

Barack Obama and the Middle East Three Years On

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Few American presidents in recent years have taken office with such an ambitious Middle Eastern or, indeed, global agenda as did Barack Obama in early 2009. At first glance, that was rather surprising given that the American voters who elected him were almost exclusively preoccupied with the financial and economic crisis afflicting the country since 2008; that foreign affairs played practically no part in the election campaign; and that Obama himself had virtually no history of involvement in foreign policy during his brief career in national politics before putting himself forward as a presidential candidate. However, Obama also inherited from his predecessor, George W. Bush, a host of serious problems that he could not ignore – declining international confidence in American leadership; rampant anti-Americanism in the Middle East, and even among American’s traditional allies elsewhere; and ongoing involvement in two ground wars as well as the borderless war against terrorism – all of which both posed security challenges and impinged directly or indirectly on the prospects for global and local economic recovery. Consequently, he immediately embarked on a series of initiatives under the overarching theme of “engagement” that aimed to enhance America’s reputation and restore its popularity around the world. Engagement was pursued across a broad front and directed at a variety of targets, but it particularly addressed audiences in the Muslim world by focusing on issues in and about the Middle East.

As the US enters another presidential (and Congressional) electoral season, there are some indications of economic recovery. These as yet are tentative and erratic, and thus the state of the economy remains the

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primary concern of most Americans and most American politicians. Nevertheless, Republican aspirants have invested some of their time in criticizing Obama's foreign policy performance, especially in the Middle East. Administration spokespeople have in turn naturally defended it, and the material for a three-year balance sheet is beginning to emerge.

Leading Middle East Action Items

By the absolutist standards of his most idealistic disciples at the beginning of this three-year period or of his most outraged detractors at the end of it, Obama has clearly failed. He has not established Jeffersonian democracy in Iraq, Afghanistan, or anywhere else in the region; he has not produced an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement; he has not disarmed Iran; and he has not made America universally respected, loved, feared, and obeyed. Perfectionists – and not just Republicans on the campaign trail – may therefore be tempted to label him a colossal failure.¹ However, by the more reasonable standards of previous administrations or of what is feasible in the real world, the record is more ambiguous.

If there is a single conclusion that most closely approximates a “bottom line” in the balance sheet, it is that Obama's outreach has produced modest results, except, ironically, with respect to the one objective that was conspicuously underplayed at the outset of his tenure but was seen as the signature feature of his predecessor's Middle East policy – democratization. Even there, the achievement was palpable only with respect to a necessary precondition for democratization – the weakening or removal of autocratic regimes – and only to a limited degree could be attributed to the actions of the administration. There was not much evidence in early 2012 that the downfall of autocratic rulers was actually precipitating the emergence of democratic political cultures and systems. The implicit assumption behind the optimistic response to the outbreak of anti-regime upheavals in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria, encapsulated in the very term “Arab spring,” was that such an evolution would occur. But subsequent developments point to the distinct possibility that it is Islamist forces that are best poised to profit from these developments, and while Islamism may indeed enjoy more widespread support than did the dictators whose overthrow made it possible for it to flourish, the new order may ultimately prove just as illiberal as the old, and even less protective of minorities and women. In

short, the initial sympathy for the unprecedented wave of popular, anti-regime activism was soon followed by growing concern that the Arab spring might actually mutate into an Islamist winter.

Still, an opening for democratization, however contingent, did at least emerge. That harbinger of possible positive change was not matched in most of the issue-areas to which Obama had explicitly dedicated himself. In Iraq, conditions enabling an orderly American withdrawal seemed at first glance to have prevailed. There were recurrent incidents of sectarian violence in Iraq but attacks against coalition forces declined precipitously. Moreover, Iraqi government performance settled into some modicum of routine, and a semi-autonomous administration functioned smoothly in Iraqi Kurdistan. Obama succeeded in fulfilling the obligation undertaken by Bush (and ratified by Obama) to end active combat operations of American forces in Iraq by August 2010 and to withdraw them entirely by the end of 2011. That gratified American voters, who approved of the withdrawal by a margin of three to one. This success, however, was the result of a unilateral decision, and could not be replicated if associated measures to consolidate it depended on the cooperation of others. Thus the United States was unable to secure agreement for an ongoing advisory and training presence. Even more critically, serious reservations remained about the capacity of Iraq to sustain a stable and secure democracy following the American departure, given growing doubts about the construction of an inclusive Iraqi national identity, some contentious issues that remained unresolved (e.g., agreed division of oil revenues), and the willingness of Iraqi governments to pursue policies that did not subvert other American interests in the region, given the proximity and influence of Iran. A hint of Iraq's future regional orientation may have already come in its abstention on the resolution to suspend Syrian membership in the Arab League or to join in the sanctions imposed on that country.

