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Beneath Iraq, Afghan, Israel Policy: Iran, Iran, Iran

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When President Barack Obama speaks to the nation Tuesday night about Iraq, he'll be marking the removal of American combat troops from that nation, an important milestone. But his address will signify something much broader as well.

This week's Iraq moment means that Mr. Obama now has, to steal a term he used last year to refer to Russian relations, hit the reset button on all four important areas of American policy in the region: Iraq, Afghanistan, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Iran.

Administration officials think they have at least improved the chances for success in each spot, and they probably have. As always in the Middle East, the chances of failure remain high on each front, too.

Whatever the odds of success, though, a common thread runs through Mr. Obama's moves in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Palestinian territories. In each case, one important goal is to clear the decks in order to concentrate more intensely on the paramount challenge posed by Iran and its Islamic extremist friends.

The Bush administration invaded Iraq in 2003 because it was worried about precisely this kind of threat to American security in the post-9/11 era: a marriage between Islamic extremists in al Qaeda and a hostile state potentially armed with weapons of mass destruction. Since then, though, the threat

has evolved in a significantly different direction. Al Qaeda has splintered and now is dangerous not because it is sponsored by a powerful state, but because it has burrowed underground in states too weak to counter it, in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen and Somalia.

Meantime, there is indeed a threat from a hostile state potentially armed with weapons of mass destruction. But that threat now arises not from Iraq but from its next-door neighbor, Iran, and from Iran's extremist friends in Hezbollah in Lebanon, in Hamas in the Palestinian territories, and among other groups getting support or inspiration from Tehran.

American policy maneuvers in the region—starting in the last year of the Bush administration, continuing into the first two years of the Obama administration and culminating in tonight's Iraq address—represent an effort to adjust to this new reality.

The move to end combat operations in Iraq is, on its face, simply an attempt both to reduce American troops' exposure and to prove the point that America can create a stable, secular democratic state to counter the instability created by theocratic, undemocratic forces. Likewise, the concurrent surge of additional military troops in Afghanistan is an attempt to prove the same point in a land that is even more threatened by Islamic extremists and even further away from

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establishing a stable central government friendly to the West.

This week's relaunch of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks—which begins when Mr. Obama hosts Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas for dinner Wednesday night—is an attempt to reduce the danger of a traditional flashpoint, the plight of the stateless Palestinians.

Finally, the administration continues its efforts, begun with a United Nations Security Council resolution earlier this summer, to ratchet up economic pressure on Iran, in hopes of somehow coercing it to back away from its worrisome nuclear program.

But each of the other moves is directly tied to that overarching concern about Iran and its influence in the region. In Iraq, the effort to consolidate power in a credible central government also is an attempt to block neighboring Iran's ability to exert influence there. Similarly, stabilizing Afghanistan would demonstrate the ability of the West to bolster moderate Muslims as a counter to the rise of Iran-like extremism.

And restarting Israeli-Palestinian talks is an effort not just to seek peace on the Palestinian front, but also to remove a political sore point in the Palestinian problem—one that Arab leaders say inflames their people and reduces their ability to cooperate with the U.S. and Israel in countering Iran's nuclear ambitions. More directly, a successful Palestinian peace process also would reduce the influence of Iran's allies in the Hamas movement, which seeks to undermine Mr. Abbas and other moderate Palestinian leaders.

Of course, it could all go terribly wrong. A disintegration of the fragile government that U.S. forces leave behind in Iraq would only widen the playing field there for Iranian trouble-making. Palestinian talks could collapse quickly over the question of new Israeli settlement activity, strengthening the hand of Iran's radical friends in the Hamas and Hezbollah Palestinian movements.

So the risks are as great as the opportunities in the Obama policy reset. The good news is that this is

a rare area where the president actually has a degree of bipartisan support, which he may need if the various gambles don't pan out.

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