Remarks on Palestinian Conflict Is Mixed," *The Wall Street Journal (Eastern Edition),* 5 June 2009.

61 Michael Slackman, "Across the Mideast, Praise and Criticism for Obama," *The New York Times,* 5 June 2009.

62 Coker, "Obama In The Middle East: Many Muslims Praise Tone of Speech, but Call for Action."

63 Slackman, "Across the Mideast, Praise and Criticism for Obama."

64 Michael Slackman, "On Eve of Obama's Visit, Egyptians Crave Deeds More Than Words," *The New York Times,* 4 June 2009.

65 Helene Cooper, "Muslims Will Judge Obama by Actions More Than Words," *The New York Times,* 5 June 2009.
Coker, "Obama In The Middle East: Many Muslims Praise Tone of Speech, but Call for Action."

66 Frank Newport, "Little Change in U.S. Obama Approval After Cairo Speech; Gallup Poll Daily Tracking Shows Obama Approval at 62% for June 5-7," *Gallup Poll News Service,* 4 June 2009.
"Obama's Ratings Slide Across the Board," Pew Research Center, 30 July 2009.
"YouGov/Economist Poll May 17-19, 2009," YouGov, 19 May 2009.
"YouGov/Economist Poll September 4-8, 2009," YouGov, 8 September 2009.

of foreign policy in the Middle East retreated from the limelight soon after, however, underlines the fact that the Cairo speech was certainly no magic bullet in addressing the many issues but rather a discursive support measure.

The Cairo speech certainly gave new momentum to the expert discourse on Obama's Middle East foreign policy. During the period in question, this discourse had evolved from criticism of the Bush presidency, through an episode consisting primarily of speculative recommendations for the new president, to assessments of how the window of opportunity created by the charismatic president's discursive interventions could be used most efficiently. However, apart from the general elections in Israel in February and Iran in June, where the particular results were anticipated in advance, the half-year after the inauguration did not see any fundamental changes in the conditions on the ground that would have led experts to reassess their take on the topic. By the summer of 2009, the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq was underway and Obama had had the opportunity to present the schedule domestically and internationally, meaning that the proposed refocusing of political and military resources on Afghanistan was also starting to materialise. On the Iran nuclear issue, however, the deadlock with Teheran continued after the anticipated re-election of incumbent president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his hard-line government.[67] Lastly, on the Israeli–Palestinian front, neither side was showing genuine interest in addressing the long-term impasse, which had been further entrenched by the recent violent clashes in Gaza. Additionally, the new Israeli government under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Likud party was expected to clash with Obama's vision on the Middle East, not only with regard to the Palestinian question.[68]

The period surrounding Obama's landmark speech in Cairo was probably when intellectual support within his own country – although far from unanimous – was at its peak. Voicing widespread support for the ongoing withdrawal, experts elaborated extensively on the US role in a post-occupation Iraq, suggesting activities such as the future training of Iraqi security forces;[69] a so-called "diplomatic surge," which was to include the political reconciliation of

67 "Results of a New Nationwide Public Opinion Survey of Iran before the June 12, 2009 Presidential Elections," *New American Foundation,* 8 June 2009.

"Pre-election Iranian poll showed Ahmadinejad support," *Reuters,* 15 June 2009.

68 Jonathan Marcus, "The 2009 Israeli Election: A Bump in the Road to Peace?" *The Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (2009): 55-69.

Although some argued that the two new heads of state were both keen to avoid an early collision, Obama because he was busy on many fronts at home and internationally and was weary of a rupture with Tel Aviv in the face of the envisioned peace talks, and Netanyahu because he wished to avoid a quarrel with a new and popular US president at the outset; see David Frum, "Why Obama and Netanyahu Will Get Along," *American Enterprise Institute,* 23 May 2009.