Similar uncertainty attended the course of events in Afghanistan. Although Obama had endorsed the operation in Afghanistan as a "war of necessity" (in contrast to the "war of choice" in Iraq that he had consistently opposed), the prosecution of the war during his first year in office unfolded in a similarly discouraging manner, with high casualties, increasingly brazen challenges by the Taliban, and unimpressive progress in the buildup of local security forces. In response, Obama initiated a

protracted reassessment of strategy and ultimately opted for the same solution adopted by Bush in Iraq – a “surge” aimed at extending central authority and buying time for the ultimate handover of responsibility to the Afghan government. The strategy did produce some positive results: the buildup and training of the Afghan National Army proceeded apace, Taliban sanctuaries were increasingly brought under government/coalition control, and insurgent attacks declined by about 25 percent in 2011. All of this permitted Obama to begin drawing down forces and reaffirm his commitment to end combat involvement in Afghanistan by 2014. However, as in Iraq, the durability of whatever intensive involvement by the American-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) had achieved remained highly questionable because of the persistence of sectarian violence and skepticism about the integrity and even viability of the central Afghan government following the end of ISAF’s combat role (and Hamid Karzai’s term of office). Moreover, much of the progress on the ground was purchased by operations to deny Taliban sanctuary across the border in Pakistan, especially by means of drone attacks. But the collateral damage produced by those attacks (together with accusations of Pakistani duplicity) resulted in a serious deterioration in US-Pakistani relations, raising concerns that whatever Afghan vulnerabilities remain after 2014 might be exploited by Pakistan to quickly undo whatever gains may be in place when the US war in Afghanistan comes to an end.

Iran

If this review of developments with respect to democratization, Iraq, and Afghanistan arguably sustains a conclusion that “the jury is still out,” the same cannot be said of the other major items on Obama’s Middle East agenda. The most prominent of those items with direct national security implications was Iran. Obama reiterated the commitment he inherited from Bush not to allow Iran to acquire a nuclear military capability. His initial approach, however, was to pursue this objective through engagement. Thus, Obama made a number of conciliatory gestures, referring respectfully to the Islamic Republic, sending Iranian New Year greetings to the Iranian people, and even refraining from expressing any support for or encouragement of the Green Movement that emerged to

protest the fraudulent reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in mid-2009 and went on to mount a serious challenge to the regime.

However, when the “open hand” that Obama extended in his inaugural address was answered with a “clenched fist,” the President switched to a different tack. The United States coordinated some international economic sanctions and unilaterally imposed others of an even more stringent nature. It was also assumed, or at least suspected, of being involved in some active measures, such as the cybernetic and/or kinetic sabotage of nuclear-related facilities and the elimination of some individuals involved in the nuclear weapons program. Nevertheless, Obama was unable to mobilize comprehensive international support for what Secretary of State Hillary Clinton once termed “crippling” sanctions despite efforts to “engage” major global actors such as Russia, China, and Turkey. And he was unwilling until late 2011 – perhaps in response to escalating criticism by Republican presidential hopefuls – to take some of the most drastic unilateral economic measures urged on him by others (such as a complete break in dealings with the Central Bank of Iran), or to communicate the existence of a credible military threat if all other measures fell short. As a result of these actions, the Iranian nuclear weapons program suffered some setbacks and delays, the Iranian economy began to exhibit symptoms of serious stress (such as price inflation and currency devaluation), and the Iranian regime began to show signs of distinct nervousness. Still, there was little evidence to indicate that the nuclear program itself was paralyzed or even critically disrupted, and none at all to suggest that the regime was giving any serious consideration to the idea of abandoning it altogether.

