

Challenges to the United States in the Greater Middle East

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America and the Muslim World: A New Beginning?

Along with the presidency of the United States, Barack Obama inherited from his predecessor the most serious economic crisis facing the country since the Great Depression of the 1930s. But while confronting that crisis was his most urgent priority, Obama, unlike Franklin Delano Roosevelt, did not initially confine himself to the economy to the exclusion of almost all else. Of course, this was not just a matter of arbitrary preference. The world has changed beyond recognition since 1932. Roosevelt assumed the leadership of a potential great power but one that was at peace and determined to remain there, largely by isolating itself from the rest of the world (at least outside the Western Hemisphere). Obama's America, by contrast, functioned in a much more globalized and interdependent economy and was, moreover, the undisputable superpower of the international system – notwithstanding the increasingly fashionable discourse of “declinism.” Even more to the point, it was actively fighting two foreign wars and prosecuting an ongoing struggle against international terrorism.

Consequently, Obama had to act simultaneously on both the domestic and international levels. On the latter front, the Greater Middle East inevitably enjoyed pride of place. That was the locale of America's two ground wars, the wellspring of terrorism, the epicenter of the global energy market, the greatest challenge to nuclear non-proliferation, and even – at least during George W. Bush's first term as president – the source of major tensions in the transatlantic partnership.

It is therefore not surprising that the Greater Middle East quickly came to dominate Obama's foreign policy agenda. Other matters, of course, could not be completely ignored. Much was made of the administration's desire to "reset" prickly relations with Russia, and ties with China, which had been the centerpiece of the Bush administration's foreign policy until 9/11, were also a focus of concern – particularly in their economic dimension. But the preeminence of the Greater Middle East and the Muslim world was symbolized by the fact that Obama's very first concrete act, within days of his inauguration, was to appoint two high profile special envoys: George Mitchell, for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and Richard Holbrooke, for AfPak (Afghanistan-Pakistan).

If there was a single underlying theme in the administration's approach to the Greater Middle East, it was that America's difficulties in dealing with specific problems in this part of the world stemmed not from structural realities (America's status as superpower), intrinsic conflicts of interest, or cultural and ideological contradictions, but rather intense public and governmental suspicion of American motives and hostility to American actions or inactions. As a result, the administration was convinced that the way to draw the poison from this relationship was proactive engagement in word and deed. The word consisted of a series of declarations stressing America's desire to seek "a new beginning" and launch a positive and constructive relationship with Muslims. In these statements, most prominently the address at Cairo University in June 2009, Obama tried to reach out both by stressing America's tolerance of cultural diversity in general and its respectful attitude toward Islam in particular, and by constructing a narrative of two centuries of felicitous Muslim presence in the United States. (In what might have been an implicit dig at France, he even noted that the United States government had gone to court to protect the right of Muslim women to wear the *hijab*.) Extending an "open hand" to the Islamic Republic of Iran and visibly embracing King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and President Husni Mubarak of Egypt, two rulers who had greeted President Bush's promotion of democratization with frosty reserve, Obama also tried to disarm criticism that America was bent on imposing its own political values on others, i.e., pursuing regime change.

Finally, Obama directly addressed what is often described as the most neuralgic issue in US-Muslim relations, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Although he never explicitly articulated a twenty-first century update of what Elie Kedourie once called the “Chatham House Version” – the belief widely held in the British establishment after World War I that were it not for Britain’s ties with the Jews, the generals would have their bases, the diplomats would have their treaties, the businessmen would have their contracts, and the missionaries would have their converts – Obama did signal his determination to preempt the persistent accusations against other American administrations of insufficient attentiveness to the problem or excessive bias in favor of Israel. Moreover, various figures in the administration asserted a linkage between the close US-Israeli relationship and America’s difficulties elsewhere in the region.

