The new President of the USA will still have to spend a great deal of time dealing with the legacy of his predecessor. Although he is determined to address the internal problems of the United States first, he will not be able to implement them fully until he restores global stability, at least in general. Based on the tasks he set, Donald Trump will need to ‘reduce’ the value of the US foreign policy, which means the US passing its security responsibilities to its allies, both old and possible new ones. However, this is practically impossible until the regional security systems that existed in the world before, which functioned on the principles of Pax Americana, have been, at least in general, created or recreated.

Nevertheless, these systems have been destroyed to varying degrees. In case of the Middle East, they have been deeply destroyed, including by the actions of the Obama administration. This also applies to the Arab-Israeli settlement process, the idea of re-establishing to which the first black US president arrived as with a flag at the region.

Let us recall that Obama presented his Middle East Policy in a speech he gave on June 4, 2009 at Cairo University. His main promise was to build new relations between the USA and the Islamic world, to help Afghanistan and withdraw US troops from its territory and from Iraq. It has been said that Iran has the right to producing peaceful nuclear energy, if it is to comply with the NPT. Drafted by experienced experts, this speech contained everything that could please the Arabs in the Arab-Israeli peace negotiations in ending the occupation of Palestinian territories, solving the main problems of the final status – Jerusalem, borders, refugees, establishing an independent Palestinian State, etc. It was clearly stated that the only feasible and practical choice was the two-state solution and the peaceful coexistence of Israel and Palestine. It was emphasized that construction of Israeli settlements on Palestinian land is illegitimate. This speech was warmly greeted in the Arab world, and for the first two or three years, Obama gained enormous credibility there.

What followed next is common knowledge. Obama only in part succeeded in reaching an agreement on the Iranian nuclear program, which was also with the help of other great powers, including Russia and Germany. Everything else turned to be a disaster, a situation in which Washington has not found itself in since the Second World War. The withdrawal of US troops from Iraq in 2011 (and not in 2010 as he promised in his speech in Cairo) led to the exacerbation of the split in the country and to the emergence of ISIS. The region erupted because of US-backed ‘colour revolutions’, and a few countries (Syria, Libya, Yemen) have split up or turned to be on the verge of collapse. Flirting with the ‘moderate’ Islamists, among whom there were “Muslim brothers” as ranked by Washington, resulted in a bout of extremism and destructive Islamic radicalism.

Nothing went well with Obama’s policy on the Middle East peace negotiations. Any attempts by the US administration to start direct Palestinian-Israeli negotiations were met with stiff resistance from Benjamin Netanyahu and the entire Israeli far right wing, which has actively used anti-terrorist rhetoric to block the initiation of the peace process. And the Head of the White House did not want or could not get to have many levers of influence on Israel at the disposal of the United States, in view of opposition to such a move by Congress, where Republicans dominated. The ‘Quartet’ of Middle East mediators (Russia, the USA, the EU, the UN) also did not really
start to work, mainly because of the serious tensions in relations between Moscow and Washington, which have only grown over the years.

And right at the last moment, Obama went in for an unprecedented move, which might be called a gesture of despair. He let the first in the history of US-Israeli relations anti-Israeli Resolution be passed by the Security Council. Resolution No. 2334 was adopted on December 23, 2016. It has confirmed that the construction of settlements by Israel on Palestinian territory occupied since 1967, including East Jerusalem, has no legal force and is in flagrant violation of international law, and is in fact one of the main obstacles to reaching a settlement in accordance with a two-state solution. The Security Council demanded that Israel immediately and completely stop all settlement activities on occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and start to fully comply with all of its legal obligations in this regard. At the same time, the UN Security Council emphasized that it will not recognize any changes to the June 4, 1967 provisions, including with regard to Jerusalem, other than those agreed by the parties through negotiations.

This resolution has caused an uproar in Israel, and was regarded as an act of betrayal by the United States of their ally. Despite the corruption scandals surrounding him, Netanyahu came up with an angry diatribe against Obama. Israel has stated that it will not acknowledge the Resolution, or comply with its terms.