The Israeli-Palestinian Process

Obama’s efforts to promote an Israeli-Palestinian peace process were, if anything, even less productive. The advancement of Israeli-Palestinian peace was perhaps the most important substantive component of his Middle Eastern agenda as well as its symbolic centerpiece – apparently on the assumption that the American approach to this issue was a major, if not the major irritant in American relations with the Arab and Muslim worlds as well as with many of America’s European allies. Obama therefore began to address it from his first full day in office and become personally involved, if only to preempt the accusation leveled against all

of his predecessors that they had done too little and acted too late. This involvement included pressure on Prime Minister Netanyahu to adopt positions that did not deviate materially from the policy preferences of previous American administrations but was applied in a manner that resulted in considerable friction between Obama and Netanyahu. It did, however, lead to some noteworthy concessions by Netanyahu, including a highly publicized affirmation of the principle that the conflict should be resolved on the basis of two states for two peoples and a ten-month moratorium on settlement construction. Nine months into the moratorium, PLO Chairman and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas was induced – or coerced – to restart negotiations that had been suspended since late 2008, but after less than a month of futile and aimless contacts, Abbas refused to continue unless Netanyahu extended the moratorium and accepted terms of reference, especially on territory, proposed by the Palestinians. Those conditions may well have been unacceptable to Netanyahu’s coalition under any circumstances, but the chances of their being endorsed were certainly not helped by Obama’s inability to secure any rhetorical concessions from Abbas, particularly a reciprocal commitment to the principled formula of two states for two peoples, or even any modest confidence building measures by other Arab states.

The US continued to urge a resumption of negotiations, sometimes unilaterally and sometimes through the Quartet mechanism, but by mid 2011, enthusiasm for ongoing and intense American involvement in what was increasingly referred to as the “so-called” peace process was clearly waning. It was not clear whether this was the result of a growing appreciation of the complexities of what at the outset might have seemed a fairly straightforward task; frustration that Obama – notwithstanding engagement with the Arab/Muslim world and willingness to confront Israel – was no more able than his predecessors to bridge persistent gaps between Israeli and Palestinian positions; distraction by the dramatic events grouped under the rubric of the “Arab spring”; or greater sensitivity to domestic political considerations as America began to move toward the 2012 election campaign. If the explanation is exclusively or even primarily domestic politics, then it is possible that Obama, if reelected, will re-launch a vigorous effort on this front in 2013. If the explanation is a combination of all of the above factors, then future American policy

– whether under Obama or under a Republican president – may well be less proactive.

Of course, it could be argued that Obama’s demarche at the beginning of his administration was a serious misstep that, by making it impossible for the Palestinians to appear more flexible than the United States, virtually guaranteed the stalemate that followed. However, it is also the case that it did not precipitate a stalemate. That was something that Obama inherited from the inability of Abbas and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to reach agreement during their negotiations and by Abbas’ suspension of further contacts in response to Operation Cast Lead in late 2008. In any case, it is impossible to know whether a different administration or a different approach by this administration would have made any substantial difference. All that can be said with some certainty is that after three years of striving for an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement or at least what might look like a viable peace process, Obama’s reach continued to exceed his grasp.

The Attempt to Rebrand America

Still, one might have expected that the very act of trying would earn Obama some political credit in Arab/Muslim eyes (even as it raised doubts about him in Israel and among Israel’s supporters – Jewish and non-Jewish – in the United States). However, that objective also remained elusive. Obama’s activism on the Israeli-Palestinian issue was part of the broader effort at engagement that was intended to rebrand America and rehabilitate its reputation. Other components of engagement included a drastic revision of America’s diplomatic lexicon that eliminated references to the “war on terror” or even the concept of “terrorism” itself and excised any terms connoting a religious connection to America’s newly defined enemy – “violent extremism” – in order to avoid offending Muslim sensibilities. Instead, the administration consciously stressed shared Muslim-American values, interests, and history. The chief spokesman for this kind of public diplomacy was the President himself, who conveyed the message personally on a number of

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high profile visits to Muslim capitals, including Ankara, Riyadh, Cairo, and Jakarta.