Vision and Reality

These rhetorical flourishes had a near-term payoff: public opinion surveys initially showed a palpable improvement in America’s image in most Muslim countries. However, this had little tangible impact on America’s ability to advance its goals, and popularity, though never reverting to the lows at the end of the Bush administration, soon began to regress. There was no single explanation for the swing in public opinion, except perhaps the unrealistic expectations fed by Bush’s departure and Obama’s rhetoric. Indeed, one obvious problem was the gap between word and deed that emerged in very short order. Obama, for example, could easily cultivate good will by promising the closure of the Guantanamo Bay detention facility, the object of much resentment because it embodies a blatant contradiction between American judicial principles and the actual treatment of detainees, almost all of whom were Muslims. But it was far harder to actually do it, given the reluctance to release more terrorists – some who had previously been released had already returned to their pre-capture activities – and the unwillingness of American allies (and Americans themselves) to provide sanctuary for released detainees or even to try them in civilian courts. More than a year after the promise was given to close it within a year, Guantanamo was still in business.

Second, Obama's words and gestures were simply not enough to overwhelm the policies of regional actors that were grounded in national or regime interests as understood by their ruling elites. Tehran, for example, could happily accept Obama's acknowledgment of the need for a course correction in US-Iran relations, but the regime showed no inclination at all to backtrack on its drive for nuclear weapons, its support for terrorist organizations, its incitement against Israel and the West, or its repression of domestic opposition. Engagement with Syria also produced few positive results. Syria welcomed the revival of high level consultations and the posting of a resident American ambassador to Damascus after a five year hiatus, but it maintained (as did Turkey) its intimate ties with Iran, its meddling in Lebanese affairs (including ongoing material support for Hizbollah), and, according to some reports, its facilitation of access to Iraq by "foreign fighters." Indeed, the pilgrimages to Damascus of erstwhile Lebanese adversaries of Syria – especially Prime Minister Saad Hariri and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt (both of whose fathers were widely thought to have been assassinated at the orders of Hafez al-Asad, the father of Syrian president Bashar al-Asad) – seemed to suggest that local leaders with political antennae finely tuned to the vagaries of regional power balances had already concluded that America had become a weak reed on which to lean. And whatever they may have thought or said in private, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and other Arab allies (like Russia and China) were unwilling to incur Iranian wrath or jeopardize economic interests by publicly endorsing American calls for pressure on Iran to halt its nuclear development program. The most they were prepared to do was to "contextualize" the issue by repeating longstanding calls for a comprehensive approach to a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East, to include Israel. Finally, on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Obama did gain considerable credibility in Arab and Muslim eyes by assertively staking out a position at variance with that of the Israeli government, but then lost much of it by failing to "deliver" Israel in the way that many Arabs had hoped.

Third, much as it appeared to be grounded in a philosophically consistent world view, Obama's new policy with respect to the Greater Middle East could not avoid certain internal contradictions. One was the seeming dilemma of maintaining the US-Israel strategic alliance while

promoting the United States as a more assertive and (in Arab eyes) more credible mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This dilemma might theoretically be diluted by the administration's insistence that what it sought was also in Israel's best interest, but in practice was almost certain to persist.

Another, perhaps even more blatant contradiction was the desire to be seen to have abandoned any pretense of political/cultural hegemony while simultaneously reiterating the traditional American commitment to democracy. This involved such difficult intellectual contortions that it soon proved totally unmanageable, and democratization was effectively dropped as a central motif of American policy under Obama. That no doubt reassured and mitigated the hostility of regimes and their apologists, whose goodwill the US wanted or needed to cultivate, as well, perhaps paradoxically, as Islamist opposition movements that also viewed democracy (and pluralism and women's rights) as an alien ideological construct imposed by arrogant Western crusaders. But it could only have the opposite effect on liberal forces that had drawn inspiration from the previous administration's admission that America had too often been willing to sacrifice freedom for the sake of stability. Perhaps the most poignant example came in the wake of Obama's lukewarm response to the post-election crackdown in Iran (almost surely prompted by the desperate desire to avoid the accusation of interference in another country's internal affairs), when some demonstrators, consciously recalling Bush's much ridiculed rhetoric in connection with the war on terrorism, carried signs with the sarcastic inscription "Obama, you're either with us or against us."