It should be admitted that the administration of Barack Obama was not at all frightened by the angry tirade by Israel. The administration seemed to have originally been aimed at the scandal and at going out with a bang, to somehow justify itself to its disappointed Arab partners.

On December 28, just before the New Year, outgoing US Secretary of State, John Kerry, gave a very emotional speech in which he tried to justify the US decision not to veto Resolution No. 2334. It is worth stopping at this speech, as it has passed almost unnoticed globally because everyone was focused at the New Year celebrations. The meaning of this demarche (there is no other word for this) was that the refusal to veto the UN document was made in order to keep the possibility of a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which is the only true solution. Otherwise, the Palestinians would be faced with eternal occupation and segregation, while Israel would face insecurity.

In addition, John Kerry put forward a number of principles of settlement ‘for the future’, which would make sense to be taken seriously if they have been consistently promoted by the United States during the whole period of Obama being in power, and would not have been put forward as slogans at the last days of the outgoing US administration. However, they still appear to be worth reproduced, as they are apparently the political testament of Barack Obama on the issue of the Palestinian-Israeli peace negotiations.

The first principle: to provide on the basis of Resolution 242 of the UN Security Council secure and internationally recognized borders between Israel and a viable Palestine in the framework of negotiations on the basis of the 1967 borders, with mutually agreed swaps of territories. The second principle: to fulfil the vision of UN General Assembly Resolution No. 181 of 1947 on two states for two peoples, one Jewish and one Arab, with mutual recognition and full equal rights for all their respective citizens. The third principle: to provide for a just, agreed, fair and realistic solution to the Palestinian refugee issue, with international assistance, that includes compensation, options and assistance in finding permanent homes, acknowledgement of suffering and other measures necessary for a comprehensive resolution consistent with two states for two peoples. The fourth principle: to provide an agreed resolution for Jerusalem as the internationally recognized capital of the two states, and protect and assure freedom of access to the holy sites consistent with the established status quo. The fifth principle: to satisfy Israel’s security needs and bring a full end to the occupation, while ensuring that Israel can defend itself effectively and that Palestine can provide security for its people in a sovereign and non-militarized state. The sixth principle: to end the conflict and all outstanding claims, enabling normalized relations and enhanced regional security for all as envisaged by the 2001 Arab Peace Initiative of King Abdullah. The Final Status Agreement shall resolve all outstanding issues and lead to the end of the conflict, so that everyone can move ahead to a new era of peaceful coexistence and cooperation. For Israel, this must also bring broader peace with all of its Arab neighbours.

Well, this is a well-intentioned program. The only thing is that Donald Trump comes to the White House with completely different sentiments. He made this clear when he sharply criticized the refusal of the United States to use its veto in the Security Council, and warned that the United States will stop funding the UN activities (25% of the UN budget) and the countries that voted for the Resolution. Moreover, the newly elected president said that he would pick as the US Ambassador to Israel David Friedman, who himself does not believe in a two-state solution, and even intends to move the US embassy to Jerusalem, which would mean the unilateral recognition of Israel's
annexation of East Jerusalem.

Despite the general dislike for Barack Obama in the Arab world, the program represented by John Kerry would find a positive response among both Arabs and the international community. This actually was the case, as attested by the results of an international conference on the Palestinian-Israeli peace negotiations that was held in Paris in mid-December, which also condemned Israel's settlement activity.

Donald Trump has much work to do to combine his openly pro-Israel views with the need to garner Arab support in the fight against radical Islam and the ISIS. The task is arduous. Moreover, if the new President wants to combine the solution with additional pressure on Iran, which will probably fall in line with Donald Trump's intention to refuse to support the establishment of a viable Palestinian state and to move the American Embassy to Jerusalem for recruiting new adherents in the Arab world, and not only among Shiites ...

_Pogos Anastasov, political scientist and orientalist, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”._