69 Brian Katulis, and Emily Hogin, "Rethinking "Advising and Training" in Iraq," *Center for American Progress,* 14 July 2009.

different factions; the material and intellectual reconstruction of the country; and Iraq's reintegration in the region.[70] Regarding reservations about a potential deterioration in Iraq's security situation in Iraq following the US withdrawal, however, historical precedents as well as the political climate in the United States made a redeployment of US combat troops rather unlikely.[71] The biggest reservations with regard to Obama's approach in Afghanistan, on the other hand, concerned the geographic and demographic differences from Iraq, which could potentially make the copy-and-paste policy unviable.[72] The need for a political surge, as well as nation-building measures in addition to the military surge,[73] led some analysts to suggest that the United States would be better off withdrawing from Afghanistan altogether and focusing on selective counterterrorism missions if there were no substantial security improvements in the near future.[74] Equal reservations were expressed with regard to Obama's approach towards Iran. The election results, as well as Obama's public condemnation of the government crackdown on the ensuing protests, made the direct negotiations proposed in Cairo rather unlikely in the near future. Hence, analysts focused on alternative strategies to contain Iran's regional ambitions.[75] With regard to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, it was widely acknowledged that Obama's initiative had provided a favourable political climate on the discourse level. However, as conditions on the ground proved unfavourable for direct engagement, pundits argued that the Obama administration should work to extend the window of opportunity he had created and then engage on actions that would bolster the legitimacy of the Palestinian government and facilitate comprehensive negotiations.[76]

As mentioned above, Obama did not add any substantial points to his foreign policy approach in the Middle East in his Cairo address. In an interview two days before the speech, he even sought to contain expectations by stressing that the speech was meant to increase diplomatic room to manoeuvre in region and that he was not going to present drastic new approaches to old issues.[77] With regard to the framing of the different issues when speaking to the Muslim world, however, some particularities are worth noting. Most importantly, there was the controversial order in which Obama addressed the different topics, arguably representing a balance between US and the presumed Muslim priorities. That he started with violent extremism, generally seen as a unifier and core concern of both the American and Middle

70 Brian Katulis, "After Redeployment from Iraqi Cities," *Center for American Progress,* 30 June 2009.

71 David M. Edelstein, "Exit Lessons: The Search Is on for Graceful Strategies for Exiting Iraq and Afghanistan. Apart from Victory, History Suggests, There Are None," *The Wilson Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (2009): 34-40.

72 Steven Simon, "Can the Right War Be Won?" *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 4 (2009): 137.

73 Jason Campbell, Michael O'Hanlon, and Jeremy Shapiro, "How to Measure the War," *Policy Review*, no. 157 (2009): 19 and 23.
Fotini Christia, and Michael Semple, "Flipping the Taliban," *Foreign Affair* 88. no. 4 (2009): 34-45.

74 Edelstein, "Exit Lessons," 34-40.

75 Milani, "Obama's Existential Challenge to Ahmadinejad," 63-78.
Keye, and Wehrey, "Containing Iran?" 37-53.

76 Brian Katulis, "Window of Opportunity for a Two-State Solution," *Center for American Progress,* 15 July 2009.

77 Thomas L. Friedman, "Obama on Obama," *The New York Times,* 3 June 2009.

Eastern publics, seems natural. However, the president's logic of equating the threat of global terrorism with the war in Afghanistan had by that point started to unravel. That he addressed the Israeli–Palestinian conflict second was certainly due to the audience, as the issue had not been in the limelight in Obama's previous speeches. On the other hand, the direct appeal to the Iranian government – though likely rooted in genuine conviction – can be seen as more of a symbolic gesture, as the administration had little hope that the offer of direct engagement would be taken up anytime soon. In this regard, the Cairo environment was suitable to apply international pressure on Iran to resolve the nuclear issue – a necessary precondition for the tightened international sanctions that would soon follow. Lastly, the issue of the Iraq war, which was even more unpopular in the Middle East than in the United States, was effectively sidelined in the Cairo speech. With the US occupation of the country soon to be history, there was no need to address the topic extensively and it was mainly used for illustrative purposes regarding issues such as terrorism or democracy promotion.