Finally, there were some cases in which the effects of engagement rhetoric were simply swept away by an emotional tsunami caused by American actions beyond Obama's control. The most prominent example concerned Turkey, where "Obamania" had already been restrained and where whatever more favorable attitudes he had been able to cultivate couldn't survive a vote by the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives to label the mass murder of Armenians during World War I as "genocide."

An Interim Balance Sheet

Transatlantic Relations

Taken together, these factors resulted in a far less dramatic transformation of American standing in the Greater Middle East than many in and out of the administration had hoped for. In fact, the greatest effect of the Obama rhetorical approach to the Greater Middle East may actually have been on US-European relations. In Europe, Obama was welcomed as something of a messiah. His emphasis on consultation, multilateralism, and the importance of international law and institutions in his declaratory worldview had even greater resonance in Europe than in America, and after his election, the vitriol in transatlantic discourse, which had already seriously abated during Bush's second term, practically disappeared. Indeed, some Europeans began to wonder if America under Obama was becoming too conciliatory, especially with respect to Iran. As a result, even when Obama authorized actions that were just as muscular as Bush's, such as targeted assassinations of suspected terrorists in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and elsewhere that sometimes caused considerable collateral damage, he drew virtually no criticism from European allies. Not all of this translated into much more active European support for American policies, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan (the Netherlands, for example, announced what seemed to many Americans as a premature withdrawal of the Dutch contingent in the NATO force in Afghanistan), but at least the aim of rhetorical reconciliation was accomplished.

Iraq

In the Greater Middle East, however, the impact of the new American approach was rather more ambiguous. Obama, for all the talk of change, essentially pursued a course in Iraq laid out by his predecessor: an exit strategy based on a military surge and cooption of Sunni tribes intended to produce enough stabilization, entrenchment of political institutions, and "Iraqi-ization" of the security effort to permit the withdrawal of American forces from active combat operations, the drawdown to what is termed a "transitional force" of 50,000 by August 2010 and the departure of those forces by mid-2011. These processes resulted in a continuing drop in American and Iraqi casualties and remained sufficiently on track during

2009 for parliamentary elections to be held in early 2010. The elections themselves were free and fair enough to prompt at least one observer to suggest that they were the only elections in the Arab world where the results were not known in advance. Moreover, the appearance and relative success of at least one avowedly Iraqi national, i.e., non-sectarian party raised the hope that the country might actually be moving to transcend the sectarianism that had produced such a paroxysm of violence after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

Still, this remained at best a distant prospect. The elections were preceded by a wave of bombings and accompanied by charges of fraud. They produced inconclusive results that ushered in a prolonged period of political maneuvering that might well end in deadlock and renewed ethno-national and confessional conflict. That had not really been eliminated anyway, as attested to by the election results (the secular Iraqiyya Party did well only in Sunni-dominated areas), the continuing Arab-Kurdish-Turkmen tensions in Mosul (along with the virtual expulsion of Christians from there), and the inability to reach an agreed formula on the division of oil revenues. Thus, there was little to guarantee that the reconstruction of Iraq would not eventually degenerate into renewed large scale violence, renewed dictatorship, or Iranian domination. Although Iraq was essentially Bush's war and Obama had consistently opposed it, he nevertheless inherited responsibility for its outcome. And despite the revolution he ostensibly introduced into America's overall approach to this part of the world, a positive outcome on his watch, i.e., the emergence of an Iraqi government stable and authoritative enough to be safely left to its own devices, remained far from assured.

