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For The United States, A Treacherous New Year

By Lawrence J. Haas

Happy New Year – we should hope – because 2013 could prove a defining one on a host of interrelated challenges in the Greater Middle East, and elsewhere, that will have profound consequences for the United States and its allies for decades to come.

The challenges include Iran and its nuclear program, Syria and its transition to a post-President Bashar al-Assad future, Egypt and its government under the Muslim Brotherhood, the West Bank and its future under a Fatah-Hamas reconciliation, and the direction of Iran ally, Venezuela, after strongman Hugo Chavez dies.

These challenges could prove particularly, well, challenging for an administration that wants to reduce, rather than increase, the U.S. footprint in the region (“leading from behind,” is the memorable phrase of a President Barack Obama aide) and that will soon have a largely new foreign policy team in place.

That’s because the challenges will require not less U.S. leadership, but more, and an approach in which Washington protects its short-term security interests while pursuing its long-term goal of more freedom and democracy for the region.

Let’s take these challenges one at a time:

Iran

For the West, Iran has long been a race against time: Can Washington corral its allies and the global community to impose the tough economic sanctions that would force Tehran to change course before it reached a nuclear “point of no return” – with the technology and know-how to produce a nuclear weapon?

The sanctions are biting ever harder, but the regime continues making progress and, by most estimates, is on course to reach important nuclear thresholds in 2013, probably convincing Israel to take military action that would prevent Iran from reaching those thresholds for at least a year or two.

The International Atomic Energy Agency reported last month that Iran had installed all of the critical equipment it needs to produce nuclear fuel at a site that’s buried deep in the ground near Qom. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned that the world must stop Iran’s enrichment activities by spring or early summer of 2013 – when nuclear experts believe Iran would have enough medium-enriched uranium to make a single nuclear weapon – or, presumably, Israel would act.

The question is whether the White House will show the world it means what it says, that it will do what's necessary to prevent a nuclear Iran, by taking military action on its own or at least joining Israel in the effort if the need arises.

Its failure to do so not only will make Israel's goal of crippling Iran's program harder to reach. It will leave Saudi Arabia and the five other U.S.-allied members of the Gulf Cooperation Council -- which recently formed a unified military command to counter the "very serious" security threats from Iran -- feeling less confident about U.S. promises to contain Iran's hegemonic ambitions.

Syria

Strongman Bashar al-Assad's demise will almost surely come within the next year, and that should prove to be a body-blow to Syria's closest regional ally and fellow terror-sponsor, Iran.

Nevertheless, while Washington eschewed a strong hand in forcing Assad out to avoid "destabilizing" his country, its worst nightmare has come true anyway: The desperate dictator has now slaughtered more than 40,000 people while jihadists have assumed a stronger role in the rebellion.

In late December, 11 organizations came together to form the Islamic Syrian Front, which said it seeks "to topple Assad's regime and establish a civilized Islamic society governed by religious Muslim law..."

For Washington, the questions here are the same as everywhere when a Middle Eastern tyrant falls victim to Arab Spring-induced uprisings: Will the new regime prove any more tolerant than the one it replaced? And will the United States have any leverage to nudge it toward more freedom and democracy?

After Obama enunciated a "red line" in "seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized," another question is presented: Will he take action if recent reports from Al Jazeera -- that Syrian forces have now used poison gas in Homs -- are accurate?

Egypt

This largest and traditionally most influential of Arab states is providing a useful test case for whether the day-to-day necessities of governing will force the Muslim Brotherhood to smooth its rough Islamist edges.

Egypt has elected a new president who served in the Brotherhood, and the public now has endorsed a new constitution over which the Brotherhood exerted great influence. But what comes next?

Will the Brotherhood, which assumed power through a democratic process, allow democracy to flourish? Will it allow other political parties to compete fairly in regularly scheduled elections,

and will it step aside if others win? Will it allow for civil society and an independent media to arise and grow?

Most of all, can Washington help hold the Brotherhood's feet to the fire on respecting, enforcing, and strengthening the democratic process, thereby helping to nurture a more tolerant and pluralistic nation?

West Bank

The closer that Palestinian rivals Fatah and Hamas move toward one another, the more Israeli-Palestinian tensions grow – turning a once-peaceful and increasingly prosperous West Bank into a simmering powder keg.

Fresh off its success in securing United Nations non-member “observer state” status for the Palestinian territories, the Palestinian Authority of President Mahmoud Abbas has warned that it may take Israel to the International Criminal Court over its decision to build 3,000 housing units in Jerusalem and the West Bank.

Meanwhile, with the Palestinian Authority no longer cracking down on Hamas in the West Bank, violence is increasing, terrorists are planning more attacks, and Israel is preparing for a “new era” – and possibly another intifada.

For Washington, the question is whether it can help convince Israeli and Palestinian leaders to pursue a more productive future, one of more cooperation and prosperity in the West Bank in particular, all while the two sides seem more inclined to play to the most extreme parts of their constituencies.

Venezuela

The news that cancer-stricken Venezuelan strongman Hugo Chavez has delegated various financial duties to Vice President Nicolas Maduro has renewed questions about his health and long-term prognosis.

As with Assad, Chavez's demise could prove particularly troubling for Tehran, which has worked through him to expand its anti-American agenda and that of its terrorist client, Hezbollah, across Latin America.

Chavez won another six-year term in October with 54 percent of the vote, hardly a huge margin. Though he has urged Venezuelans to back Maduro in case he dies, which would force another election, Maduro is hardly a shoe-in to win if Henrique Capriles Radonski, who lost in October, decides to run again.

Presuming that Chavez's cronies allow for a fair election, a Radonski victory would threaten a Caracas-centered, anti-American axis that includes Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua and that has sought to spread “21st Century socialism” across the region. In his previous run, Radonski

pledged to take Venezuela in a new direction, eschewing revolutionary impulses and promoting growth through free markets.

The United States cannot determine the outcome of such an election. But, it should pressure Caracas to hold a fair one, and it should support (perhaps covertly) Radonski or anyone else who shares Washington's support for free markets – especially someone whose victory would weaken Iran's influence in America's backyard.

For Obama and his incoming foreign policy team, the challenges outlined above will require the most deft and nimble use of public rhetoric, private diplomacy, and economic leverage to advance U.S. goals.

Happy New Year.

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