The pursuit of popularity was not necessarily a foreign policy end in itself. Favorable views of the United States would certainly make it less uncomfortable for American diplomats to interact with their counterparts in other countries, but the real driver was probably the expectation that more congenial atmospherics would dispose foreign governments to comply more willingly with American policy preferences. How much such “soft power” is actually translated into policy formulations remains an open question, but the fact remains that while Obama’s approach did enhance America’s standing in many other countries outside the Middle East, especially in Europe (where George W. Bush’s reputation was toxic), it failed to make much of an impression among those publics that were its primary target.

On the specific issue with the most immediate security implications, a variety of attitudinal surveys in Muslim countries indicate that hopes that the Obama presidency would offer a brake on social support for jihadist violence “have proven to be a mirage.”² More generally, perceptions of American policy, the United States, the American people, and Obama himself range from indifferent to extremely negative. The October 2011 University of Maryland Annual Public Opinion Survey (carried out in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and the United Arab Emirates) found that while 26 percent of respondents had a very favorable or somewhat

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favorable attitude toward the United States (as opposed to 15 percent in 2009) and 56 percent had a somewhat or very unfavorable attitude (as opposed to 84 percent in 2009), positive views of the President himself had declined to 34 percent (from 39 percent in 2009) and negative views had risen to 43 percent (from 24 percent in 2009). Moreover, only 20 percent remained hopeful about Obama’s Middle East policy (vs. 47 percent in 2009) and 52 percent were discouraged (as opposed to only 15 percent in 2009).

Pew Foundation findings were even less encouraging. The 2011 survey of 22 Middle Eastern and South Asian states exposed highly unfavorable views of the United States in Egypt (79 percent – higher than the 75

percent recorded in the last year of Bush's administration), Jordan (84 percent), Turkey (75 percent), and Pakistan (75 percent). Of course, all such surveys need to be treated with a certain degree of skepticism. The Pew project indicated that 17 percent of Egyptian respondents preferred that the Muslim Brotherhood lead the next government, whereas actual results in the parliamentary elections there gave the Brotherhood closer to 50 percent of the vote; the University of Maryland survey suggested that roughly a third of voters would support an "Islamic party," whereas the Muslim Brotherhood and the more radical Nour Party actually polled more than twice as many votes.³ But even allowing for some reservations about the accuracy of such surveys, most of the evidence tends to confirm the broad-brush conclusion that Obama-style engagement has signally failed to improve America's standing in most of the Arab/Muslim world.

On the specific question of general perceptions of America, the most plausible explanation for Obama's failure, at least in Arab countries, appears to lie in the salience of the US-Israel relationship. The 2011 University of Maryland survey, for example, revealed that 46 percent pointed to Palestine/Israel as the single issue in US policy that most disappointed them, more than all the other issues combined (Iraq, attitudes toward Islam, Afghanistan, human rights, democracy, and economic assistance). Moreover, 55 percent mentioned an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement and 42 percent suggested stopping aid to Israel as one of two steps that would most improve their view of the United States. But such conditions set a standard that no US president can realistically be expected to meet, because the content of the peace agreement that the US would be required to deliver goes far beyond what even Western governments more sympathetic to the Palestinians, not to speak of the US (much less Israel) have ever endorsed. For example, the same Maryland survey showed 37 percent of respondents citing the "right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes" as the single most central issue in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, more than either a fully independent contiguous Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza or Arab sovereignty over East Jerusalem.⁴ This context points to a

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rather perverse aspect of popularity, i.e., not as an end in itself but rather as a dimension of “soft power”: the ability to encourage others to comply with American preferences requires the United States to comply with their preferences. That is a dilemma that Obama has not resolved any more did any of his predecessors or, it is probably safe to predict, will any of his successors.