Afghanistan-Pakistan

Events in AfPak were, if anything, a source of even greater concern. Unlike the war in Iraq, the campaign in Afghanistan was endorsed by Obama as a "war of necessity." Indeed, his criticism of the commitment to Iraq was that it diverted resources and attention from Afghanistan, the real source of the terrorist threat, making it harder to achieve decisive results there. Accordingly, Obama quickly began to redirect resources to that theater of operations. Immediately after taking office he sent 20,000 more troops to

the area, even as he ordered a major review of American strategy in the face of renewed Taliban challenges to central authority. After protracted consultations – so drawn out, in fact, that critics began to accuse of him of being an indecisive “ditherer” – he finally settled on the same solution he had denigrated in Iraq: a major surge involving an additional 30,000 troops (fewer than area commanders had recommended but still a substantial buildup, particularly if they were joined by the 10,000 others requested from NATO allies). The NATO force buildup proceeded in parallel with a continuing buildup of the Afghan National Army and National Police Force, all of which eventually paved the way for the first major Afghan-led military offensive (Operation Mushtarak) in early 2010. That operation enabled the coalition to take and hold Marja, a major Taliban stronghold in Helmand Province.

The significance of any tactical successes, however, was undermined by growing doubts about the integrity of the Afghan security forces and bureaucracy and the legitimacy of the government of President Hamid Karzai. The first round of the presidential election, in August 2009, was marred by low voter turnout and accusations of widespread ballot stuffing, intimidation, and other electoral fraud. The runoff, scheduled for November, was canceled at the last minute when Karzai’s main opponent, Abdullah Abdullah, withdrew because he believed that the chances of a fair contest were practically nonexistent. Similar concerns caused parliamentary elections, originally scheduled for May 2010, to be postponed until September. Given the lack of clear progress in the formation of credible national political institutions, there was considerable skepticism about whether American forces, slated to begin their withdrawal in July 2011, would leave behind a government any more willing or able to govern Afghanistan in a manner compatible with American interests than the one the US had ousted when it invaded the country in 2001.

A central feature of what was billed as Obama’s comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan was ongoing counterterrorism actions across the Pakistani border, aimed at denying Taliban fighters sanctuary there. These were accompanied by exhortations to the Pakistani government to undertake more aggressive military operations against Pakistan’s own Taliban movement in tribal areas traditionally beyond the

control of central authorities. US strikes by unmanned aircraft did eliminate many Afghan Taliban commanders, although the collateral damage – civilian casualties – did little to enhance America's popularity in that part of the world. In late 2009, the Pakistani army was eventually moved to launch a large scale operation in South Waziristan, though perhaps more in response to a wave of bombings by Islamist groups throughout the country than to American urgings to support the campaign in Afghanistan, which actually heightened political tensions between the two countries.

Pakistani ambivalence was explained by sensitivity to domestic criticism that such operations only turned the army into a mercenary force in the service of the Americans; the longstanding use of Islamist movements for its own purposes by the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence Agency); and the army's conviction that resources and manpower should always be reserved for use against Pakistan's "real" enemy – India. The same elusive formula for the right political-military mix that seemed tantalizingly out of reach in Afghanistan also eluded the United States in Pakistan. Moreover, while the United States did not have a large direct presence in the latter country, the existence of a significant nuclear arsenal there made the potential risks of failure far greater.

Obama and Sisyphus

The most striking aspect to American operations in the Greater Middle East (as in Bosnia and Kosovo a decade before) is that they have proceeded for years with varying degrees of participation by Western allies, but apart from the provision of some (NATO-designated) logistical facilities by Turkey, with virtually no overt material support from other Muslim countries. Even after the ostensible "reset" of relations under Obama, and despite all the public diplomacy efforts to change the prevailing perception, most of the Muslim world continues to act as though these are efforts made by America in or to the Muslim world but not for the Muslim world. This suggests that while Obama may have made some progress in alleviating the suspicion and hostility that have long overshadowed the relationship, the aim of real partnership, which is at the center of his policy of engagement, remains beyond his grasp. But perhaps that would be true of any American president.