4 Obama: Idealist, Pragmatist, or Opportunist?

When President Barack Obama put down the microphone after his hour-long address in the Cairo University auditorium, the questions about its implications and the likelihood of political follow-up echoed around the world. As Obama's unprecedented discursive intervention left its mark on the discourse on US engagement in the Middle East, the "why" question remained. Obama's supporters and critics alike have played down the initiative as the idealistic vision of a young, inexperienced politician; as a calculated return to a pragmatic, interest-based US foreign policy after the ill-fated Iraq intervention; or as opportunistic calculation aimed at gaining political capital in and outside the USA. Gideon Rose, the current editor of *Foreign Affairs*, in his assessment of Obama and his two terms in office, once described the president as an "ideological liberal with a conservative temperament," countering the allegations of both "softheaded idealism" and "cold-blooded realism."[78]

In assessing the underlying motivations behind Obama's foreign policy in the Middle East, this study follows a similar line of argument. In the previous sections, a primary-source-based historical account of the corresponding foreign policy discourse has been established, taking into account both its sender (Obama) and primary addressees (the US public). The following evaluation examines the dynamics between rhetoric and perception to identify indicators of the different underlying motivators for Obama's discursive intervention.

Regarding *idealistic motives*, this paper argues that Obama showed a considerable degree of personal commitment to the key pillars of his foreign policy approach towards the Middle East. This claim is supported by a series of indicators of such an underlying motivation for the foreign policy programme.

78 Gideon Rose, "What Obama Gets Right. Keep Calm and Carry the Liberal Order On," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 5 (2015): 2.

First, there are the convictions that Obama carried over from before he ran for president. In general, these included themes such as responsibility and his preference for negotiated solutions over the use of force. In particular, however, it was Obama's early opposition, when he was still a senator, to the war in Iraq that indicated his position on US foreign policy in the Middle East. He subsequently became a strong advocate of a timely withdrawal during the 2008 campaign and during his presidency.

Second, Obama addressed the different issues with a notable persistence, not only the war in Iraq, which he opposed from the beginning, but also the other contemporary issues that defined US foreign policy in the Middle East during the period analysed. At every possible occasion, he stood behind his approach to fight terrorism at the source by improving the security situation in Afghanistan, and vowed that a negotiated agreement with Iran could be reached without starting another war in the Middle East. The exception here is the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, which was only addressed after Obama moved into the White House in January 2009. However, the four Middle East issues this study has focused on accompanied Obama's presidency well beyond the formative time period analysed here.

A third factor that indicates idealistic motives is the absence of immediate benefits from addressing a certain issue. According to this line of argument, peace in the Middle East and therefore addressing the Palestinian question marginally impacted US interests, but there was little political advantage to be gained domestically by addressing the stalled peace process and confronting pro-Israeli constituencies in the United States. The potential legacy of a US president who achieved a comprehensive long-term solution to the conflict hardly counts as a strategic gain during midterm elections, thus hinting at alternative motives.

A final set of indicators for idealistic motives concerns the conviction with which certain approaches were advanced, despite opposing interests. Of course, there was healthy debate on all the issues with representatives of different interests from various sides; however, it was in his diplomatic outreach to Iran, as well as his even-handed approach to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, that Obama encountered the most resistance. The latter inevitably put pressure on Israel, as Obama urged both parties to make concessions, while the outreach aimed at thawing the relationship with Iran worried not only Tel Aviv but also other US allies in the region such as Saudi Arabia.

Concerning the *pragmatic reasoning* behind Obama's approach, this study argues that issues that aligned with long-standing core US interests in the Middle East and/or dealt with contemporary concerns rooted in national or specific interests were addressed more consistently and that the proposed approaches were therefore more likely to be translated into sustainable policy outlines. The profound interaction between such interests and the formulation of a foreign policy agenda is supported via the illustration of those points where Obama's approach on the Middle East aligned with articulated US interests.

It is useful for this analysis to distinguish between vital US interests in the Middle East and complementary interests, long-standing or recently formulated, that influenced Obama's approach towards the region. First, assessing how the issues at hand correlated with the three core US interests in the Middle East (geopolitical calculations, security concerns, and natural resources), which scholars have identified in the context of Cold War studies,[79] provides initial insights on the historical continuities of Obama's approach.