Moreover, Obama himself was not dogmatically committed to his initial approach. Engagement was posited as the antithesis of the belligerent unilateralism widely but simplistically attributed to the Bush administration (especially in its second term) that had so compromised America’s standing in the world. However, the administration quickly internalized the understanding that engagement needed to be supplemented by pragmatism and the use of various other tools, including those taken from the repertoire of administrations never accused of naiveté or appeasement. Thus, Obama implemented a surge in Afghanistan and expanded the use of cross-border drone strikes in Pakistan, ratcheted up the pressure on Iran, approved the targeted assassination, i.e., extra-judicial killing, of prominent terrorists (including Osama Bin Laden and Anwar al-Awlaki, a US citizen), and put in place an

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enhanced homeland security system that thwarted several serious attempted terrorist attacks on American soil. None of this suggests that any failures to achieve foreign and security objectives stemmed simply from Obama’s inhibitions about the use of hard power.

The Limits of Power

In fact, the explanation for Obama’s seeming inability to make serious headway on the subjects of material concern to him in the Middle East (and elsewhere) resides less in any fundamental misunderstanding of the world grounded in a community organizer’s propensity to rely on soft power and more in the intrinsic limits of American power. The United States retains military power unmatched by any potential adversary or combination of adversaries in the Middle East.

That power is sufficient to overwhelm regional military forces and destroy hostile regimes, which it did in Iraq, Afghanistan, and even Libya. But the application of military force depends on the existence of political will, which in turn depends at least in part on the appearance of multilateral legitimacy and partly on the conviction that military force will produce not only destructive but also constructive results at a reasonable cost. The experience of Iraq and Afghanistan has undermined confidence that the latter result will ensue, and there is therefore diminished enthusiasm for further such exercises – which is why the United States chose to “lead from behind” in Libya.

And apart from military force, which is beginning to be constrained by economic exigencies and is in any event not applicable to most of the challenges facing the United States, there are simply not that many effective instruments in the American tool box. Israeli-Arab peace negotiations could be usefully shepherded by the United States (more than by any other international actor) if there is a strong and urgent underlying desire by both parties to reach a peace agreement, but that has not been the case. Nation-building can be assisted (even by military means) if the rudiments of an overarching national identity exist, but it is questionable whether that is truly the case in Iraq and Afghanistan (or Yemen or Libya), notwithstanding the proclivity of American spokesmen to conflate the terms “nation” and “state.” And democratization can be encouraged by a clearer signal that the United States is no longer on the side of the old order (even if withdrawal of support for authoritarian rulers is interpreted by other authoritarian rulers to mean that America is no longer a reliable partner) and by technical and financial support for institution-building.⁵

Still, such measures are likely to have a perceptible, near term impact only if the underlying socio-political culture includes some receptivity to ideas of pluralism, tolerance, and sovereignty of the individual, and that is also not always the case. At best, there is only the embryo of such a culture, embodied by the more secular middle class younger generation who first took to the streets of Tunis and Cairo and captured the imagination of people in the West before they began to be eclipsed by other, perhaps more deeply-rooted social formations in their societies. The embryo of that culture might still develop in a manner congenial to liberal democracy, but if it does, it will not be because of engineering

by American soldiers, economists, social workers, intellectuals, or presidents, either Barack Obama or whoever might succeed him in office.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Barry Rubin, "Navigating the New Middle East? The Obama Administration is Lost at Sea and on the Rocks," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 15, no. 4 (December 2011).
- 2 Gordon L. Bowen, "Has Outreach to the Muslim World by the Obama Administration had an Impact on Muslim Attitudes toward Terrorists and Terrorism?" *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 15, no. 1 (March 2011): 65.
- 3 True, it could be argued that the surveys more accurately reflect real opinion and that the election results were manipulated, as some Egyptian opponents of the Brotherhood and Nour have argued.
- 4 Nor was it even clear that an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement would suffice to salvage America's popularity. The Maryland survey showed that while 35 percent of Egyptian respondents now favor canceling the peace treaty with Israel (with 37 percent in favor of maintaining it), Israeli agreement to a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza based on the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital would reduce support for canceling the peace treaty by only 4 percent – to 31 percent – and raise the number supporting maintenance to only 41 percent.
- 5 For an example of how this course could and should be pursued, see Kenneth M. Pollack, "America's Second Chance and the Arab Spring," *Foreign Policy* 5 (December 2011).