With respect to geopolitical calculations, the addressing of Teheran's nuclear ambitions was most directly linked to this core US interest, as a nuclear Iran would threaten the regional power balance. With neither of the other issues, however, were the underlying geopolitical calculations as pronounced. A weak case for containment directed at Iran could be made for the US engagement in Afghanistan; however, Obama's opposition to the US military mission in Iraq – which also shares a large border with Iran – calls this into question. Regarding the Iraq war, on the other hand, one could even argue that the mission hurt the United States' geopolitical position in the region, hence making Obama's proposed withdrawal somewhat align with this core US interest.

With regard to US security concerns, this core national interest is intuitively linked to the issue of terrorism. However, although terrorism threatened the lives of US citizens and those of its allies, it never posed a threat to the physical integrity of the United States, Israel, or other regional allies. As Obama's support for the US engagement in Afghanistan stemmed from his linking of the mission with the issue of terrorism, the lack of vital US interests in fighting the latter made the entire case for the president's approach on this issue a rather weak one. Similarly, the low-level warfare that characterised the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, although undesirable and definitely worth addressing, had long ceased to pose an existential threat to Israel, the main US ally in the region. Iran's nuclear ambitions, on the other hand, posed an existential threat to the United States, as well as to Israel and other allies in the region, making it one of Washington's main security concerns.

Regarding natural resources, it was again Iran's regional ambitions that threatened this core US interest in the region, because of the former's ability to obstruct the flow of crude oil from the Gulf States. Arguably, a weaker case in this regard could be made for addressing the issue of terrorism, or against the withdrawal of troops from (oil-rich) Iraq.

In a second step, some complementary national and specific interests that influenced Obama's approach towards the Middle East are worth noting. Most pressing, and most prominently argued by Obama, were the economic interests of the United States. Obama was ex-

79 Rashid Khalidi, *Sowing Crisis: The Cold War and American Dominance in the Middle East.* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 9.

John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 155-158 and 163-170.

Michael C. Hudson, "The United States in the Middle East," in *International Relations of the Middle East*, ed. by Louise Fawcett, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 321-343.

pected to address the economic crisis at home, and any foreign policy expenditures that impeded these efforts were therefore up for reconsideration. Additionally, Obama had early on advocated a general redirection of focus to economic opportunities in the Asia-Pacific region (the so-called "pivot to Asia"), which he argued would better serve US interests than fighting prolonged (and futile) wars in the Middle East. Thus, regarding the Iraq war, fiscal considerations and the possibility of using the resources that would be freed up by disengagement to address other issues in and outside the region (e.g. the war in Afghanistan) were very prominent in Obama's argument. Additionally, a weaker case in this regard could be made for business interests in Iran materialising in the wake of a potential détente.

With respect to further contemporary interests, voters' concern for physical security, especially in the post-9/11 American society, also shaped the discourse on US foreign policy in the Middle East, especially regarding terrorism. Again, however, Obama's linking of international terrorism with the war in Afghanistan only held in the discursive environment he helped to maintain, but hardly withstood the scrutiny of an analytical inquiry.

Then there were the various interest groups, with their specific agendas shaping the decision-making process in the United States. Most prominently in the sphere of foreign policy in the Middle East were the various pro-Israeli lobby groups, among which the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) arguably had the most profound impact on US politics in the region. However, although Obama repeatedly stated that Israel's security was in the interest of his administration and of the United States, his approach rarely aligned with AIPAC's agenda (or that of pro-Palestinian lobby groups for that matter), whether concerning the approach towards Iran, terrorism, or the Palestinian question. Thus in most cases, these interest groups consisted of forces opposing Obama's approach, rather than supportive ones. However, as observers acknowledged in the wake of the Cairo speech, Obama's approach would inevitably displease elements on all sides, putting the argument on partisan interest groups into perspective.[80]

Lastly, the United States' standing in the region and its resulting soft power can also be included in this assessment of the interests behind Obama's approach towards the Middle East. Addressing the Israeli–Palestinian conflict thus certainly weighed heavily in the equation, as did asserting US credibility by bringing the instigators of the 2001 terrorist attacks to justice. Ending the unpopular US mission in Iraq can also be added to the list, as can preventing an Iranian nuclear bomb through negotiation. Although US soft power in the region is hard to grasp, it can be considered an underlying interest to all four key issues. Arguably, this was articulated most directly in Obama's interview prior to the Cairo speech, when he stated that the initiative was designed to increase the USA's room to manoeuvre in the region.[81]

80 Slackman, "Across the Mideast, Praise and Criticism for Obama."

81 Friedman, "Obama on Obama."

With regard to the *opportunistic motives* behind Obama's Middle East policy, this paper argues that the key issues that Obama addressed in Cairo and elsewhere were rooted in more than campaign calculations, but that some auxiliary issues were included primarily to gain support for the main programme. This claim is based on the fact that the indicators for such underlying motivations are scarce, at least in the data analysed for this study. However, there are some particularities to this general observation that are worth noting.

First, isolated instances of an issue being addressed usually hint at more short-term political calculations. Some issues raised during the Cairo speech might fall into this category. Obama's pledge to address social issues (in this case, women's rights and religious freedom) and to support comprehensive economic investment in the region thus have to be taken with a grain of salt, as they had not previously featured in his foreign policy programme and did not make headlines in the aftermath either. The same goes for the promotion of democratic values in the region. However, it was Obama's pledge to address the Israeli–Palestinian question that generated the most suspicion among experts and commentators, as the issue only made it into his public Middle East discourse after his inauguration. The fact that the conflict featured so prominently in the Cairo address without having been a regular part of Obama's regularly articulated Middle East agenda during the preceding year indeed raises a number of questions.

As a second line of argument regarding indicators of opportunistic calculations, it thus makes sense to look at supporting measures to the rhetorical moments. In this regard, the analysis argues that although the Israeli–Palestinian conflict was a late addition to Obama's Middle East programme, it had been consistently addressed after the inauguration. Additionally, the rhetorical approach was supported by extensive flanking measures. When Obama arrived in Egypt in 2009, too many resources and too much political capital had been spent on addressing the Palestinian question for it to be a token issue aimed at wooing the Muslim audience in Cairo. That the administration's engagement with the issue continued after Cairo supports this claim. Conspicuously, however, this was not the case for either the social or the economic issues addressed in Cairo; they received no notable supporting measures beyond the rhetoric.

The last category which hints at opportunistic motives concerns the suspiciously high degree of congruence between Obama's stated positions and the political orientation or goals of the respective audiences. Undoubtedly, this was the case for addressing the Israeli–Palestinian question in Cairo, as well as the pledge for social and economic investment. However, there are other such instances which at first glance might fall under this category. The primary example is Obama's addresses to AIPAC.[82] However, while he usually bent his argument so that his take on US foreign policy in the Middle East aligned with the positions of the powerful pro-Israeli interest group in general terms, he did not yield the basic principles of his vision,

82 Barack Obama, "Obama's Remarks at AIPAC," *The New York Times*, 4 June 2008.

thus making it difficult to draw definite conclusions. Similarly, Obama's consistent pledges to fight terrorism despite the debatable logic of connecting the issue to the war in Afghanistan, as demonstrated throughout the paper, hint at political calculations. If anything, these episodes underline the blurry distinction between calculations of political expedience and the serving of special interests.

5 Conclusion

Obama's landmark speech in Cairo in 2009 sparked a lively debate on US foreign policy in the Middle East. Ten years later, the extensive research on Obama's foreign policy has validated his supporters and critics alike with regard to the question of whether the former president managed to follow up on his ambitious vision and lofty rhetoric. This study, however, has taken a step back and asked *why* Obama dedicated a considerable amount of his administration's resources to outlining a "new beginning" between the United States and the Middle East in the first place.

Filling this argumentative gap, this paper has argued that the main underlying motivations behind Obama's attempt to translate his Middle East foreign policy vision into political action were personal conviction and the representation of US national interests. By looking at indicators of idealistic, pragmatic, and opportunistic motivations in an extensive collection of contemporary public sources, the paper has supported this claim with regard to all four key pillars of Obama's Middle East agenda – the withdrawal from Iraq, terrorism, Iran's nuclear programme, and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict – albeit to significantly varying degrees for the different issues. Fittingly, this variation correlates with the frequency with which the different issues featured in Obama's speeches, as well as the public and academic discourse.

The thematic case that most strongly supports this hypothesis is Obama's approach to the Iranian nuclear programme, where he managed to follow up on his vision with political action, resulting in one of his most lauded foreign policy achievements. The vital US interest in preventing an Iranian nuclear weapon operated as a powerful catalyst to Obama's approach. A similar case can be made for Iraq, where the fiscal interests in the timely withdrawal of US troops from Iraq supported the subsequent execution of Obama's key foreign policy campaign promise. Other issues, however, were passed on to the next administration. This was the case with terrorism and its connection to the war in Afghanistan, a seemingly endless concern that threatens American lives but not necessarily the country's vital interests, and the resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, which, although in the interest of the United States and Israel under certain conditions, is not a vital concern for either nation and will be remembered as a "missed opportunity" instead of the envisioned breakthrough.

Therefore, although the analysis has identified a pronounced personal commitment to his vision on the part of the president, the absent realist foundation for the latter two issues made them far less likely to be translated into policies that would show progress and yield tangible

results. In other words, where Obama managed to align the issues with the formulated national interests of the United States, he was able to follow up on the promises he made during the Cairo speech in 2009. Where this realist foundation was weak or missing, the ambitious vision would eventually yield to the conditions on the ground, which, when Obama moved into the White House, were far from ideal. At home, Obama's government enjoyed widespread public support, but was expected to focus on urgent domestic issues, and his honeymoon period, which was already showing signs of fatigue in the summer of 2009, would inevitably end. Internationally, the issues in question had reached a stalemate on many fronts well before Obama became president, making time one of the most valuable as well as volatile commodities in the eventual execution of the ambitious vision.

In this regard, the findings of this study run counter to retrospective criticism alleging that Obama's ambitious "new beginning" for the Middle East was mainly formulated for political expedience but was never translated into actual policies, an argument that featured prominently in Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's recent address at Cairo University, 10 years after Obama's speech.[83] As discussed at the beginning of the paper, these allegations received heightened attention in 2011, when the geopolitical situation in the Middle East had changed considerably in the wake of the Arab Uprisings, and were based on the claim that the so-called Arab Spring had provided a (missed) opportunity for President Obama to follow up on the many promises he had made in Cairo two years before.

However, the *implementation* of Obama's foreign policy approach towards the Middle East is left to further research. This study has focused on the rhetorical framing of this approach and the public and intellectual environment during the formative period between summer 2008 and 2009 in order to shed light on the underlying motivation for the president's commitment to his ambitious approach, and has thus defined one important variable in the equation. In this regard, the strength of the very thematically focused and primary-source-based historical inquiry also defines its limitations. However, although the motivation variable, as defined in this study, is by no means sufficient to assess Obama's Middle East policy as a whole, it provides a solid foundation for approaching the topic using more comprehensive research designs which take into account other factors, such as the historical implications of the different issues or the volatile geopolitical dynamics of the region. While this study has analysed the origin of Obama's vision, a comprehensive assessment of President Obama's Middle East legacy would have to include such additional variables. Obama certainly built a solid argumentative and receptive base for his approach. How his vision was transformed into US foreign policy and whether the "new beginning based on mutual interests and mutual respect" was a shot worth taking will be subject to further inquiries.

83 Michael R. Pompeo, "A Force for Good: America Reinvigorated in the Middle East," *U.S. Department of State*, 10 January 2019.

Appendix I:

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